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AN INDIAN CAPTIVE IN GERMANY

This is the first of two articles in which Maj Gen Syed Ali Hamid writes about captivity during the Second World War – this article is about Anis Ahmed Khan, an Indian officer held as a PW in Germany for five years.

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When the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force were evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940, my uncle Sahibzada Anis Ahmed Khan was the only Indian officer amongst the 40,000 who were captured by the Germans. In spite of five long and stressful years in Prisoner of War (PW) Camps, during which he spurned the easy way out of joining the Azad Hind Legion, he adjusted well on his return to active service. His staff course report of 1946 states that, “This officer was a PW, but has recovered from captivity remarkably well.” Three years later he became the first Muslim to be promoted major general in the post-Independence Indian Army. What does it take for a man to suffer the rigors of prolonged captivity and still retain his sense of balance and professionalism?

Anis Ahmed had a very distinguished lineage. His grandfather Nawab Ghulam Ahmad Khan was from Kunjpura District (now Karnal in Haryana), and a member of Council of Regency in the Gwalior State. His father Sahibzada Aftab Ahmad Khan was an associate of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. As a Trustee of the Aligarh Muslim University he supervised the construction of many of its charming buildings and hostels, and from 1924 to 1926 was its second Vice-Chancellor. After his death, the Aligarh Old Boys’ Association constructed a complex of hostels and named it Aftab Hall in recognition of his valuable contribution. Anis Ahmed was born in 1904 and after graduating from Aligarh, he was selected for the Royal Military Academy (RMA) at Sandhurst. He belonged to the clan of Rohillas which originally comprised of Pashtuns and Afghans recruited by Emperor Aurangzeb. The ancestors of Anis Ahmed were from the Zakakhel branch of the Yousufzai tribe and records credit them to have come from Gungushti which lies in the plains of Charch in the Attock District of Pakistan. The Rohillas settled in northwestern Uttar Pradesh in a region that came to be called Rohilkhand and prior to the revolt of 1857, they were the cream of the cavalry of the army of the Bengal Presidency.

Known as AA Khan in military circles, Anis Ahmed was the 24th Indian and 11th Muslim to be commissioned from the RMA with the Indian Army number IA 419. After a year’s attachment with the Royal Scots Greys, in 1925 he was posted

to 2/1st Madras Pioneers a very old and distinguished unit whose origin is traced back to 1758. His contemporary and friend was Shirinagesh who was commissioned a year earlier and after Independence was the third Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army. His wife Kumari and Anis's wife Razia, were also close friends and remained in touch till Razia's final years in the late 1990's. Pioneer battalions had the dual task of infantry as well as engineers and in 1927, both Anis Ahmed and Shrinagesh served with the 2/1st in Burma where it was constructing civil works. His Annual Confidential report as a company officer in Burma has an interesting observation. 'He is dealing tactfully and firmly with his Hindu company, which resents having an Indian in command and a Mohammedan in particular: this is much to his credit'. Two of his early ACRs also credited him with moderate and strictly temperate habits. It was these qualities that enabled him to endure the years as a PW.

Increased specialization made the pioneer battalions too valuable to use as regular infantry and in 1933 their personnel were absorbed into the Corps of Sappers and Miners. Anis Ahmed was attached to the 1/14th Punjab (now 5th Punjab Battalion of the Pakistan Army) which was one of the first infantry units to be Indianised. Ayub Khan, who after Independence was the first Pakistani C-in-C of the Royal Pakistan Army, was commissioned into the 1/14th Punjab in 1928. He acknowledged that, as VC Aligarh, Aftab Ahmed Khan had changed his life by nominating him for Sandhurst. Anis Ahmed served with the Punjabis for the next three years at Bangalore. During this period his Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) were positive and stated that he is 'A quiet officer who works steadily, is reliable' and 'has tact and pleasant manners'. However he probably did not adjust well in the infantry and was placed on attachment with the Madras Sappers and Miners where he commanded a field company but in 1936 applied for transfer to Indian Army Service Corps (IASC). From the outset he did well in the IASC and a year later the report that he earned while serving with the corps near Secunderabad, credits him with being, 'An excellent supply officer who takes a keen interest in his work and who can be relied on. He is tactful and maintains an excellent liaison with the QM branch a useful and sensible officer'.

