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Austrian POWs in Aliceville, Alabama
1944-1946

verfasst von / submitted by

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**Emilie > Karl**

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**Karl > Emilie**

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All photos taken at the Aliceville Museum complex and the former camp ground are privately owned and were all taken in spring 2014 (Karl & Lena Netrval).

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Introduction

First and foremost, I want to explain why I chose the topic of Austrian Prisoners of War (short: POW) in a very specific POW camp in US – a POW camp in a town called Aliceville in Alabama.

My paternal grandfather, Karl Netrval Sr., was drafted into the Austrian army during the Second World War and was captured shortly after D-Day (exact date unknown, he was reported missing in action on June 10, 1944; D-Day took place on June 6, 1944) in Normandy, France. After his capture, he was transferred by ship to an intermediary stop in a town called Fort Bragg (North Carolina) from where he was moved throughout the US to his final destination in the South. He was eventually detained in one of the biggest American POW camps of the Second World War, Camp Aliceville in Alabama, in one the most southern states of the United States. From 1944 to 1946 (the time of his return to Europe), both he and my grandmother continuously wrote letters back and forth. My grandparents have always held on to those letters until my grandfather’s death in 1992 – which was when my father unknowingly inherited their correspondence.

One day in December a couple of years back - I was looking for an old postcard for another seminar - I came about this box full of letters, cards, and pictures that my grandmother apparently had kept all those years. During his lifetime, my grandfather had not talked much about what happened during the war in general and what happened while he was imprisoned in the Aliceville POW camp in particular – therefore, both my father and I had no idea where exactly he was kept as a prisoner, how the conditions were, and what he experienced there. My grandmother had already died during the 1970ies and my grandfather passed away in 1992 - so there was no one to ask anymore. Until we found the box in the basement.

That’s when I started to do some research and found out that there is a POW Camp Museum in the town of Aliceville and decided to write and e-mail to John Gillum, the current director of the Museum. He replied instantly and very soon, my father and I planned and booked a trip to Aliceville to visit the Museum as well as the old POW-location site that is close by. In April of 2014 we were warmly welcomed by the staff as well as by the citizens of Aliceville and it was then that I decided to do some more research and make this the topic of my next diploma thesis.

It is this thesis at hand where I am going to explore what everyday life in a POW Camp in the United States was like during the 1940ies for Austrian/German POWs. The
scarce literature that exists concerning this topic generally deals with German POWs and their experiences, rituals, pastimes, as well as leisure activities - unfortunately, there is hardly any distinction between Germans and Austrians in this literature but one can assume that the circumstances where roughly the same.

Furthermore, I am going to try to shed some light on the history of Camp Aliceville itself and on its role within the system of POW camps in the United States.

Also, I am going to go into detail in reference to the stigma of surrendering to the enemy and becoming a POW; a stigma that goes back to World War I where surrendering equaled the loss of one’s masculinity and where falling into enemy’s hands was regarded as the ultimate defeat. This idea of never giving oneself up to the enemy but rather die (even be it by suicide) was taken to extremes by Adolf Hitler’s Hitlerjugend, where the ultimate consequence was to sacrifice his/her own life for the native country. This was indoctrinated as self-evident of every young man serving Hitler.

I can never be 100% sure whether my grandfather surrendered to the enemy or was taken prisoner during the ongoing fighting, resisting (or no resisting) arrest. But the documents that I am going to be looking at might give information on how his arrest went.

My research is - among other sources that were used for the theoretical part of this thesis - comprised of my grandparents’ letters (see index for full list), some official records that documented my grandfather’s journey to Camp Aliceville via England and his travel back home via Pine Camp, New York State, as well as well-researched books like Ruth Beaumont Cook’s Guests Behind the Barbed Wire (published at the University of Alabama). Unfortunately, I was not able to interview either of my grandparents because they both sadly passed away many years ago but I hope to do my grandfather’s experience in an American POW Camp justice.

As for my hypothesis already mentioned previously: I want to explore what the (Austrian) POWs experienced and how were treated while imprisoned (particularly in Camp Aliceville, Alabama) and if there was a noticeable difference between Austrian and German POWs. The literature mostly uses the word “German” when referring to the prisoners because after the annexation in 1938, Austria and Germany were regarded as one entity. Hence, some of my interest lies in the details that might distinguish the German POW from the Austrian one as well as in seemingly ordinary things such as past times and camp structures.
The thesis will be divided into two parts:

- In Part I, I explore the theoretical background of POWs throughout history, of POW camps in the 20th century, their structure, their characteristics in general and those of the POW camp in Aliceville, Alabama, in particular. Furthermore, I analyze the stigmatization of surrendering to the eventual captor and its connection to masculinity and the loss thereof.

- In Part II, I relate the theoretical issues discussed in part I to the letters and cards of my grandparents, how he experienced life in Aliceville and explore correlations and overlaps. I also examine the collection of letters hermeneutically.

Due to reasons of length and legibility I am not able to include all cards and letters that were written back and forth but only a choice of them. There is a full list of all the cards, letters and documents featured in the index of this thesis.
Part I - Background Information on POW camps in general and Aliceville in particular

1. What is a POW?

“A prisoner of war is a man who tries to kill you and fails, and then asks you not to kill him.”

(Winston Churchill, 1952)

First and foremost there is a need to define the term “POW”: a **Prisoner Of War** is a soldier that is taken hostage by the enemy during the course of the war:

The losers [...] are the prisoners of war (POWs), that is, captured members of an opposing army, in or out of uniform, who were armed with anything from knives and lances to modern machine guns. The important distinction between war prisoners and, say, the civilian inhabitants of a town [...] is that the civilians have few, if any, weapons. Or many options, for that matter.¹

Often, prisoners of war were killed after their surrender to the enemy. Back in ancient history (and even to this day) it was (is) expensive to provide enough food and shelter for one’s own military personnel, let alone for the enemy. Furthermore, the soldiers who took the military men hostage often had to witness their own peer’s death before and were enraged, seeking revenge.²

There have been many examples throughout history when prisoners of war were executed in the most gruesome manner (by the Greek, the Romans, the Vikings, the Danes, as well as by the English, for example)³ – which, due to time constraints, there will be no focus on in this thesis. Nevertheless, even before the 20th century, it became apparent that the winning parties tried to not let it get out of hand.⁴

During the Second World War, the *Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* of 1929 came into play (see below for more information). It can be deduced that the Germans, for example, murdered their counterparts predominantly when time or money (or pure rage, in some instances, see below for more information) was of the essence. When this was not necessarily the case they took their enemies hostage and put them in newly created POW camps. Overall it can be

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² Cf. ibid., p. 2.
³ Cf. ibid., p. 4.
said that Allied POWs were murdered, yes, but not to the extent and the force the Japanese, for example, treated their POWs in the Pacific. Or the how the Russians treated their POWs in the Gulag. In general, “the Germans tried to adhere to the Geneva Convention of 1929. Of the 93,941 American servicemen taken prisoner in the European theatre, 1,121 died in captivity – a death rate of only 1.1 percent.” But the articles of the Geneva Convention were not always obeyed (and/or sometimes, the enemy soldiers were killed before they could even become POWs); in this example the German side murdered Allied military personnel during the Normandy Invasion of 1944:

The Germans reluctantly killed their American, British, and Canadian prisoners as well, despite their general compliance with the Geneva Accords, presumably to reduce the grad on their forces as events moved quickly around them. Groups of Allied prisoners were found massacred in the wake of the Normandy Invasion in June 1944, many shot execution-style with their hand wired behind their backs. Since they were dispatched without torture and over a short period of time, one assumes that they murdered to lighten the enemy’s ability to retreat speedily and without encumbrance.

