

## **Robert Schlaer: The Pipes at the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp (His Own Words).**

Over the last few months I have been trying to turn up information about the liberation of Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945 by the British Army, who in good style did it to the skirl of my instrument, the Highland Pipe. What I don't know is who the piper or pipers were, and what tunes they might have played on the occasion. When I failed in my first remote attempts over the internet I sent a message to Bruce Hitchings, who runs the Jim Thomson School of Piping and Drumming each summer in Flagstaff, AZ, and who is a force in the Scottish piping world. I thought if anybody could initiate a chain of connection to someone who knew the answers, it would be Bruce."

"Hi Bruce,

It is always a pleasure to receive your emails.

I have a question that perhaps you can help me with. A few months ago Judy Lokenvitz, a friend of mine who knows of my interest in the pipes sent me this obituary of Branko Lustig, and highlighted the bagpipe reference in yellow (*Appears at the end of this article*). On April 15, 1945, the pipers entering the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp must have made some everlasting friends for the instrument. Just imagine what that sounded like to the survivors within!

There are a number of published interviews in which Lustig tells the same story with but minor variations. The clearest and most inclusive piping reference I have found is in a Los Angeles Times interview from 2014:

"...Exactly. I was very sick. I had typhoid, and then in one moment, I heard music. I hadn't heard music for a long time. I was delirious, thinking, "I'm in heaven finally, and these are angels playing," because never before [had] I heard Scottish music, bagpipes, and the British troops entered Bergen-Belsen with bagpipes."

So on April 15 (2020) last I piped a tribute to Branko...as well as to the liberators, the valiant British Army with their intrepid pipers before them, and I am recruiting other pipers to do the same next year. The problem is I had initially no idea of who the Army piper or pipers might have been, and only a tentative idea of what they perhaps played. I have spent a good deal of time on internet research, but have come up blank. The Imperial War Museums have available an archive of oral histories from people who were there, many of which have been transcribed, but nowhere is there a reference to the pipes.

There is a first-hand description of liberating the camp by Lt-Colonel Leonard Berney, who was a member of the General Staff of the British Army VIII Corps, and who apparently was the commander on the ground when British troops first entered the camp. It is titled "Liberating Belsen Concentration Camp," and somewhere down further on the slippery chute of this missive I have included its initial pages. They cover the first day the British were in the camp, but disappointingly contain no mention of the pipes or piping.

According to Berney's account another officer who was there was Lt-Colonel [R. I. G.] Taylor, the CO of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment. They were charged with taking over the camp and might have had pipers along, but about him or them I can find nothing either.

Could there be an archive in Scotland relating to the pipers who were assigned to the XIII corps at the time, and what they might have played on such an occasion? Could there be living memories from then which have been passed down as family lore? Do you have any other ideas of where to look?

Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated.”

Warmest regards,  
Bob Shlaer (aka Piobob)

“And not long afterward this came from Stuart Letford of the National Piping Centre.

Hello Robert,

My good friend Bruce Hitchings mentioned your tribute to Branko Lustig and how you are trying to source more information on the pipers of the British Army XIII Corps. I thought it was a wonderful story, and I've put it out to the readers of Bagpipe News in the hope that someone may be able to help. I shall pass on anything I hear/receive.

Here is a link to the article:

<https://bagpipe.news/2020/07/09/branko-lustig-vj-day-ppbso-webinars/>

Thank you Robert,

Stuart Letford,  
The National Piping Centre,  
Glasgow,  
Scotland.”

So it seems to me that the publicity provided by Bruce and Stuart, and so soon after my initial inquiry, is as likely as can be to shake free more information on piping at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

After seeing the Bagpipe News article I wrote back to Stuart to correct a small misimpression that might have remained:

“Hello Stuart,

Thank you for publishing the very attractive article on Branko Lustig and the pipes he heard as the British entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. If anything can shake more information loose about that moment, your publication is it.

Just one thing is not explicitly present in the article, although it is implied. I chose to play on April 15 because it is the day in 1945 when Branko heard the pipes of the British Army as it came to his rescue. April 15 is therefore the appropriate day on which those of us who wish should pipe to commemorate this startlingly moving event.

Warmest regards,

Robert Shlaer”

To which Stuart answered:

“Hi Robert, thank you very much indeed for your reply to my email. I shall clarify the date reasons you mentioned in a subsequent post. What a great initiative.

Very best wishes,

Stuart.”

Then the same day Stuart sent me this short note:

“Hello Robert, I have received a couple of responses to the post and I shall send them on to you shortly.”

