



LEARNING FREEDOM IN CAPTIVITY

At the end of World War II, the United States taught German POWs how to transform a dictatorship into a democracy.

They were lessons that changed lives By LYNN ERMANN

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY KLAUS BURK

Photograph by SILVIA OTTE



Former POW Wolf Dieter Zander, right, in his New York office. Opposite: Zander, front row right, at Camp Concordia, Kan., circa 1944, with his roommates—Horst von Oppenfeld and “Muffi,” front row, and Klaus Burk, back right.

APT. FELIX TROPSCHUH turned on his heel at the word “traitor,” and took off across the yard. He wasn’t waiting to see what the Nazis would do to him next. He already knew. They would pounce without mercy, smash his face, break his ribs, stomp him to a pulp. He had seen it before. It may have been this kind of savagery that made him despise Hitler, a secret hatred he confided only to the pages of his diary, the one stolen out from under his pillow by the Gestapo that morning and presented as evidence of his treachery minutes before.

Now the accused man was running for his life, chased by a mob of Nazis, determined to make it to safety. After all, the Fuehrer was an entire ocean away. They were not in Germany anymore. They were in Kansas, in a U.S. camp for German prisoners of war.

Near the gate of Camp Concordia, Tropschuh saw his first chance to be rescued, a guard truck passing. The driver, an American, slowed for a few seconds, then screeched away. Tropschuh had even worse luck with the American camp commander, whom he begged for help. The commander shrugged indifferently and then returned the captain to his barracks, where he was brutally beaten.

Wolf Dieter Zander, a fellow POW, knew Tropschuh was in mortal danger. He ran to the Americans later that day and pleaded for the captain to be removed from the camp, to no avail. By 11 p.m. on that mid-October day in 1943, the “traitor” hanged himself in his cell. He was, according to U.S. military investigators, given a rope and forced to sign a suicide note that said only: “I voluntarily take leave of my life.” Four months after Tropschuh’s death, a German private would be forced to slit his wrists, also at Camp Concordia.

Graduation at Fort Getty, R.I., for the first POW class trained for administrative duties in postwar Germany.

The two Concordia deaths and others in American POW camps outraged first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and led to an unprecedented education initiative that changed the

AS FAR AS ZANDER COULD TELL, THE AMERICAN CAMP OFFICIALS WERE UNAWARE OF THE NAZI MACHINE OPERATING IN THEIR MIDST.

lives of Zander and hundreds of German POWs. Its aim was no different from the one being pursued today by the United States in Iraq: to transform a dictatorship into a democracy.

THE COMMANDER of the 10th Panzer Division would later claim his troops “fought to the end with knives in hand-to-hand combat” in North Africa. Wolf Dieter Zander remembers it differently: “We were out of food and petrol,” waiting to be picked up by British forces. It was Lt. Zander, then 27 and an English speaker, who was elected to radio the British and work out the surrender on behalf of his entire division. Zander’s fellow officer and friend, Horst von Oppenfeld, 30, drove their commander to the British lines on Cap Bon near Tunis. The commander, von Oppenfeld says, waved a makeshift white flag as they sped toward the British.

Gen. Erwin Rommel’s prized Afrika Korps was thoroughly wiped out. With British-run POW camps overflowing, a large portion of the captured Germans were sent to America. By the end of the war, the United States would house 380,000 German prisoners.

THE TRAIN ROLLED from New York to Kansas. Through the windows, Zander and von Oppenfeld stared at the vastness and wealth of the enemy. At one point, one of the other POWs shouted that he was sure they were in Akron, Ohio, and everyone craned their necks to look at the rubber factories. “German propaganda wanted us to believe that the Americans were so short of fuel that they could not use their cars anymore,” von Oppenfeld remembers. “But now we see all these laborers arriving for morning shifts” in big cars. “Some dumb Nazi said, ‘Don’t you know they placed those cars there just to impress you?’”

Their destination was a remote Kansas town, not notable in any way. And that was the point. Most of the 150-plus German POW camps in the United States were located in the middle of nowhere, invisible to most Americans. Camp Concordia sprawled across the pristine prairie. A barbed wire security fence encircled two new housing compounds, which would eventually hold about 1,700 officers and 600 enlisted men. Zander and von Oppenfeld shared a spare, clean room with two other officers: young, wide-eyed Klaus Burk, a friend from the 10th; and a fortysomething man, “Muffi,” whose real name they can no longer recall. The roommates had their own stove, an ample supply of coal and more food than they’d eaten in years.