Thus it can be said that military conflicts in relation to POWs have been around for a very long time but parallel to the evolution of modern warfare, the number of POWs has increased tremendously. During World War I, roughly seven million POWs were taken. During World War II, however, this number rose to 30 million. Especially the POWs that fell into Russian hands had a very hard draw. But also, on the other hand, as mentioned above, the Germans did not always treat their POWs with dignity either (often because they did not want to pay for their accommodation and nourishment, as already reference to; this often occurred with Russian POWs):

So war das größte Verbrechen der Wehrmacht der Massenmord an den sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen. Von den rund 5,3 bis 5,7 Millionen

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7 Ibid., p. 6.
Rotarmisten in deutschem Gewahrsam sind 2,5 bis 3,3 Millionen, die Schätzungen schwanken umgekommen (45 bis 57 Prozent). Sie starben in Lagern, für die die Wehrmacht verantwortlich war: 845 000 noch im Militärverwaltungsgebiet in der Nähe der Front, 1,2 Millionen in Lagern der weiter hinter liegenden Zivilverwaltungsgebiete, 500 000 im sogenannten Generalgouvernement und 360 000 bis 400 000 in Lagern im Deutschen Reich.  

Rough translation: The biggest war crime committed by the Wehrmacht was the mass murder of millions of Russian prisoners of war. Out of 5.3-5.7 million Russian soldiers in German hands 2.5–3.3 million died (45-57%). They died in camps for which the Wehrmacht was responsible: 845 000 died close to the battle fields, 1,2 million died in camps a little bit further away, 500 000 died in the so-called “general government” and 360 000 – 400 000 in camps within Germany.

Often, this rage and feeling of wanting to retaliate within the German Wehrmacht grew from violations of unspoken rules of war: the Russians, for example, often stimulated death or unconsciousness in order to attack their enemy in an ambush; or they used fire as a way to get through the German lines. This broken trust, so to speak, was often paid back in a very brutal manner once Russians became German POWs. Even though the Haager Landkriegsordnung regulated military behavior during war times, there were also many unwritten rules of warfare that both sides did not adhere to.  

In the following chapter, I am going to shed light on the historical evolution of the rights of POWs. I am going to briefly describe all important judicial stages of the legal development from the Hammuarbic Code to the Haager Landkriegsordnung and the afore mentioned Geneva Convention of 1929 but I will especially highlight the articles and clauses that are particularly relevant to my thesis, i.e. the ones that deal with writing to the next of kin and regulation of free time at camps.

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9 Cf. ibid., p. 137.
1.1. From the Hammurabic Code to the English Civil War

The roots of the Geneva Convention of 1929 lie in the ancient town of Babylon in one of the first written accounts of the law, the Hammurabic Code. Despite the fact that there is no direct evidence on how to treat prisoners, there are clauses that regulate how to provide for a prisoner’s family (wife and children) while the POW is in jail:

Clause 133: “If a man is taken prisoner in war, and there is sustenance in his house, but if his wife leaves house and court, and goes to another house, she shall be judicially condemned and thrown into the water.”

Clause 134: “If any one be captured in war and there is not sustenance in his house, if then his wife go to another house this woman shall be held blameless.”

Clause 135: “If a man be taken prisoner in war and there be no sustenance in his house and his wife go to another house and bear children, and if later her husband return and come to his home, then his wife shall return to her husband, but the children follow their father.” [sic]\(^{10}\)

The mentioning of the return of the wife to the husband after his time in prison indicates that prisoners of war were not killed, thus having a chance to go back home after they had served their time. Nevertheless, there is no mention of the actual treatment of prisoners of war.

During the Civil War in England and the Enlightenment period that followed during the 1700s, the conditions for the prisoners of war changed once more. While during the Civil War they were held in very bad conditions (often used as a good to be exchanged for); shortly afterwards the taking of prisoners of war was seen as rather unnecessary. The Dutch theorist Hugo Grotius “acknowledged that war captives, like citizens, had a recognizable humanity which could not be legally violated except in cases where a normal civilian might receive similar punishment and [...] after a place has surrendered, and there is no danger to be apprehended from the prisoners, there is nothing to justify the further effusion of blood.”\(^{11}\) Unfortunately, this vision would not be acknowledged everywhere for another 200 years – especially the American Revolutionary War saw very barbaric British treatment of POWs.

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\(^{11}\) Ibid, p. 18.
During the Great War (a.k.a. the First World War) roughly 8.5 out of 70 million soldiers were taken prisoners by the Allied Forces – this translates to approximately twelve percent of all soldiers who fought in the Great War. While the number of death soldiers (nine to ten million) outweighed the number of captive soldiers, the story of the prisoners of war during WWI remained untold for a long time.\(^\text{12}\)

### 1.2. Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907

At the end of the 19\(^\text{th}\) century, the Hague Regulations of 1899 were the only state-of-the-art regulations that mentioned prisoners of war. Another advanced Hague Convention replaced/extended it in 1907.

The Regulations of 1899 state in Article 6 that “neutral merchantmen, yachts, or vessels, having, or taking on board, sick, wounded, or shipwrecked of the belligerents, cannot be captured for so doing, but they are liable to capture for any violation of neutrality they may have committed.”\(^\text{13}\) In Article 7 it says that “the religious, medical, or hospital staff of any captured ship is inviolable, and its members cannot be made prisoners of war.”\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, the Regulations of 1899 also secure the prisoners wellbeing when they are sick in Article 8: „Sailors and soldiers who are taken on board when sick or wounded, to whatever nation they belong, shall be protected and looked after by the captors.”\(^\text{15}\)

The key article in this convention is Article nine:

**Art. 9.** The shipwrecked, wounded, or sick of one of the belligerents who fall into the hands of the other, are prisoners of war. The captor must decide, according to circumstances, if it is best to keep them or send them to a port of his own country, to a neutral port, or even to a

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hostile port. In the last case, prisoners thus repatriated cannot serve as long as the war lasts.\textsuperscript{16}

The repatriation of prisoners of war is crucial - even though they might be wounded and/or sick, it is meant for them to return home. After the Second World War, the repatriation of the POWs took many months.

The articles of the Hague Regulations of 1899 were slightly amended in 1907:

\textbf{Art. 4.} Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or corps who capture them. They must be humanely treated. All their personal belongings, except arms, horses, and military papers, remain their property.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Art. 5.} Prisoners of war may be interned in a town, fortress, camp, or other place, and bound not to go beyond certain fixed limits; but they cannot be confined except as in indispensable measure of safety and only while the circumstances which necessitate the measure continue to exist.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Art. 6.} The State may utilize the labour of prisoners of war according to their rank and aptitude, officers excepted. The tasks shall not be excessive and shall have no connection with the operations of the war. Prisoners may be authorized to work for the public service, for private persons, or on their own account. Work done for the State is paid for at the rates in force for work of a similar kind done by soldiers of the national army, or, if there are none in force, at a rate according to the work executed. When the work is for other branches of the public service or for private persons the conditions are settled in agreement with the military authorities. The wages of the prisoners shall go towards improving their position, and the balance shall be paid them on their release, after deducting the cost of their maintenance.\textsuperscript{19}


Art. 7. The Government into whose hands prisoners of war have fallen is charged with their maintenance. In the absence of a special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war shall be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the Government who captured them.20

Further articles discuss the mail that prisoners of war are allowed to receive, freedom of religion, as well as the quick repatriation of the prisoners as soon as the war is over and peace has been reached. The guarantee by the nation that captured the POWs to give them food, shelter, and work equal to their own is held up in the Geneva Convention of 1929. The term “humane treatment” is not elaborated on further, but in conclusion to the content of the articles, humane treatment means treating the POWs like the own soldiers, but while in a mild form of incarceration.

