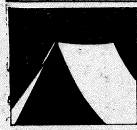


Christmas Letters speak across the years



**North Country
Notebook**

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By George Vukelich

The Christmas season arrives at different times for different folks. In some of the shopping malls, it used to be right after Thanksgiving. Then it got moved up to right before Thanksgiving. Then it got moved up again to right after Labor Day.

In our neighborhood, it used to be when Walter strung colored lights around his windows and eaves and the whole place glowed all the winter night like one of your favorite roadhouses hunkered down for the season a little off the beaten path in Oneida County.

In our house, it used to be when we got out the thin, worn, beloved little book in the blue binding and prepared for the annual Christmas reading of Last Letters from Stalingrad on radio station WIBA.

The Letters were written by members of the 270,000-man German Sixth Army encircled, entrapped and eventually destroyed at Stalingrad

in one of the great turning points of World War II.

I think we read them live on WIBA for 13 Christmases and I really don't know why, except that it seemed right to read them at Christmastime, even though some listeners protested that the Letters were too sad and somber and stopped listening because the readings spoiled their season. Others said the Letters "glorified" the Germans and they stopped listening, too.

But we kept reading them every year and because they were read live and not recorded, the Letters always varied a little ("wobbled," some of the listeners said) but all of the Letters got read and all of the

music got played and it was sort of 10 nights or so of some heavy stuff after Rudolph and Frosty. It was also sort of our Christmas card to the community that supported us when no one else would.

The Letters stand by themselves. An English prof once told me he regarded them as "literature" pure and simple.

What makes them so powerful, I think — and they do have a strange power — is the juxtaposition of Russian music and German music and carols sung by the Wiener Sangerknaben, the famed Vienna Boys Choir from the city that contributed so many of the Sixth Army dead.

What also makes them so powerful is that these Letters, written 35 Christmases ago by German soldiers, speak to us across the years, across the wars with more relevance, with more meaningfulness than tomorrow's newspapers.

It's been a funny year.

What has happened since Oct. 1, 1977 has made me appreciate this Christmastime more than any since I was a kid at my first Midnight Mass. This year, more than any other, we are still blessed with Family and Friends and the Living Voices of all those dead Germans.

The Christmas season is arriving again and I really don't know what to give you this year, paisan. But don't despair.

We have miles and miles to go before we sleep.

And we will think of Something.