“We had access to luxuries we had not seen in Germany since the beginning of the war: citrus, other fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, raisins, milk, butter, meat, fruit juice,” von Oppenfeld says. He and other prisoners gained so much weight that their uniforms split down the rear, and they patched them with wedges of material from U.S. uniforms. “Our rears made for a funny sight,” he



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says. They took to calling their patches “the victory wedge.”

Life at Concordia was drab and small, reduced in scope to a few privileges—listening to the radio, smoking cigarettes—and an obsession with the attainment of more. Zander, the English speaker, was the messenger on these missions. The Americans who ran the camp were sometimes accommodating, sometimes indifferent and sometimes mystifying. When camp officials learned, for instance, that the leader of Rommel’s personal band was at Concordia, Burk recalls, they brought the rest of the band from other camps so they could play together again. Sports were always popular, though enthusiasm for soccer waned after one POW ran out of bounds to retrieve the ball and was shot dead by the guards.

A few months after his arrival, Zander began helping to organize high school and college classes for the POWs. Finding teachers was easy. Among the POWs at Concordia were doctors, teachers, lawyers, judges, businessmen, even a geologist. Zander taught English and parliamentary government systems. “In this last effort, I was a few hours ahead of the class,” says Zander, who started each lesson with a warning: “No complicated questions, please.” One of his closest friends, Heinrich Treichl, taught French. Von Oppenfeld and Burk were students.

Von Oppenfeld figured he’d need an education if he was going to start over after the war. His family’s farm in eastern Germany was in the hands of the Soviets. But he didn’t voice his worries about the future aloud. That would be acknowledging Germany’s impending defeat—a dangerous point of view in a camp still dominated by Nazi officers and Nazi ideology. Nor did von Oppenfeld, Zander, Burk and Treichl dare express their true feelings about Hitler, except among themselves. Even reading the *New York Times*, instead of relying on Nazi propaganda, was a risky endeavor at Concordia, though Zander did secure copies of the paper and



Von Oppenfeld, now 90, outside his home in Bethesda. Inset, in uniform during World War II.

translated it for his friends in hushed tones in their room.

Zander, who was in the insurance business before the war, had never been caught up in the Hitler frenzy that swept Germany in the 1930s. He’d seen Jewish friends and neighbors yanked out of their houses in the middle of the night by the Nazis. And he was married to an American woman, though he’d never been to the United States before his capture. He was drafted into the service and promoted to officer while serving on the Russian front. As far as he could tell, the American camp officials were unaware of the Nazi machine operating in their midst.

Felix Tropschuh, a 30-year-old captain, became the target of that machine minutes after roll call on October 17, 1943. When Zander begged the American commander to remove Tropschuh from the camp, the commander found it impossible to believe

that the German captain's life was in danger. "We have Republicans and Democrats," he told Zander, "and we don't kill each other."

"Yes," Zander replied in exasperation, "but this is a dictatorship."

Tropschuh's death sent a chill through Zander and his friends. But the "atmosphere of terror," as Zander put it, was about to change.

WHEN THE NEWS MEDIA GOT WIND of the Concordia deaths, two female columnists from the New York Herald Tribune took the problem directly to the first lady. Eleanor Roosevelt, characteristically, wasted no time. She and Maxwell McKnight, chief of the Administrative Section of Prisoner of War Camp Operations, had dinner at the White House to discuss the problem, according to Judith Gansberg's book *Stalag, U.S.A.* Soon Concordia officials were plucking Nazis out of the camp and introducing a reeducation program for German POWs.

While the Geneva Convention forbade the indoctrination of prisoners, they could be provided with "intellectual diversion." In a top-secret compound in Rhode Island called "the Factory," a group of selected anti-Nazi prisoners of war, German refugees and Americans screened movies, created reading lists for POWs and translated books into German. The Factory even began producing a German-language newspaper called *Der Ruf*.

BY MID-1944, new leadership had been installed at Concordia and many of the worst Nazis had been removed. Concordia's canteens and library were filled with books that had been banned by the Nazis. Treichl read and reread the American bestseller *The Road to Serfdom* by Friedrich Hayek, which detailed the flaws in socialism and contrasted it with democracy. Zander pored over *Fortune* and the *New York Times* and shared what he read with his friends. None of them were aware that they were now part of an official reeducation program.

Emboldened by the success of the Concordia school, Zander, Treichl and von Oppenfeld sent a memo to the camp commander, proposing that the United States compile lists of anti-Nazi POWs and train these men in American systems so they could help in the postwar reconstruction effort. Either because of their initiative or by sheer synchronicity, the Factory met in early 1945 to discuss the specifics of just such a plan. There would be an administrators school at Fort Getty in Rhode Island and a police school at nearby Fort Wetherill. American intelligence officers were dispersed across the country to screen potential candidates.