1.3. Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1929)

After the First World War and in reference to the Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907 (see above), the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War was drafted in 1929. The Hague Regulations showed some deficiencies, therefore a new regulation had to be legalized quickly:

Such defects were partly overcome by special agreements made between belligerents in Berne in 1917 and 1918. In 1921, the International Red Cross Conference held at Geneva expressed the wish that a special convention on the treatment of prisoners of war be adopted. The International Committee of the Red Cross drew up a draft convention, which was submitted to the Diplomatic Conference convened at Geneva in 1929. The Convention does not replace but only completes the provisions of the Hague regulations. The most important innovations consisted in the prohibition of reprisals and collective penalties, the organization of prisoners’ work, the designation, by the prisoners, of representatives and the control exercised by protecting Powers.21

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Article 2 states that “Prisoners of War are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation which captured them. They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden.” This defines the term “humane” a little bit further: soldiers are protected from violent measures that might be forced upon them by their war opponents.

In other articles of the convention, the prisoners do not lose the right to their personal belongings during the course of their imprisonment; they are guaranteed medical care whenever needed; and they are also guaranteed their safety in dangerous situations.

Furthermore, I want to focus a little bit more on the articles of the Geneva Convention that regulate the contact with their next of kin (it is called “relations of prisoners of war with the exterior” in the Convention):

**Art. 8.** Belligerents are required to notify each other of all captures of prisoners as soon as possible, through the intermediary of the Information Bureaux [...]. They are likewise required to inform each other of the official addresses to which letter from the prisoners' families may be addressed to the prisoners of war. As soon as possible, every prisoner shall be enabled to correspond personally with his family, in accordance with the conditions prescribed in Article 36 and the following Articles.

**Art. 36.** Each of the belligerents shall fix periodically the number of letters and postcards which prisoners of war of different categories shall be permitted to send per month, and shall notify that number to the other belligerent. These letters and cards shall be sent by post by the shortest route. They may not be delayed or withheld for disciplinary motives. Not later than one week after his arrival in camp, and similarly in case of sickness, each prisoner shall be enabled to send a postcard to his family informing them of his capture and the state of his health. The said postcards shall be forwarded as quickly as possible and shall not be delayed in any manner. As a general rule, the correspondence of prisoners shall be written in their native language. Belligerents may authorize correspondence in

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other languages.24

**Art. 37.** Prisoners of war shall be authorized to receive individually postal parcels containing foodstuffs and other articles intended for consumption or clothing. The parcels shall be delivered to the addressees and a receipt given.25

**Art. 40.** The censoring of correspondence shall be accomplished as quickly as possible. The examination of postal parcels shall, moreover, be effected under such conditions as will ensure the preservation of any foodstuffs which they may contain, and, if possible, be done in the presence of the addressee or of a representative duly recognized by him.

Any prohibition of correspondence ordered by the belligerents, for military or political reasons, shall only be of a temporary character and shall also be for as brief a time as possible.26

In reference to Part II of this thesis, those articles will be of relevance. Only one of the letters that Karl Netrval wrote to his wife Emilie was censored, for example. By taking a look at the dates of the letters one can also conclude when the prisoners were allowed to write their correspondence letters and postcards.

The Geneva Convention of 1929 was to be effective until the newer Geneva Convention provisions in 1949.

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1.4. Surrender and the Threatening of Manhood

Why is manhood threatened by surrender?

In his book *The Stigma of Surrender* American author Brian K. Feltman analyses the possible humiliation and the threat of one’s manhood that goes hand in hand with surrendering one into the enemies’ hands.

In reference to Hitler’s point of view during WWII he writes as follows:

For Hitler and many of his fellow National Socialists, a soldier’s death, even by one’s own hand, was preferable to the humiliation of surviving as a prisoner of war. He applied his personal philosophy to the German people as well. Long after Hitler knew that the war was lost, he remained unwilling to negotiate for peace, preferring to “fight to the last breath” rather than to surrender.27

For Hitler, committing suicide was the more honorable way to die. Instead of facing numerous charges of treason, he chose to escape capture in a way that might seem like cowardice to many of us today but in his mind was the only right thing to do – because one does not simply surrender and give up, in his ways of thinking. According to Feltman, “they identified suicide as a ‘distinctly masculine way of dying,’ one that would remove the possibility that they might suffer the same of captivity.”28

As already alluded to before, there is no evidence of my grandfather having surrendered but there’s also no evidence of him having been taken prisoner during the ongoing fighting – apart from the fact that he was unharmed when taken.

1.4.1. The “Heldentod” vs. Social Darwinism and the Hitlerjugend

“Women will hate war and love the warrior, precisely because the best warrior is also the best man.”

(Widow of a German pilot, as cited by Feltman)29

The “Heldentod” had been part of the German (and to a certain extent Austrian) military ideology for a long time; it became “popular” so to speak during the Great War from 1914 to 1918. The “Heldentod” was indoctrinated into German/Austrian soldiers from a very young age onwards; the intention of course was not to eradicate

28 Ibid., p. 197.
29 Ibid., p. 196.
the entire army but to persuade “their soldiers to continue fighting during the ‘critical moments’ when a stalled advance or the surrender of even a small number of men could set off a rout. [...] They had been indoctrinated from an early age to welcome the Heldentod, and their education in heroism had been deliberate.”

Not only during the Great War but also during World War II the soldiers felt that going to war for one’s country was the ultimate sacrifice and goal - “falling into enemy hands threatened to erase everything soldiers had accomplished by joining their units in the nation’s time of need.”

The Hitlerjugend, an organization created by Adolf Hitler to strengthen the offspring and to make them ready for war, was a place where the Heldentod was part of the curriculum, so to speak. “We were born to die for Germany” (Wir sind zum Sterben für Deutschland geboren) was their main slogan.

What Hitler’s view of pedagogy and education was is illustrated in Hermann Rauschnings Gespräche mit Hitler (English: Conversations with Hitler) and goes as follows:


Rough translation: Hitler thinks that knowledge and being intellectual interferes with one’s ability to be strong like a predator; the wants the youth to be able to endure as much pain as possible, be unfazed and brutal, even savage. He wants them to be athletic and dictatorial because knowledge only spoils them, making them weaker.

30 Ibid., p. 21.
31 Ibid., p. 25.
32 Cf. Ibid., p. 194.
This willingness to die for one’s own country predominantly can be applied to those soldiers who enlisted voluntarily. Those that were drafted – we can assume, to a certain degree – did not necessarily want to die a “Heldentod”; they just wanted to get out of the battlefields alive once the war was over (and ideally, won).

Yet, in addition it can also be assumed that surrendering to the enemy (irrespective of being a volunteer or having been drafted) “made them immediate outcasts [because] experiencing capture by the enemy [can be seen as] a metaphoric castration”34 either way.

This leads to the immense effect Social Darwinism had on mankind in general and a certain part of society in particular. Charles Darwin established the theory of the “survival of the fittest”, meaning that the strongest nation, race, class, or person will prevail over the other, thus making it a means of evaluating the weakest link(s).35 According to this theory of the survival of the fittest, war was/is inevitable at some point. War then again leads to war crimes, violence, destroyed and divided countries, as well as to winners and losers. Wanting to be among the fittest, one can argue, is closely tied to dying a hero, as discussed before. Not dying as a hero but surrendering to the prevailing enemy was very likely seen as the ultimate betrayal of one’s country and one’s ideals.

