

**“Who is ‘the Other’?  
Historical Explorations into the Context of War Experiences”**  
keynote address delivered by Professor Dr. Jörg Seiler (University of Erfurt) at  
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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thearl Mesecher was one of approximately 90,000 US Americans who were being held prisoners of war by Germany during World War II. He recorded his experience of captivity in three diaries. Amongst other places, he spent roughly two years being interned at Jaskow near Gdańsk (German: *Danzig*). After returning to the USA after his liberation in 1945, he stayed in touch with the Rudolph Voss family. The latter’s daughter, Billa Voss, had been shot by a German guard while trying to smuggle a fish to Thearl into the prisoner-of-war camp.

On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1946, Rudolph Voss wrote to Thearl:

“Times have changed. Now we are the captives [*die Gefangenen*]. We have no rights; the Russians and Poles do with us as they please.”<sup>1</sup>

The correspondence between Thearl and the Voss family as well as parts of the diaries have been edited by the non-profit educational organization “TRACES”. In the preface to his diaries, Thearl contemplates the meaning of the word *Gefangene*:

“It’s a very expressive German word. No English word or phrase translates it simply. ‘Prisoners of war’ doesn’t quite do the job. In the German tongue, it means rather prisoners of fate, captives of circumstances under which the individual has no control.”

As displayed here, the distinction—or rather implied comparison—between different dimensions of captivity is interesting. Independently of when these texts were written, Voss and Thearl share the experience of being captive. Thearl was actually locked up in the camp. Later, after Soviet troops had taken the *Danzig* area, and a Polish administration had been established, the Voss family considered themselves as prisoners. Rudolph Voss was, in fact, free; and yet, he was not. He was held captive, too—although differently. At first sight, the difference seems to suggest itself: The status which prisoners of war held evidently differed from that of Germans residing in the new Polish territories under Soviet influence. Voss uses the notion of captivity in a metaphorical way in order to convey his unease with the new situation, his fears and loss of security.

When reading the Voss family’s letters, which are displayed in the section of the exhibit titled “Behind Barbed Wire”, you will discover that Rudolph Voss did, indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> “Die Zeiten haben sich geändert. Nun sind wir die Gefangenen. Rechte haben wir keine; die Russen und Polen tun mit uns, was sie wollen.”

correlate the palpable distress experienced by Thearl as a prisoner of war with his (*i.e.* Rudolph's) situation in 1946. Simply speaking, he substantiated his request for financial (and moral) support on grounds of the life-threatening commitment proven to Thearl by the Voss family during the war. Consequently, Rudolph Voss—now in his own state of captivity—hoped for help from Thearl.

First of all, I would like to state for the record that captivity is a complex subject matter. It marks alterities between captive and free. In addition, it allows for insight into possible alternatives: Billa Voss did not have to smuggle a fish into the prisoner-of-war camp. Nonetheless, she did so and paid dearly for this act of humanity by losing her life. From a moral point of view, she was not obliged to act as she did, and, legally speaking, her humanitarian gesture was prohibited. She did, however, act differently from what was morally demanded and legally permitted. On what grounds was this alterity based? I should like to suppose on her constructively filling the space—created by circumstances of war—between her as a German and the US-American enemy. I shall address this point further down the line.

Why did I begin with this episode?

This exhibit on prisoner-of-war and internment camps in the USA and in Nazi Germany is not an abstract historical one. Not only is it concerned with the past but, moreover, it is intended to make us comprehend history by turning towards individual biographies. History as presented here is telling about real persons' experiences. These experiences have been recounted to us, and by bringing them up in discussions with others we shape history. Such is the concept underlying this exhibit. It is based on countless interviews conducted for more than 75 hours with contemporary witnesses by Michael Luick-Thrams, director of the German historical association *Spuren* ("traces"). Furthermore, it is based on all material yielded to him by the interviewees on these occasions. Hence, the exhibit does not focus on presenting the system of World War II camps as objectively as possible; rather, it directs attention to the experiences shared with us by people who had to live in these camps. The accompanying texts have been written **from the perspective of these experiences**: at times descriptively and narratively, at times analytically, at times passionately, accusingly and admonishingly. We do not claim to describe "the truth" about World War II imprisonment. Notwithstanding, a multifaceted reality of suffering is broached, which may postulate a claim to truth due to experiences lived out.

Subjects include life before captivity, the act of capture, transport to the camps, and life within them. The latter was characterized by work, spare time, and living together. Everyday vignettes were depicted in comic strips or sketches; sometimes, POWs produced wood carvings and even jewelry cases. You will see display boards dealing with escape, resistance, and return. Finally, some of the boards are dedicated to reconciling with the past. Coerced working relations between prisoners of war and locals often

resulted in relationships which outlasted the war. The example already mentioned is but one of many. German prisoners of war in the Midwest frequently benefited from the fact that much of the local population was of German origin, which helped to establish a certain bond. About five percent of the German prisoners of war returned to the USA during the years following their release.