When the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) mobilized for France in 1939, it was decided that each of its divisions should be supported by an Animal Transport Company (ATC) of 400 mules from India. For cohesion and ease of supply, the entire manpower comprised of Muslims mainly from the Rawalpindi Division of the Punjab but also a few Pathans and Hazarawal. The companies assembled in various locations in Punjab and the 22nd ATC mobilized in November at Rawalpindi. Captain Anis Ahmed was nominated as its second-in-command (2iC) and it was

commanded by Major LW Hitchcock for whom Anis did not have much respect. They were transported by train to Bombay and sailed for Marseilles on 3 December where they arrived at the end of the month. The 2iC of the 25th ATC was Akbar Khan who rose to be a major general and was the senior most officer in the Pakistan Army at Independence. In his memories he recollects that it was blistery cold when his ship arrived in Marseilles, and the soldiers had to initially camp in the snow. A few days later unheated troop trains took the 25th up to the Belgian border to join the BEF.

However, the 22nd was held back at Marseilles till early May 1940 when it placed under command the 51st Highland Division. The division had been detached from the BEF to the French Third Army and deployed on the ill-fated Maginot Line ahead of Metz. When the Germans launched their offensive on 10 May 1940 and bypassed the Maginot Line, the Highland Division gradually fell back towards the port of Le Harve. However they were intercepted by the German Army and 10,000 were taken prisoner and transported to PW camps in Poland. Anis's company, which had remained back at Metz to clear artillery supplies, attempted to escape to Switzerland but the men were very distressed at abandoning their 400 mules and horses. The 260 strong company marched 170 km south along the Moselle River but was captured on 24 June, 115 km short of the Swiss border. Most of the men survived the war except for ten who are buried in France, seven in Germany and one in the UK. Eight managed to escape from the PW camps including Jemadar Jehan Dad who was commanding the 'A' Troop, and about 20 joined the Azad Hind Legion or the more exotically sounding, Tiger Legion.

Eight months after his capture, Anis Ahmed's wife was informed through a letter from the Red Cross that her husband had survived. He had been allotted a PW number 996 and held at Stalag 111-D/70 which was at Wünsdorf, 32 km south of Berlin. During the First World War Wünsdorf had also been the site of several PW camps, including the "crescent camp" for Muslims who had fought for the Triple Entente, and where the first wooden mosque in Germany was erected. It was an important location because it hosted the underground headquarters of the German Wehrmacht (OKW) and Army's High Command (OKH).

Camps with the designation of Stalag were for enlisted men and each was divided into a number of sub-camps holding 1,000 or more prisoners. PWs of the same nationality were generally kept in one sub-camp and Stalag 111-D/70 held troops from India and Africa that the Germans tried to subvert. When Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Germany in 1941 and started forming the Indian Legion (another name for the Azad Hind Legion), an effort was made to recruit Anis Ahmed

who was at that time the only Indian officer in German captivity. Anis told his daughter Zeenut that an associate of Bhowse named Swaleh (both were married to Germans), used to visit him. Though Anis Ahmed was not an admirer of the British, he was bound by an oath and had eaten their salt and was not prepared to join the INA. In what turned out to be his last visit, Swaleh enquired about Anis's family background and when he came to know that Anis was the son of Aftab Ahmad Khan, Swaleh said to the German officer accompanying him, "Let's leave this officer be. He will not join our cause."

During his five years of captivity, Anis changed a number of camps. Though the PWs were generally not mistreated, as the war turned for the Germans, the conditions worsened. They were kept on a subsistence diet of bread and soup prepared by boiling the complete head of a horse. An authentic account of the conditions in the PW camps is recorded in the diary of Subedar Jit Singh Sarna, who was held in Camp Oflag 79 at Waggum. Oflag were camps for officers and by an interesting coincidence, Jit Singh records in his diary that one of the officers in the camp was Major Anis Ahmed Khan of Aligarh. Describing hunger in the camp Jit Singh wrote in his log, "Hunger takes you down even up to the extent that distribution of the rotten peelings of potatoes and turnips is well managed and whole-heartedly accepted. Hunger gives a strange feeling and sensation in the stomach. It gives pain as well." The prison log of Jit Singh has details about a barter system started by the prisoners in which the unit of transaction was one cigarette. A packet of Canadian biscuits could be traded for 40 cigarettes and sweets for 5 cigarettes. By 1944 the supply of Red Cross food parcels was regular enough to cover the deficiencies of the German diet, and being very disciplined, AA carefully regulated his rations; as a non-smoker he probably built up his stock of eatables in exchange for cigarettes.