Surrender, in relation to the outcome of the Great War for example, can make or break a country. In 1918 – studies show - a flood of voluntary surrenders played a vital role in ending the First World War. The fear of being killed after having surrendered, according to the aforementioned Feltman, was very predominant - if it hadn’t been for that fear, those high numbers of soldiers giving themselves up might have occurred earlier in the war.36 He states that

[...] many soldiers preferred to fight to the death rather than face the humiliation of asking their enemies for mercy. Resistance to the concept of surrender was rooted in centuries of interaction between captors and their prisoners. [...] Surrender was not seen as a desirable end to military service for many soldiers [...]. Instead, it forced soldiers

34 Ibid., p. 24.
to bear a heavy psychological burden that most men preferred to avoid.\textsuperscript{37}

In general, emasculation was one of the dominant feelings of German soldiers after having had to surrender to the eventual captor after having fallen into the enemy’s hands in one way or another – they often would have preferred death during the course of the war or maybe even suicide. This feeling was not only shared by German (and therefore Austrian) soldiers, but probably by soldiers all around the world during the Great War and beyond due to the indoctrination of the \textit{Heldentod} at an early age. Often, feelings of cowardice and helplessness lingered around for a long time in a person’s mind and body.\textsuperscript{38}

After having served in the Great War, many ex-POWs felt out of place in the community that they felt it not welcome them as full-fledged members of society. Adolf Hitler, in a very genius move one has to admit, invited them back into the community and thus gave their life purpose again\textsuperscript{39}:

\begin{quote}
Hitler’s decision to formally welcome them to the community of the front represented the culmination of their battle for redemption and acknowledgement. Redemption was possible in Hitler’s Germany, and former prisoners of the British and other belligerent played key political and military roles in the Third Reich. Admiral Karl Dönitz [...] ended the Great War in enemy hands after the British sank his submarine in the Mediterranean. [...] Apparently, even the inner sanctum of the Nazi movement was open to former prisoners.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Feltman also raises the question whether the experiences of surrendering and powerlessness drew those WWI veterans to the fascist Nazi movement or whether those numbers are pure coincidence, given the fact that so many Germans (and Austrians) made those experiences during WWI. Feltman does not reference further studies concerning this theory but states that Hitler himself loathed surrender (as illustrated before in reference to his \textit{Hitlerjugend}) and that his decision to involve WWI POWs was one made out of strategic military thinking and not empathy\textsuperscript{41} because “the veneration and commemoration of sacrificial death was a hallmark of a Nazi propaganda machine that called on soldiers to sacrifice their lives in the name of

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Ibid., p. 198
\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Ibid., p. 195.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 195.
\textsuperscript{41} Cf. Ibid., p. 196.
German prosperity. Soldiers who died for German were viewed as martyrs who had entered the realm of eternal heroes."42


Image 1: Obituaries Image 1 illustrates how the Heldentod was emphasized on after a soldier’s death. Hans Hautum, Firth Ehnes and Willi Dornis all died for the Third Reich, fighting for Germany.

The circle closes as – after the end of World War Two and even during the course of the last year or two of the war – Germans and Austrians again fell into the enemy’s/Allies’ hands and served time as POWs all over the world.

After returning from those POW camps, according to Feltman, men were assigned new roles in society to support a new, softer self-perception: the one of a mellow, even somewhat feminine man who focuses on his family.44

But how exactly did soldiers fall into the captor’s hands?

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42 Ibid., p. 196.
1.5. The Taking of POWs during WWII

Among the first prisoners to be brought to POW camps (in general, not only to Camp Aliceville in particular) were, as previously already stated, soldiers of General Rommel’s *Afrika Corps*. American and British troops (under General Omar Bradley and George Patton, respectively) joined forces to destroy Rommel’s *Wehrmacht* soldiers—those fights went down in history as the biggest artillery and tank battles in world history.45 Predominantly German and Italian soldiers were coming off the battlefields, wounded and confused. The first step for the Allies was to search for weapons on the POWs and the main difficulty between the enemy soldiers was the language barrier, first and foremost. The Americans spoke little German, the Germans spoke little English, and the recruited soldiers from the East usually spoke neither German nor English. Therefore, the Americans and the British simply disarmed the soon-to-be prisoners of war and brought them out of the fighting grounds. The soldiers were put onto trucks that usually brought new ammunition and weapons to the front. They were then usually sent to transit camps.46 It seems as if no distinction between German and Austrian military personnel was made in reality, even though there should have been (see next page). After some problems on the transports from Africa, this tension eased when the outcome of the war had shifted to the Allied:

Als der Kampf sich weiter durch Nordafrika hinzog und sich das Kriegsglück zugunsten der Alliierten zu neigen schien, verschwanden die Ressentiments gegen feindliche Gefangene fast völlig. Das persönliche Engagement für den Kampf war der sachlichen Einsicht gewichen, dass der Krieg nur ein “Job” war, der getan werden musste, und als die POWs ihre anfängliche Furcht vor Misshandlungen durch die, die sie gefangen nahmen, verloren, war auf beiden Seiten Entspannung erkennbar. Das gegenseitige Interesse aneinander schwand in solchem Maße, dass Mitte November 1943 die amerikanischen Leser von *Collier’s Magazine* erstaunt ein Bild in dieser Zeitschrift sehen konnten, das eine lange Reihe gefangener Soldaten des Afrikakorps zeigte, die ungeleitet und unbewacht zum Sammelkampf marschierten.47

It can be assumed that this was the same procedure with lots of the POWs that were taken by the American and the British during WWII (the exceptions were already alluded to before; mainly because of time and money constraints or personal

46 Cf. ibid., p. 35.
47 Ibid., p. 35.
retaliation). Once they arrived at a transit camp or a collective camp, they were medically examined (badly injured POWs were sent to a military hospital to be treated, according to the Geneva convention), and then they were assigned an identification number (which was to be kept until the end of their time as POWs)\textsuperscript{48}:

- The first part of the number indicated the place where the soldier was taken.
  - 81 = North Africa
  - 5 = Pacific area
  - 31 = European war theater
- The following letter indicated the country of origin
  - G = German
  - I = Italian
  - A = Austrian
  - ....
- The third part of the number was the prisoner’s personal identification number.

Following this information, found in Arnold Krammer’s book \textit{Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in Amerika 1942 – 1946}, my grandfather Karl Netrval should have received a number starting with 31-A-xxxxx. Instead, he was given the number 31-G-70559. This indicates that on paper, the differentiation between German and Austrian soldiers was made, but in reality, since German had annexed Austria officially in 1938, this differentiation was thrown overboard most of the time. One can only assume that this was the case because either time was of the essence and/or Austrians were seen as Germans (which they technically were at the time, since the \textit{Anschluss} of 1938). Sometimes, those numbers were assigned even later, in the United States after they had been taken overseas, and not in Europe or Africa; those numbers were then different from those assigned before the prisoners were transferred overseas.

In addition to the medical checks and the assignment of a personal ID number, the prisoners had to fill in a three-page-form, along with a CV, an anamnesis, submit a set of finger prints, a list of personal belongings that were on him at the time of his capture, as well as his military history.\textsuperscript{49} My efforts to allocate my grandfather’s form were fruitless; it was among those documents destroyed in 1957 (for more information, see chapter on “WASt” in Part II of this thesis).

The language barrier continued to exist, both overseas and on the main land, which made it increasingly difficult to communicate with the newly arriving POWs. In addition to trying to strictly adhere to the terms of the Geneva Convention, it had

\textsuperscript{48} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, 0. 36.
\textsuperscript{49} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 37.
become increasingly difficult to handle the situation. Business as usual was that only one interpreter was working at a camp that could hold 8,000 to 10,000 prisoners that spoke many different foreign languages. This problem should be present until the end of the war and even beyond that – today, the Aliceville POW Camp Museum and Grounds does not have a German speaker to translate all their documents. They have one freelancer who speaks a little bit of German (albeit she is not a native speaker) who helps out with some translations, but she can’t manage the entire inventory of war and POW memorabilia.