You know that war imprisonment is cruel. Nevertheless, I shall concretize it with a few facts. In Poland, the German *Wehrmacht* (armed forces) denied most Polish prisoners of war protection according to international law and exploited them as forced laborers in German agriculture and war industry. Of the 5.7 million Red Army soldiers in German captivity, 3.3 million did not survive, which is to say almost 58 percent. The respective quota among US-American, British, Canadian, and other soldiers amounts to 3.5 percent (8,348 of 232,000). The more than one million members of the German *Wehrmacht* being held captive since the summer of 1944 were sufficiently fed in Anglo-American prisoner-of-war camps. It was not until the capitulation—with their number increasing to approximately 7.5 million—that supply shortfalls occurred. About one-third (2 million out of 3.3 million) of the German prisoners of war died in Soviet captivity. Behind abstract figures like these, actual people with individual experiences and destinies lie hidden. You will acquaint yourself with them by touring the exhibit.

In another line of thought, namely, by asking “Who are **the others?**”, I would like to introduce selected aspects of actual people’s experiences ‘condensed’ to an exhibit.

First of all, some theoretical considerations concerning the notion “the others”. I hereby avail myself to François Jullien’s thoughts.<sup>2</sup> Jullien (born in 1951) is a French philosopher and sinologist.

According to him, the idea of the others is bilaterally menaced. On the one hand, there is the danger of absolutizing the others: they absorb me, thereby confining me with regard to who I am and how I live or should be/do and want to. (This is, in a manner of speaking, endangerment ‘on the left’.) On the other hand, there is the danger of being subjected to the dictate of assimilation: in this case, the others will be absorbed by me and have to conform to my cultural ideas and perceptions. (This is, so to speak, endangerment ‘on the right’.) Both endangerments result from the problems caused by the notion of “difference”. A difference always presupposes something basically common, which—and here lies the problem—is conceptualized based on the identity of the person who perceives and addresses the difference. In this context, there is imminent danger of hegemonic encroachment.

François Jullien therefore proposes to substitute the concept of difference for that of interspace. “Interspace” signifies distance and, in doing so, indicates room which is not

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<sup>2</sup> For the following cf. Jullien, François. *Der Weg zum Anderen: Alterität im Zeitalter der Globalisierung*. Ed. Peter Engelmann. Trans. Christian Leitner. Vienna: Passagen, 2014. Passagen Forum (French Original *L'écart et l'entre* published in 2012).

qualified by assimilation to my ideas or my absorption by the others. It is something in between, which does not always exist, though, but has to be created by either one or the other side. The others are the others because, together with me, they build a field between poles, on which something may happen. Jullien calls it a "fertile field producing something".

Let us apply this concept to the example drawn from the exhibit.

Billa Voss did, of course, perceive Thearl Mesecher as one of the others due to formal inequality: During the war, he, a prisoner of war, was deployed for duty at her father's smithy. The encounter took place within the framework defined by martial law. Moreover, 'enemies' met each other. Inequality prevailed as to the freedom of movement. Taking into account the aspect of difference, dependencies instantly manifest themselves here. Dependencies also existed when the Voss family approached Thearl for help after the war. Those, however, were no longer based on grounds of martial law but had a moral or humane quality to them. The idea of interspace between Billa and Thearl as well as between Thearl and the Voss family allows for insight into other contexts. The persons involved built a relational framework (in the terminology introduced by Jullien, a "fertile field"). Within this framework, the respective other ones were perceived not just as differing (free/unfree, taskmaster/forced laborer, etc) but rather—given the inhumanity of war, about which nothing could be done and on which no one involved seems to have dwelled—a successful attempt was made to create something which can be described using terms such as "help", "humanity", "emotional and physical support" or even "love". If incorporated into the framework of dependency and difference, these terms would be considerably less significant; for the external conditions of, *e.g.*, martial law so unambiguously define the alterity "victor/captive" that the others fail to act as producers of a "fertile field". Under such circumstances, we would only comment on the episode in awe and with admiration: "My goodness, they were so brave! It's great that there were people like these, too!" Do not get me wrong: this comment would be utterly appropriate. However, the reason for me being touched by the vignette of Voss and Thearl is not just that I admire Billa's death-defying heroism; I also fathom that, even in times of war, the others (in this context meaning "enemies") are not just people who absorb me (*i.e.* who defeat me) or whom I align with me (*i.e.* whom I defeat). In this, I do not relativize the abomination of World War II by keeping it at bay through academic ambages. I rather learn to understand dynamics which do not correspond to those presupposed by politics, ideology or military strategy. Comprehension of said divergent dynamics is an asset of focusing on biographies. Products of such an historical approach can be seen in this exhibit, which, consequently, does not tell merely random stories but, by using historical examples, reveals the potential contained in concerning oneself with the others in the context of war experiences.

You are invited to discover how rewarding the encounter can be. You yourself will experience some alterities. To begin with, the presentation does not employ state-of-the-art technology due to narrow means, and still, testifies to the authors' dedication. We aim at reaching people not impressing them by sophisticated design. Visit TRACES' website. See pictures and watch clips of people all around the USA meeting at this exhibit. That is impressive.

The discreet topicality of the exhibit and its supplementary program may turn your attention to the tension in German public attitudes whenever the word "refugees" is uttered. Anyway, it would be much wiser to use the term "fleeing people". I am under the impression that all those who perceive the Occident as threatened succumb to an inflexible image of the others. Their alienness always presents a positive challenge. If mainly considering alienness a threat, though (By whom, actually?), I do not appreciate the productive space opened up through encountering the others. Human rights, the inviolable dignity of all human beings as well as the humane and Christian character of our society are all the more reason to enter this space.