Oflag 79 had been established in December 1943 with officers and men transferred from camps in Italy – mainly British Commonwealth officers captured from Crete and North African. It included a number of Indians and one of them who arrived after being caught while trying to escape in Italy, was Sahibzada Yaqub, 18th Cavalry. He also belonged to a prominent Rohilla family and it must have been a very pleasant surprise for the two Sahibzadas to find themselves together. The camp was near Brunswick, situated only two kilometers from an airfield and was surrounded by military targets such as anti-aircraft batteries and factories. Its location was considered so dangerous by the representative of the Swiss Red Cross that a request was made to the German High Command for its transfer elsewhere.

Brunswick and its surrounding military establishments was a regular target for Allied bombers who came in waves. In his diary Jit Singh records the effects of a raid on 24 August 1944 that also caused major destruction in Oflag 79. "The scene was horrible – nearby barracks, German guardrooms and kitchen was reduced to ashes. Seven bomb craters were created and a good number of anti-personnel ammunition was dropped on the camp" Three PWs were killed, and a large number wounded. A British PW records in his diary that, "The camp was in a very bad state for weeks after this – nerves all to pieces and the constant 'reds' (alerts) sending everyone to the shelters". He also admits that, "I don't know whether it was the caged in feeling or what, but I've never been so frightened before or after". The camp was a wreck and heating and hot water was not restored for three months. This made the coming winter which was one of the harshest on record, miserably cold for the PWs. Unlike some of the other camps Oflag 79 had limited space for outdoor recreation, but to keep themselves occupied the PWs organized all kinds of intellectual activity including theatrical and musical entertainments, study groups on religious topic and educational classes and examinations. During his captivity Anis Ahmed took to learning the German language.

His trail finally came to end as the war in Europe drew to a close and Oflag 79 was liberated by troops of the US Ninth Army in April 1945. Within a year of being repatriated home, Anis Ahmed was promoted lieutenant colonel and in the latter half of 1946 attended the course at Staff College, Quetta. His report credited him with being an officer who is '..... intelligent and has imagination, and sound common sense. He is a clear speaker and writer and has some capacity for detailed staff work. He knows his own mind and is steady and industrious'.

Anis Ahmed wanted to migrate to Pakistan at Independence but his eldest sister beseeched him to stay back. In 1949 he was promoted major general and appointed Director Supplies & Transport (DST) of the Indian Army. That same year his friend Shirinagesh was promoted lieutenant general and appointed GOC-in-C Western Command. Anis Ahmed retired in 1953 and decided to migrate to Pakistan. Two years later Shirinagesh was appointed as the chief of the Indian Army. Anis Ahmad's decision of to migrate was entirely apolitical but it was used by the hardliners in India to question the loyalty of all Muslims in uniform. His migration came as quite a shock to the Indian Army. As DST he was privy to the operational planning for logistics for the entire army. It is unfortunate that the Indian Army did not appreciate that his staff course report credited him with being 'a loyal officer'. They also did not appreciate that an officer who chose to undergo five years of

captivity instead of defecting to the INA because of an oath, would act against his conscience and divulge military secrets.

In the 1950s, my parents and family used to visit Karachi regularly and my recollections of my uncle were of a gentleman of failing health. He had been unfairly denied his pension by the Government of India and lived modestly. Ironically, one of his visitors was Swaleh who had tried to coax him to join the INA, and was now settled in Karachi. AA Khan passed away in 1966 at the young age of 62, his health effected by five long years of captivity.

I am grateful to Unver Shafi for providing me information and photographs of his grandfather and to my cousin Zeenat for sharing memories of her father. Photographs and valuable information was also readily shared by Ghee Bowman who is completing his PhD on Force K6 and also by the military historian Hamid Hussain who permitted me to quote from an article on Major General Sahibzada Anis Ahmed Khan.