Furthermore, the taking of personal items and/or military equipment was a big black market for some American GIs, particularly at the beginning of the POW transports - a German or Italian soldier’s knife (especially those items with Nazi insignia on them) was a prestigious treasure to have. Another sought-after gem was a soldier’s Soldbuch, a small booklet that yielded all personal and official information about a soldier, together with his family’s addresses, photos, personal data, and signature. This booklet proved to be very helpful when registering a soldier in the POW system, but often, American soldiers took it as a souvenir. My grandfather’s booklet, together with the form and many other documents, cannot be located either. It was probably taken by American GIs or burnt when the Austrian Government rejected the POW files during the 1950ies.

Last but not least: especially at the beginning of the POW registration, the Americans checked almost everything there was to check about who was coming to their country, but they did not/could not “check” their prisoners’ view of the Nazi regime. Therefore, in the beginning, the prisoners were separated by rank as well as by military affiliation (air force, ground forces etc.) and not essentially by ideologies (there were some exceptions: “obvious” Nazis were interned separately in a variety of specific camps all over the United States):

Von der ersten Phase der Durchschleusungen, den ganzen Krieg hindurch, wurden Nazis zusammen mit Antinazis eingesperrt und dadurch alle späteren Versuche, eine “demokratische Umerziehung” in den Lagern einzuführen, stark behindert. [...] Nur die ganz offensichtlich fanatischen Nazis griffen sich die amerikanischen Dienststellen heraus – bis 1945 insgesamt nur 4500 Mann – und internierten sie in Alva, Oklahoma, während die ebenso offensichtlich überzeugten Antinazis, 3300 an der Zahl, nach Fort Devens,

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50 Cf. Ibid., p. 38.
51 Cf. Ibid., p. 39.
Massachusetts, und in das Lager Campbell, Kentucky, gebracht wurden.\textsuperscript{52}

After registration was over, the transport into the camps began: usually via ship and train/busses/trucks, depending on where the target camp was located. Within the camps, however, the European soldiers - now prisoners – could move up in rank (and thus, in location/barracks) depending on their attitude towards the Nazi regime. At Camp Aliceville John Gillum, the aforementioned director of the POW museum, provided us with the information that once a soldier positioned himself as anti-Nazi, he was moved up from the bottom barracks (the ones that were wet, moldy, and cold) to the top barracks (the ones that were closer to the headquarters and the kitchen and farther away from the watery mud that was omnipresent at the lower cabins). I will get into this in Part II of this thesis.

\hspace{0.5cm} \textbf{1.5.1. Taking of British and American Allied POWs in Germany}

I already briefly alluded to the situation concerning the Russian POWs in Germany in the beginning of this thesis. Russian POWs were often treated differently from other Allied POW because of the brute force they often exhibited themselves. As a short digression, this chapter will focus solely on the other side of the coin: British and American POWs (“Kriegsgefangener”, short “Kriegie” in German) in Germany during World War II.

Especially during the first months (and even years) of the war, many Allied POWs were made in Germany. During the Blitzkrieg, the Germans were quick to either execute their enemies or take them hostage. Among others, “[...] 164,000 Commonwealth soldiers, sailors and airmen were to become prisoners in Germany, and 95,000 Americans would be captured,”\textsuperscript{53} recounts author Peter Doyle in his book \textit{Prisoners of War in Germany}.

The procedures were very similar to those in the American camps: the soldiers were processed, had their hair cut short, and given a “Kriegie” identification number. On the surface the Germans, so Peter Doyle, adhered to the Geneva Convention and provided the POWs with food and clothes. Due to the bad circumstances, the POWs often wore pieces of their old uniform or those of a colleague’s. He describes the

\hspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 40.
\hspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{53} Peter Doyle, Prisoner of War in Germany (Shire Library, Oxford 2008), p. 5.
conditions regarding food as way below what was required (the POWs had to received food of the same caloric value as the own troops received):

This was far from the truth. For example, those prisoners arriving at Stalag VIII(B) (Lamsdorf) in 1940 would receive only: ersatz coffee (made from acorns) or mint ‘tea’ for breakfast; a ladleful of weak soup and two or three, often rotten, potatoes at midday; followed by a third of a loaf of bread in the evenings. Soup was the staple in all camps, some cooks would grace the thin greasy liquid with titles intended to conjure up images of hearty meals, such as vegetable soup and goulash stew. Despite this, the dish never varied, and consisted of a watery concoction containing a few small bones, some vegetable stalks, a shred or two of meat and an occasional potato.\textsuperscript{54}

Sometimes, he states, the prisoners had to stash and/or share the bread they had received as well because there was not enough food. But relief parcels from other free nations as well as from their own home country could be received, most often containing dried goods and cans of food, dried milk and cheese.\textsuperscript{55} The parcels, often wooden boxes, were put to good use by the POWs as well; they were recycled to chairs or used as burning wood to make fires. Meanwhile, the tin cans were used as tableware, either just like the way they were or after some improvement by handymen around the camp.\textsuperscript{56}

Similar to the American camps in general and Aliceville in particular, the Allied POWs were also allowed to write to their loved ones; often in the form of a magazine that was printed and distributed to their relatives for free (but not without undergoing rigorous Allied censorship). In return, they received parcels from home, too. Just like a German POW’s life was often depicted as joyful, the Allied POW’s life in Germany was also often staged to be almost like a vacation stay.\textsuperscript{57}

Photographs taken by the Germans, made available to prisoners and regularly sent home, promoted a kind of ‘holiday camp’ illusion that belied the real hardships of POW life. [...] Infamous were also the letters from wives and sweethearts informing their men that they had tired of waiting and had left them for another. Such devastating news could have desperate effects on prisoner morale; offending letters would be pinned up by bitter prisoners for all to see.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 16f.
\textsuperscript{55} Cf. Ibid., p. 19f.
\textsuperscript{56} Cf. Ibid., p. 21f.
\textsuperscript{57} Cf. Ibid., p. 24f.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 25f.
Most of the time, the Allied POWs had to work after having had a 6am breakfast and a roll call shortly thereafter. After that, the POWs went to work until lunch at around 11am and then go back to work. Of course, not all of the POWs were working (higher ranking officers did not have to), so some of them had more free time to partake in leisure activities than others. The evening activities were similar to those in American POWs camps (theatre, cinema), the POWs also received a POW currency that was only of value within the campgrounds, the “Lagermark”, with which they could afford some luxury items.59

Some of the POWs had more luck than others; some had a more comfortable life within camp walls than others:

The experience of individual prisoners of war in Germany depended rather on their place of capture, their rank, their branch of service, and the location and reputation of their prisoner of war camp. Some aspects never changed: the monotony of the standard German soup and bread diet, the universal gratitude to the International Red Cross, and the developing Kriegie slang, a language shared by all.60

Many attempts to escape the POWs camps were made, most well known were tunnels that were supposed to bring the POWs inmates back into allied territory. This was not always possible, mostly due to the conditions of the underground and the overall security of the camp. Cutting or jumping over the wired fences was also a popular escape method (mostly unsuccessfully) tried by many.61

After D-Day, of course, most of the camps’ inmates were liberated by the Allied forces step-by-step.

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59 Cf. Ibid., p. 27.
60 Ibid., p. 38.
61 Cf. Ibid., p. 53f.
2. What is a POW camp?