So in an act of kindness Stuart sharply raised my expectations while testing my ability to endure delayed gratification.

On July 18, Stuart wrote:

“Hi Robert,

Here is a link to the piece that appeared the other day in Bagpipe News. It contains the correspondence and I found it interesting:

<https://bagpipe.news/2020/07/17/lewis-harris-results-tune-mystery-partly-solved-bergen-belsen-pipers/>

Kind regards,

Stuart.”

It looks like finally there is some progress on the piping at Bergen-Belsen. Even Bill Millin was there, plus many lesser or unknown pipers. Now to figure out the appropriate tunes. Bill Millin was a member of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders before joining the Commandos. But I don't think I really need their book. Much of what I understand Bill played were older tunes that are in a lot of collections with only minor variations. For now I will let someone else figure out the details, but I think I have what I need. Bagpipe News is going to run a special on Bill Millin soon, and I suspect they will list the tunes he is known to have played in WWII.

“Dear Bruce and Stuart,

Thank you so much for your efforts on my behalf. It appears that the result was to shake a good bit of information loose in fairly short order, and I am learning something about the organization of the British military in WWII. I was surprised too that Bill Millin was at Bergen-Belsen on the first day. Something will probably come of that, and I certainly look forward to a further article just on Bill.

I have been finding some minor errors, even at my distance. In his book "Liberating Belsen," Leonard Berney says he was a member of the General Staff of XIII Corps, but there is no XIII Corps in the army's organizational chart. It is probably a misprint for VIII Corps, which I believe was there. The British 11th Armoured Division was also at Belsen on April 15. The Lt-Colonel Taylor who Berney mentions is Lt-Colonel R. I. G. Taylor, CO of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, who entered the camp with him on that first day, and his regiment was charged with initially taking over the compound. Details like that may mislead someone who was there, or whose ancestors were there, into not knowing that they have possibly useful information about the event.

Warmest regards,

Piobob (aka Bob Shlaer)"

"Hi Robert,

Thank you for your email. I also find it amazing that we are still learning new snippets of information about both World Wars even now. Bill's son, John, is getting on in years himself now and told me a while ago that he has lots of items pertaining to his dad's time in the army. He was certainly a hero in the eyes of the people of France. There's also a pipe band in northern Italy which keeps his memory and I'd like to do a feature on that band soon, once this damn virus is eliminated and we can all return to some degree of normality.

Being a journalist I do like to see for myself proof of any statements made by someone, especially statements that come out many years after any particular event, and when I speak with John Millin again I shall ask him about the photos he says his dad had from Bergen-Belsen. Not that I'm doubting him, of course, but I would like to see something definitive on that purely because we all didn't previously know that information about Bill. The photos that John says he has, I think, should be made public purely from a historical point of view.

Best wishes,

Stuart."

"Dear Stuart,

Near the end of the second article you sent me Bill Millin's son, John, is quoted as saying:

"Dad was given a camera by the APU and asked to photograph his daily tasks, one of the undeveloped films made its way into Dad's kit bag and developed on his return to the UK."

"The photographs from this film were donated to the National Holocaust Museum in Laxton, Nottinghamshire by the Millin family. Dad kept the photos to ensure that the world could never deny the Holocaust."

So that is where you can probably find Bill Millin's photos of Bergen-Belsen. Let me know if you locate them.

On Wed, Jul 22, 2020 at 12:05 PM Stuart at Bagpipe News <news@bagpipe.news> wrote back:

Ah yes, of course, good spot Robert. I shall follow this up and let you know how I get on.

Aye,

Stuart.”

But who, you may ask, is Piper Bill Millin, and why is he beginning to figure so prominently in the story of Bergen-Belsen? It now seems remotely distant in time and memory, but he is simply the most famous piper of WWII. As Piper to Lord Lovat he earned his place in history in the icy surf and on the shifting sands of Sword Beach in Normandy, by defying orders from above and piping in a kilt during the British landing on D-Day. Later he piped at the battle for Pegasus Bridge, where in the midst of combat he played a tune to a little French girl who called out for “Music!” The story has been told and retold many times, but perhaps the best is this version, which is in Bill’s own words:

<https://www.pipefest.com/bill-millin/>

You can easily find on the internet other descriptions of Normandy that are less expansive.

But beyond the beaches of France there is much less information to be found about Bill. Yet a startling connection comes from John Millin, Bill’s son, who gratifies us with the revelation that his father was also among the troops that liberated Bergen-Belsen. He writes: “Very little is written about my father’s war after Normandy. At the end of the Normandy Campaign in August 1944, No. 4 Commando was returned to the UK for rest and preparation for the invasion of Belgium and the Netherlands. After the horrors he witnessed during the fighting in Normandy he was better prepared for the vicious house-to-house fighting through the Netherlands. He was with the 4th Special Services Commando Brigade as they made their way into Germany.