In March, Treichl was called out of the barracks and greeted by an American who presented him

THEY TALKED MANY NIGHTS ABOUT WHAT WENT WRONG WITH GERMANY, HOW, AS ONE PROFESSOR PUT IT, A CULTURE THAT PRODUCED BEETHOVEN COULD PRODUCE HITLER.

revelations about their treatment, rations were cut back drastically at Concordia. Many Americans wanted to punish Germany for its crimes. U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau was advocating a plan—ultimately rejected by President Harry Truman—that would reduce Germany to an agrarian society.

It was during this dark time that the Americans came to Zander and asked if he wanted to be trained for Germany's reconstruction. Was this the democracy school they had proposed? Zander wasn't sure, but he bade goodbye to Treichl and von Oppenfeld, and traveled by train through the night to an unknown destination.

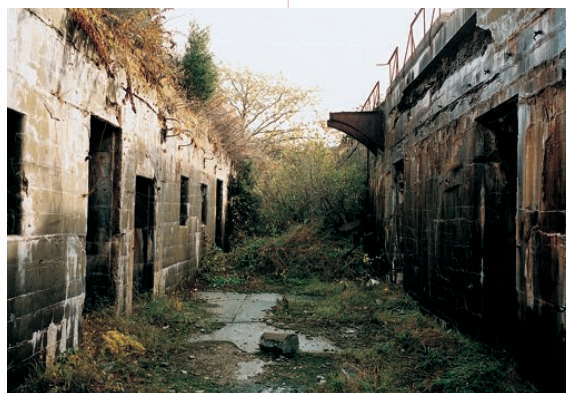
"THE MORNING FOG had prevented us from recognizing where we were, though we smelt the salt water of the sea," Zander recounted in a speech several months later. "At noontime after having had several roll calls, the sun pierced through the fog and lifted the veil around us. We found ourselves on a small island, a rock in the sea."

They were in Jamestown, R.I., at Fort Getty, where, over the next eight months, 455 POWs would be trained for jobs in the U.S. military occupation government. Initially, the depressed, defeated Germans slid into straight-back chairs with sighs. Zander fully expected to be lectured by stiff, impersonal military instructors. Instead they were introduced to academics from Harvard, Brown, Cornell and other top universities—men not much older than their students who were as eager to learn from the Germans as to teach them. Zander and the other POWs attending Fort Getty's first 60-day session were stunned.

The most beloved faculty mem-

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The long-deserted barracks at Fort Wetherill, R.I. They housed POWs preparing to be policemen.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SILVIA OTTE

POWs

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ber was American history teacher T.V. Smith, a University of Chicago professor, author of best-selling books on American life and host of a popular radio show. In his morning lectures, Smith illuminated the method behind this still-mysterious country of so many different nationalities and so much wealth. He presented America as a beautiful experiment, a work in progress. Henry Ehrmann, a German Jewish refugee who'd become a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, taught German history with an eye toward the future. At a time when the rest of the world was talking about Germans as if all of them were irredeemably evil, Ehrmann (who is not related to the author of this story) traced the democratic thread in their history. Rather than attack the German character, he attacked German political passivity. For Zander, it was Ehrmann's unspoken lesson that impressed him most deeply. Here was a German Jewish refugee treating a class of Germans with the respect and humanity he had never been afforded himself. "He was such a kind man," says Zander, who wrote to him for years after the war.

Every afternoon at Fort Getty, students and professors gathered around tables and talked about the ideas that had been presented in the morning lectures. Smith would describe an American concept like the balance of government power, then ask: How would that concept translate in Germany?

Getty changed those who went there by immersing them in the fruits of democracy. Germans were given physical freedom: afternoon swims, talks with professors cross-legged on the grass. American and German, captor and captive, teacher and student, blueblood and farmer, officer and enlisted man, treated one another as equals. Germans were asked to disregard military ranks so that an enlisted man might lead a discussion or contradict an officer. Americans, too, made a conscious point of ignoring their own ranks and behaving casually and with good humor. Nowhere was this "casual American" approach more pronounced than in Cornell University professor William Moulton's English conversation class. When von Oppenfeld attended Getty, this became his favorite part of the day. Americans and Germans of all ranks acted out amusing scenarios together, like asking someone out on a date or getting a haircut. "Max, have a cigarette!" they'd shout with delight.

It was an idyll, yes, but a sense of gravity also pervaded Getty. Zander described it as being suspended “between present and future.” Every discussion, every idea could soon have real application. Zander, Treichl and Smith talked many nights about what went wrong with Germany, how, as Smith put it, a culture that produced Beethoven could produce Hitler. Teachers and students discussed specific solutions, like using town hall meetings to air ideas and get Germans accustomed to discussing things in a democratic manner.