When the war started, the US had not put much thought into where the prisoners of the war were to be interned. In 1943, when the Allies beat Rommel’s Africa Corps, something had to be done.\textsuperscript{62} Even though the main concern of the country was its own defense, the POW system underwent constant improvements.\textsuperscript{63} The POWs were not only housed in POW camps, but also in military locations that had free space, such as the aforementioned Ford Bragg in North Carolina. In 1942, even before the beating of Rommel’s Africa Corps, a program for the construction of POWs was drafted and the plan was to use all free Civilian Conversation Corps (CCC) camps that were built during the Great Depression, before the war. The estimate was that roughly \( \frac{3}{4} \) of the demand could be met. Furthermore, the Government was scouting for additional land.\textsuperscript{64}

The main issue, other than resources, was the safety of the population of the cities closeby:


In July of 1944 there was a total of 98 such POW camps in the entire United States; at the end of the war the number had risen to 155.\textsuperscript{66}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[64] Cf. ibid., p. 48.
\item[65] Ibid., p. 50.
\item[66] Cf. ibid.
\end{footnotes}
In general it can be said that the American POW Camps aimed to treat their prisoners as humanly as possible, in reference to the Geneva Convention of 1929. This of course is a topic that needs to be discussed further (who defines the term “humane”?) but in general (taken from the literature and from oral stories that I heard during my visit to Camp Aliceville) it can be said that Camp Aliceville was one of the more charitable camps to be at:

Camp Aliceville has become widely regarded as a model of humane treatment of POWs. The American military stocked abundant provisions for the dietary and recreational needs of the prisoners. Life within the camps was so comfortable that some Alabama residents resented what the perceived as the POW’s pampering while they endured rationing.67

My father had heard some vague stories from his father about relatives and fellow soldiers that were held as POWs in Russia and Siberia (those were the POW camps my grandfather talked about; he did not talk about his own time in captivity) – they were not treated well at all and were lucky to even make it back home alive and not in a casket. This was not the case with the gross of European prisoners of war in the US.

As already referenced to above, the camps were almost exclusively all situated in remote areas throughout the country, but with a focus on the South as well as the Southwest - this is due to the fact that the camp-locations were scouted and chosen with great diligence by the American military in order to build them in mostly isolated and vacant areas, with maybe only a railroad track nearby – the South provided lots of empty land plus the transfer from the Atlantic was shorter than to, let’s say, the Midwest. The railroad track was usually used to transfer the prisoners from their arrival sites, which mainly were ports, like the one that my grandfather highly likely arrived at, Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

As mentioned before, the war department only superficially distinguished between radical Nazis and Non-Nazis (and between Austrians and Germans) and the biggest problem upon arrival in a POW camp was the communication in a different language. The same problems can be seen throughout the journey of a POW: from capture via transfer to internment at the camp.

The main aim was to move all the POWs to those specific camps, depending on their capacity and location, as soon as possible. In the United States as well as in Great

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Britain the military personnel was housed separately from the officers and the other, civil personnel. The space was calculated ranging from 3.7 square meters to 11 square meters, depending on rank and employment type.\textsuperscript{68}

Regarding the treatment of the higher-ranking POWs, the American officers were instructed to be especially kind to those that might have a say in the future of German politics - because after the repatriation of officers and generals, the Americans assumed that their paths might cross in politics or in connection to military issues again in the future. In connection to this, the overall aim was to treat all German POWs with respect because the Americans wanted them to bring home a positive picture of the United States and their stays at POW camps in order to counteract the views of those that were in, for example, Russian imprisonment.\textsuperscript{69}

Since the POWs were allowed to work while incarcerated and since the number of POW grew steadily as the war progressed, the camps soon proved to be too small for all the prisoners there were coming in and the transfer of all those excess prisoners turned out to be stressful and tedious. Therefore, many “branch camps” for the 100,000 prisoners that were employed as meatpackers, woodworkers, and field hands, with the railroad or miners were built so that the prisoners did not have to commute back and from the camp to their workplace. Those branch camps could hold about 250 to 750 prisoners, depending on the work situation; and there were 500 of those branch camps throughout the US.\textsuperscript{70} Despite initial fear, those European work hands turned out be quite popular:

\begin{quote}
Als sich die anfänglichen Befürchtungen der Geschäftswelt vor Massenausbrüchen oder brutalen Morden durch die Gefangenen als völlig grundlos erwiesen, gingen den Büros der Service Commands Anträge auf Kriegsgefangene Arbeitskräfte in Mengen zu.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{69} Cf. ibid., p. 53.
\textsuperscript{70} Cf. ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 56.
\end{flushleft}
2.1. The Layout of a POW Camp

A regular POW camp was usually located in an area where there was enough space (most of the time 1,5 flat square kilometers were standard; in order to fit everything under one roof, so to speak; with all trees and bushes removed for safety reasons), with the closest railway track being roughly eight kilometers away and the closest main street at least 150 meters down the road.\(^\text{72}\)

Those newly built POW camps were designed for 2000 to 4000 inmates on average (numbers vary depending various circumstances, such as the different stages of war in Europe and the transfer of POWs to other camps in and outside of the United States) and camps of this sort were usually divided into four main sections, holding approximately 500 to 750 men each. Within those four sections, there were a certain number of branches (holding 150 men each); and in addition to the barracks there was one (or more, perhaps) dining room(s), a workroom, a hospital, an administrative building, as well as a room for the POWs to spend their free time.\(^\text{73}\)

The barracks themselves were six meters wide and twenty meters long and covered with a corrugated metal sheet or tar paper. The barracks were connected with each other via gravel walks and walking tracks. The entire area was surrounded by mesh wire fences, many as high as three meters; and at the corners there were watch towers with big floodlights that were motored by the camp’s own electricity circuit.\(^\text{74}\)

The camp officers – who also lived on the premises, but yet separately – lived in a little bit more luxury, of course. In general, their barracks offered roughly eleven square meters of space per officer, whereas the POWs only had 3,7 square meters to live on.\(^\text{75}\) According to Krammer, there were exceptions to the rule: in some camps, the higher ranking captured German officers, generals and admirals received more space and amenities than the others because the Americans wanted them to take home good memories of their time at the POW camp to counteract propagandistic views of other repatriated officers who had spent their time in Russian POWs camps, for example.\(^\text{76}\)

\(^{73}\) Cf. Ibid., p. 51.
\(^{74}\) Cf. Ibid., p. 52.
\(^{75}\) Cf. Ibid., p. 52.
\(^{76}\) Cf. Ibid, p. 53.
This image shows a generic, standard layout of a POW camp designed to hold 5000 people. Compounds 1-3 are the barracks for the POWs; one can see where the watchtowers are located to oversee the camp and how the facility in general is structured.

Ibid., p. 51.
Krammer describes this very accurately as he states that

Die Kommandanten wurden deshalb angewiesen, sich ganz besonders um diese Gefangenen zu kümmern und sie mit der Achtung zu behandeln, die ihre gegenwärtige und mögliche zukünftige Stellung gebot. Diesen Gefangenen seien Unterrichtsmaterial und Filme [...] zur Verfügung zu stellen, und um die große wirtschaftliche Stärke und industrielle Macht der amerikanischen Kriegsanstrengungen zu betonen, sollten sie auf Besichtigungsreisen durch Werften oder größere Rüstungsdepots geführt werden. Diese Reiserouten sollten auch Ausflüge zu kulturellen Gebieten [...] führen, die typisch ‘amerikanisch’ sind.78

Roughly translated: the commanders were instructed to take special care of certain prisoners and treat them with the respect they and their status deserve. Those inmates where given studying material and movies to illustrate the economical and industrial power player that the USA has become; and in order to focus on the American war efforts, they were taken to see dockyards and big arms depots. Those journeys also included trips to cultural places that were regarded as being typical American.

After a while those regular POW camps were not big enough and burst at the seams. Therefore, the already mentioned branch camps (with roughly 500 to 700 POWs per branch camp) were needed in order to fulfill the industry’s needs. The War Department had to build smaller, secondary camps to accommodate the various workers and house them closer to their workplace, which might have been a meatpacking plant or an agricultural farm or company.