“On April 15th, 1945, British forces had surrounded Bergen-Belsen and taken the German surrender. Dad along with a few other pipers from the Achnacarry band were instructed to play as they led the Commandos into the camp. Nothing could have prepared them for the sights they witnessed inside the camp. The Army Photographic Unit (APU) descended on Belsen to record the cruel and de-humanising treatment inflicted by the Nazi’s on thousands of innocent people, most of whom lay dead and decaying where they fell.

“Dad was put in charge of a burial party tasked to collect all the dead Germans soldiers and have them buried in the local cemetery. Captured German SS men along with civilian Germans from the local village dug the individual graves whilst the murdered inhabitants of Bergen-Belsen were bulldozed into mass graves to prevent further disease. Dad was given a camera by the APU and asked to photograph his daily tasks, one of the undeveloped films made its way into Dad’s kit bag and developed on his return to the UK.

“The photographs from this film were donated to the National Holocaust Museum in Laxton, Nottinghamshire by the Millin family. Dad kept the photos to ensure that the world could never deny the Holocaust.”

**The connection is now as clear as ever can be. The Scottish pipe music Branko Lustig heard while lying sick that day came in part from Piper Bill Millin’s instrument!**

So despite his Homeric exploits on the beaches of Normandy, as worthy of celebration in song as those of the Achaeans on the plains before Troy, no one seems to have put together two small details: that on April 15, 1945, Bill Millin and other pipers from the 4th Special Services Commando Brigade were playing within the fences of Bergen-Belsen, where Branko Lustig,

weakened near to death from typhus, heard and remembered the Scottish contingent of pipers marching past. How far beyond belief that ten months after the Normandy landing Piper Millin should pop up at Bergen-Belsen to strike in his pipes and sound the camp's deliverance? Whose breath was more worthy to propagate through that putrid air the bracing tones and Highland lilt that announced the arrival of British troops? A man who, like Ancient Eurybates, could be heard above the din of battle at Normandy, should now intone the prospect of succor, hope and peace? Bill's instrument more than likely was among those that Branko heard that day, but yes or no, that bit of human contact elevated one party toward recovery from the depths of human misery and despair, while ironically the other wound up (temporarily) in charge of a lowly but essential burial detail. I suspect we will learn more as the story develops, so look for future installments in the Saga of Pipes at Bergen-Belsen."

Mr. Shlaer has requested that pipers play tribute to the event on April 15<sup>th</sup> to commemorate the liberation of Bergen-Belsen with tunes of their choice.

On March 17, 2021 Bagpipe News published this article:

<https://bagpipe.news/2021/03/17/tribute-to-the-pipers-of-bergen-belsen/>

## The Holocaust survivor who produced *Schindler's List*

Branko Lustig was a 10-year-old prisoner at Auschwitz when Nazi guards ordered him to stand in the front row at a hanging. The young

### Branko Lustig

1932–2019

Croatian Jew watched as seven inmates were brought to the gallows and, moments before the bench was kicked out from under them, shouted in Yiddish, "Remember how we died! Tell the story about us!" Lustig would do just that. Years after his 1945 liberation, Lustig embarked on a career in film that eventually took him to Hollywood. There, in 1994, he shared the Best Picture Oscar for producing Steven Spielberg's Holocaust epic, *Schindler's List*. "I hope I fulfilled my obligation to the innocent victims of the Holocaust," he said at the award ceremony.

Lustig was born in the city of Osijek "in what then was Yugoslavia and today is Croatia," said *The Washington Post*. Most of his family was killed in World War II; his grandmother died in a gas chamber. When British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen, where he had been transferred from Auschwitz, "Lustig heard the sound of bagpipes and concluded he was dead." The music, he recalled thinking, must have been "angels playing."

He began work on Yugoslavian films in the 1950s, said *The Hollywood Reporter*. A job as a location manager on 1971's *Fiddler on the Roof* "led to more international work," including as assistant director on the Oscar-winning *The Tin Drum* and supervisor on the Holocaust drama *Sophie's Choice*, another Oscar winner. But Lustig said his greatest achievement was the founding with Spielberg of the USC Shoah Foundation, which has recorded the testimony of more than 50,000 Holocaust survivors. "It's important that we not forget," he said. "If you forget, [the Nazis] will have really beat you."

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