Camp survivor recalls regaining his freedom

By HENRY BURY
Staff Reporter

It was 40 years ago Wednesday--May 8, 1945--that Max Tuchmayer regained his freedom.

And the Belleville resident remembers that day well--VE Day, marking the end of the Second World War.

"I was in Ebensee, Austria, a German concentration camp and I remember that Sunday quite clearly. It was around 11 a.m. when an American tank drove up, an American got up on the tank and said 'you're all free to go'," Tuchmayer recalled.

"Then one of the prisoners who was fluent in several languages translated the message to the prisoners. Suddenly, out of nowhere, groups of prisoners from inside the camp started coming out waving their made-up flags representing their countries and singing their national anthems."

"And then we all started running to get food from inside the camp. Mostly, we found some bread laying around and bags of flour. We started baking our own bread using what little water remained in patches."

And that night, Tuchmayer and the approximately 25,000 other prisoners set the camp's barracks ablaze. (The camp had been almost abandoned entirely by the German guards May 7).

"For us, it was a big day. We were free," Tuchmayer said.

Tuchmayer, 70, and his wife, Hilda, who had also been freed from another concentration camp, have been living in Belleville since 1951. They were married in November, 1945.

Tuchmayer is retired printer with The Intelligencer.

"We're both very happy that May 8 came along. After all those things, we're happy to be in Canada," he said Wednesday.

Added his wife, Hilda,: "I'm happy that we came to Canada to start a new life and to this day, we're very grateful for that."

For Tuchmayer, life wasn't that certain, especially after that July, 1942 day when he was arrested by the Germans in his native Poland.

He was immediately sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp where he spent the next five months. Then, prisoners with skilled trades, like Tuchmayer, were moved to Sachsenhausen, 30 kilometres north of Berlin.

For the next two-and-a-half years, Tuchmayer and other selected prisoners were involved in a secret German project--the printing of millions of counterfeit five, 10, 20 and 50-pound English bank notes.

"The Germans used that money for their spies in Europe and many of these counterfeit notes were dropped over England to create chaos in the English economy," he explained.

In early March, 1945, with Russian troops moving in from the east and other allied troops from the west, the camp's prisoners were moved to Ebensee, in southern Austria.

Tuchmayer was there for only three days when that American tank set the prisoners free.

"Once we got to Ebensee, we knew it was a matter of time before were were freed," Tuchmayer said.

After the liberation, Tuchmayer met and later married Hilda, and returned to Poland in 1946.

"In 1946, we emigrated to Holland, lived there for four years and then came to Montreal in 1951. A few months later, we moved to Belleville and have been enjoying our freedom ever since," said Tuchmayer.

Wednesday was a special day for Max and Hilda Tuchmayer, of Belleville. It was 40 years ago--May 8, 1945--that the Tuchmayers and thousands of other prisoners of Nazi Germany were freed, marking the end of the Second World War. The couple came to Canada in 1951 and moved to Belleville shortly after that. They said they've enjoyed their freedom "and we're grateful for that."

Intell May 9, 1985

TUCHMAYER, MAX