In general, the workers were – in the beginning of the POW system – mainly employed by the military and their respective institutions, depending on where they fit best; they were chosen according to their expertise and previous knowledge as well as their reliability to show up to work on time and work diligently. The POW workers were sent wherever their skills where needed, mostly either military-wise or agriculturally. This system proved to be successful and after some time, POW workers could be borrowed for various projects via the War Department. Then, they moved to such a branch camp where they sometimes slept in tents.79

The main interment camp of Aliceville also supervised branch camps throughout its existence, among others the camp at Greenville, Alabama, as well as the Tuscaloosa Detachment branch camp. There were two different types of branch camps mostly due to the agricultural structure of the state of Alabama and the US rural South. They

78 Ibid., p. 53.
79 Cf. Ibid., p. 55f.
were either permanent or temporary while “the former remained in place year
round, while the latter were just for harvest season. The branch camps at Greenville
and Tuscaloosa were of the permanent category. Greenville was involved in lumber
and wood products year round, and Tuscaloosa branch operated the laundry for
Northington General hospital there.”

2.1.1. The Personnel Structure of a POW Camp

The superior in charge of a POW camp (POW camps were class 1 prisons) belonged to
the Service Command entity. Below the service commander there was the military
base command for the area, followed by the “Lagerkommandant”, the man in charge
at the POW camp itself. The Lagerkommandant handed out orders to his personnel.
Each member of the POW camp personnel structure had his/her own area of
responsibility (e.g. censoring of the inmates’ mail, taking care of the food resources,
managing the communication between the camp and the companies that employed
the prisoners) – see also Table 1 below.

The prisoners, on the other hand, had to elect a spokesperson that had to inform the
POW headquarters about any grievances within the camp (in reference to article 43
of the Geneva Convention of 1929 which states that the prisoners have the right to
elect someone to communicate with the Allies and the military authority on their
behalf). Most of the time, this spokesperson turned out to be the most highly ranked
officer that was incarcerated; or the most outspoken. This spokesperson also had the
right to represent the body of prisoners at meets with the Red Cross or the YMCA.

Another issue was the choice of guards. It was the Lagerkommandant’s responsibility
to determine how many employees were required in his camp. The rate of escapees
was very low and the manpower was needed in the European theatre of war –
therefore, the number of guards was not very high: ideally, there was one guard
entity (roughly 325 soldiers per entity) per 1000 prisoners. Some Lagerkommandanten used guard dogs, some built large watchtowers, and some
relied on four-men-teams to patrol the area. The men in charge took calculated risks

80 E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham
81 Cf. Arnold Krammer, Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in Amerika 1942 - 46 (Lück und Mauch,
Universitätsverlag Tübingen 1995) - p. 57f.
82 Cf. ibid., p. 58.
and sent more men to the frontlines than to the POW camps.\textsuperscript{83} To sum it up in reality, less than 47,000 men guarded all European POWs in the US, which translates to one guard per nine prisoners. This then, in turn, leads to the questions of quality – if those guards were unfit to fight (all manpower was needed in Europe, only those able-bodied were sent to the front), were they fit to guard? All that glitters is not gold: sometimes, German prisoners took over the position of a guard, not always with good intentions:\textsuperscript{84}

In vielen Lagern drängten sich die lautesten Elemente der Gefangenengemeinschaft, die Nazis, nach vorn, um die personelle Lücke zu füllen, was zu begründeten, öffentlichen Klagen führte, das amerikanische POW-Programm begünstige den Nationalsozialismus in den Lagern.\textsuperscript{85}

In addition to that, the guards had often been wounded during the war, some had already retired from service, and others were simply too young:

In fast jeder Lagerleitung konnte man unter der immer kleiner werdenden pflichtbewussten und gewissenhaften amerikanischen Personals eingezogene Soldaten mit chronischen psychologischen, strafrechtlichen, alkoholischen oder körperlichen Problemen finden. Die Stimmung innerhalb der Wachmannschaften war oft so schlecht, dass das War Department sich veranlasst sah, an seine Kommandanten die folgende Warnung herauszugeben: “Wenn US-Personal zu einer Rechtfertigung erklärt ‘Wir könnten auch die sein, die PW tragen’ oder ‘Wir wären besser dran, wenn wir die Gefangenen wären’, dann ist Gefahr im Verzuge.”\textsuperscript{86}

On top of that, the communication due to the language barrier did not help the situation, either. Despite those differences, not a lot of severe altercations were reported. Therefore it can be said that there were problems, also depending on the camp, but overall, the system seemed to be working for all intents and purposes.

\textsuperscript{83} Cf. ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{84} Cf. ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p. 60f.
2.2. Daily Routine at a POW Camp

Throughout the country, the daily routine did not differ very much:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.30am</td>
<td>wakeup call, making the bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.00am</td>
<td>breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.30 – 7.30am</td>
<td>taking a shower, cleaning the barracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.30am</td>
<td>commute to the workplace, the workday starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.30pm</td>
<td>lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00pm</td>
<td>back at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30pm</td>
<td>cleaning the workspace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.00pm</td>
<td>transfer back to the camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.00 – 7.00pm</td>
<td>dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.00pm</td>
<td>free time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Depending on the workplace and the duration of the commute, those times might have differed a little bit, but in general, in accordance to the Geneva Convention, the American Government tried to keep everything as strict as possible and as close the

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87 Ibid., p. 57.
to the regulations as feasible. The workplaces were not in connection to war activities, most of the POWs worked on the field or in factories – or even for the Government.

In addition to their regular meals, the inmates were able to buy food, sweets, as well as non-alcoholic beverages in a food store on campus. Sometimes, even alcoholic drinks such as wine and/or beer were available for purchase. The American War Department also tried to serve food as close to the prisoners’ tastes as possible. In the beginning, the German/Italian and Japanese prisoners frowned at the taste of supposedly “original” meals and a lot of the food went uneaten and to waste. Soon after the commanders in charge heard about this problem, they tried to serve food that catered more to the inmates’ taste buds.

In their free time, the prisoners played sports, musical instruments as well as theater.

But why, one might ask, were the prisoners allowed to play theater, participate in sports, and have leisure time at all? Here is one the of many possible answers to this question, given by Arnold Krammer in Nazi Prisoners of War in Germany:

> From the moment the prisoners arrived in the United States, both captors and captives know that there would have to be daily diversions [...]. Psychologically, the incoming POWs displayed a universal problem. Unless men are put to work by their captors or otherwise occupied, a variety of explosive symptoms will rapidly appear. The prisoner soon finds himself at a loss to occupy his endless days and begins to dwell on his fate and the circumstances which brought it about. [...] When no systematic work projects are available, the unoccupied prisoner develops a well-documented syndrome which sees his raging frustration channeled into emotional depression and deep despondency. He sees himself as the ‘forgotten man’, abandoned by his country and despised by his captors.

Therefore (to prevent escape attempts, depression, sabotage or even suicide), there usually was a range of leisure activities to choose from, depending on the location and the possibilities of and within a camp, also whether there was interest in a soccer team, for example.