“It affected me very much,” says von Oppenfeld, convincing him that the Americans genuinely wanted to “make a positive contribution to what would happen to Germany over the next 25 years.” He and Zander and Treichl opted to stay on after graduation to serve as teaching assistants. The trio became lifelong friends of one of Getty’s most influential graduates, Walter Hallstein, a former university professor who played a large role in reshaping post-war Germany. When Hallstein returned to Germany, he was installed by the Americans as Frankfurt University’s rector. There, he instituted Getty-style teaching methods. He also had a hand in setting up the new Federal Republic, and getting the economy back on its feet, and would ultimately become the president of the European Commission. His right-hand man at the EC was another prominent Getty graduate, Heinz Henze. For both himself and Hallstein, says Henze, Getty was “the beginning of a lifelong friendship with the United States.”

ON OCTOBER 30, 1945, the New York Herald Tribune held its annual “Responsibility for Victory” forum. Though it would be an additional two years before his plan would transform Germany, George C. Marshall was in the audience that night. Wolf Dieter Zander was there, too, representing Getty and all POWs on his last night in America. Dressed in a sleek suit, his first civilian clothing in years, he delivered a 15-minute speech detailing his transformation at Getty. It was titled “Freedom and Barbed Wire.” “If I were to try to convey our present mood, in two simple words, I would choose: hope and faith,” Zander told the audience and those listening to the speech on

the radio. “Americans, our deepest thanks to you, for the chance you gave us.”

In the next day’s Tribune, where his speech was reprinted, this former prisoner of war would be held up as proof of a “democratically minded Germany.” By then, Zander was on his way home.

ODEMA IS an extreme condition of malnutrition that most often afflicts the elderly. Characterized by oozing, painful sores and swelling, it is a disturbing sight to behold, one that Horst von Oppenfeld made certain Herbert Hoover saw when he toured Germany in 1947 to assess the country’s food supply and economic situation. Von Oppenfeld had arranged all Hoover’s stops in Berlin, including one at a hospital treating victims of malnutrition.

Von Oppenfeld was working in Berlin at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, a department run by the U.S. occupation authorities that distributed food to Germans. In his job, von Oppenfeld had witnessed elderly people making trips to the country with wheelbarrows just to buy potatoes. He saw families selling china, silverware, any-

were saying, “The Americans are doing all the wrong things,” von Oppenfeld says. He often found himself coming to America’s defense, insisting that the Americans really did want to “get things moving again.” He understood that the occupation authority was just a stopgap measure until the Allied powers could foster a real democracy. But other Germans didn’t.

“The whole picture is the peculiar one of a democracy running a dictatorship to teach people about democracy,” wrote professor Moulton with disgust after returning from Germany in 1947. While he reported that many Getty men did get work in the reconstruction effort, others were stymied by red tape and gave up in frustration.

Zander joined his wife in Austria, where she had fled during the war, and got a job in the occupation government. But he didn’t stay long. Germany and Austria were too changed. And so was he. In 1947, he emigrated to the United States, returning to the country that had taught him the meaning of freedom. For a while, Zander ran his own pharmaceutical company. At 88, he still works at an investment firm in New York

City run by an old German Jewish family that he’s been close to since the 1950s.

Von Oppenfeld also returned to America, in 1948, and studied agriculture at Cornell, where he occasionally ran into Moulton, his old English teacher. He worked on agricultural reconstruction projects in Third World countries and later for the World Bank. Now 90, von Oppenfeld and his wife, Judy, live in Bethesda.

Burk stayed in Germany and became a lawyer. A few years after the war, he came across Rommel’s band, still together, and playing at a Hamburg hotel. They had switched, he says, from marching songs to American standards.

Treichl returned home to occupied Austria, carrying books from Getty and his beloved copy of *The Road to Serfdom*. He still has them. He married a Jewish woman and helped her family reclaim their publishing empire, became head of Austria’s largest bank and, later, served as honorary president of the Austrian Red Cross. Now 91, Treichl is known in Austria for his generosity and his habit of speaking hard truths. “I’m very American,” he says with a grin. □

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The New York Herald Tribune of October 31, 1945, chronicled Zander’s 15-minute speech detailing his transformation at Fort Getty.

thing they could get their hands on to pay for the most basic necessities. Germans got food stamps every month, but the average caloric intake still dropped as low as 1,040 a day. Everything was rationed, including fuel. On certain days of the week, there was no electricity. Getting just about anything done in Berlin involved long lines and red tape. The occupation government’s non-fraternization rules, which forbade interaction between Germans and Americans, made communication difficult.

“There was this negative, very negative view [of Americans] in Germany, and they