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89 Cf. Ibid., p. 69.
90 Cf. Ibid., p. 70.
91 Arnold Krammer, Nazi Prisoners of War in America (Scarborough Publishing, Lanham 1979), p. 50f.
92 Cf. Ibid., p. 51.
Arnold Krammer recalls a statement of a former POW who was interned at Camp Opelika, Alabama— not far from Camp Aliceville and similar in structure:

Sports stared right after breakfast, and our camp had a whole slate of outstanding teams in soccer, handball, volleyball etc. Athletic activities were taken very, very seriously. The Camp Championships, especially in soccer and handball, were exciting that even our guards participated as cheerleaders from their towers and attended the games on weekends with their families shouting from the sidelines. Many of our athletes, as a matter of fact, went on to sports careers in Germany after their release.\footnote{Letter from Alfred Klein, Munich, Germany, April 22, 1976 – as cited in ibid., p. 51.}

Next to partaking in sports, playing and going to the theater was also a favorite pastime. But since at POWs the captives were only men, they had to play the female roles, too, often dressing up and disguising their voices. Furthermore, choirs were very popular, as well as going to the movies, reading books at the library or attending lectures.\footnote{Cf. ibid., p. 52.}

Arnold Krammer points out that in most of those libraries (which differed very much in size and content) various American newspapers were available. Even though most of the camp staff was suspicious that the pro-Hitler inmates might somehow transfer American military insights and strategies back home, the newspapers soon became a staple in POW libraries and were devoured by the POWs.\footnote{Cf. ibid., p. 53.} Often inspired by the newspapers available, the inmates produced their own (German) newspapers:

Written entirely by the prisoners and mimeographed on the camp machine, these papers were surprisingly sophisticated, carrying such things as poetry and short stories; crossword puzzles and word games; a weekly calendar of events; sports news; announcements of plays, concerts, and films; technical articles ranging from anatomy to photography; clever cartoons and comic strips; and, finally, a page of classified ads.\footnote{Ibid., p. 61.}

In Aliceville in particular there were two different newspapers available in the camp: a newspaper by and for the inmates and a newspaper that was read by the American military personnel. The German newspaper which was self-produced and printed in German was named Zaungast and “dealt with philosophical questions, reviewed the arts, and printed stories and poetry. Cartoons, games and puzzles were included and schedules of coming sport events (mostly soccer) and entertainment programs were
regular features. Discussions of classical literature and music were featured.” In order to produce this newspaper, many skills were needed and were found throughout the camp: lots of POWs participated in the publishing of the Zaungast and the inmates even managed to get their hands on an old printing press which they acquired and used for the newspaper and other printing needs. Before 1944, the newspaper was text only. But in 1944 a camera was given to the POWs by the International Red Cross Committee and some POWs with photographing skills made photos that they were then used either for the newspaper or for postcards to send back home.

The American newspaper was the Camp Town Crier, which was first published in November of 1943. It was not mainly a military newspaper but a newspaper made by civilians with various contributors. It was probably mostly financed through advertising from the townspeople of Aliceville; those advertisements could be found throughout the editions of the newspaper. The Camp Town Crier was only published less than a year and ceased to exist in 1944, probably after the most skilled personnel was sent to work somewhere else. But before those transfers, the paper was of a good quality and quite established:

The paper was of high quality, with good writing and interesting photographs. This paper would compare favorably with those of larger, more well established military posts located in much larger cities. It reflected commendable effort on the part of both civilian and military personnel.

The aforementioned lectures were also a big part of most POW camps throughout the country. The educational possibilities were varied and diverse and ranged from a mechanics course to French classes. It was even put into writing that the courses the inmates took during the POW stay were worth a lot:

In a 12-page edict [...] POWs were informed that 15 major German and Austrian universities, from the Universities of Bonn, Berlin, and Kiel, to the Polytechnic Institutes of Danzig, Dresden and Graz, would accept their grade at face value. The Reichsminister detailed the process by which the POWs could obtain any of the five academic or vocational

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98 Cf. ibid., p. 20.
99 Cf. ibid., p. 21.
100 Ibid., p. 21.
degrees, including instructions on the number of faculty members on each type of examination board.  

If a camp was too small to offer all of the courses needed, a POW could also take further courses outside of the camp via an American University that was close by. For example, at Pine Camp (NY) – the camp in which my grandfather was located on route back home during his repatriation process - courses could be taken via Syracuse University.  

We do not have any records of him taking any classes at Camp Aliceville or at Pine Camp. This might be due to the fact that my grandfather had already finished vocational training back in Austria because he was drafted at an older age than most others. In Aliceville, education of various kinds was offered. It is reported that the camp “had well organized study courses in languages, mathematics, history, painting, woodwork and drawing.” An Austrian doctor, Dr. Hans Kopera (originally from Graz), is reported to have started medical school in Aliceville and that his credits from there were recognized at an Austrian medical school. Some of his anatomical drawings that he drew during his stay in Aliceville are still to be found in the Aliceville public library.

Surprisingly, the number of teachers was high: the YMCA funded study program included 140 teachers, 240 classes and 20 classrooms in total; in addition to that a relatively large number of POWs had been teachers before the war and also taught at the internment camp. Those inmates were only allowed to teach, however, after a careful vetting process to ensure that they were not of a Nazi ideology. In addition to that, the library held 6,000 (censored) books. Since Aliceville offered opportunities for the POWs to work but was not technically a “work camp” the education and study programs were received positively and many of the POWs took classes while in Aliceville, if only to study English, for example.

This education, however, was (not so) secretly used by the American Government to gain influence on the European POWs – this was called the Intellectual Diversion Program and was in violation of the Geneva Convention:

Eleanor Roosevelt and […] Raymond Clapper and Dorothy Thompson […] felt that Nazi prisoners of war were wielding too much influence in the camps. Political pressure was exerted and the Army started what

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102 Ibid., p. 63.
103 E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham Alabama 1993) – p. 17
104 Cf. ibid., p. 17.
105 Cf. ibid, p. 17.
they hoped would be a subtle program of ‘re-education’ of the prisoners. Because it was a clear violation of the Geneva Convention the effort was to be submerged into the existing educational efforts which was highly respected by the prisoners [...].

The idea was to have a special propaganda officer at each camp who was usually fluent in German and officially acted as a translator. His job was to oversee and expunge the schedule of the education system of anything pro-Nazi. Instead, the “new” curriculum then should focus on real American, democratic values. The idea was that for the POWs to take those ideas and values back home after repatriation. The name of this officer in Aliceville, for example, was Capt. Raymond A. Speiser. Unfortunately, there is no further insight on how effective this strategy was in general and, of course, not in connection to Aliceville in particular. E. B. Walker says that he thinks that the “Aliceville POWs were little affected by this undertaking. Apparently, they caught on to what was happening quite early on, but recognized this as something their captors wanted to do, so they went along with it” – on which information or source he based this assumption on is not known.

Some German and Austrian Aliceville POWs were even trained to work for the Americans after their repatriation. One of them, Günther Peter Ertel, was trained to work for the Military Government and ended up working for the State Department and has since become an American citizen.

\[\text{References:}\]

106 Ibid., p. 17.
107 Cf. Ibid., p. 18.
108 Ibid., p. 18.
109 Ibid., p. 18.
3. The Origins of Prisoner of War Camps in Alabama

Alabama, one of the most southeastern states of the United States of America (it is bordered by the states of Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida, as well as the Gulf of Mexico to the South) got involved in World War II (along with the rest of the United States) when they heard the news that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had opened the war scene in the Pacific ocean. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war against Japan on December 8, 1941. Even though war on Germany was not yet officially declared, many of the African-Americans living in Alabama were in favor of the war because of Adolf Hitler’s racist politics but unaware of the costs that would arise from a state of war. The citizens of Alabama experienced rationing, received coupons for household goods such as sugar or coffee and saw cuts in their social life as early as the end of 1941:

Not only were fewer pies to be baked, but local Coca-Cola bottlers cut production, threatening the social life of some Alabamians. White middle-class women of the South served so much of the soft drink that their gatherings were called “Coca-Cola parties”.

Americans - generally in favor of making sacrifices for the greater good - resorted to planting vegetables and fruit in their own backyard, buying goods at black markets, and “became acquainted with new commercial ways of processing and preserving food. Spam, dehydrated soups, and frozen foods were novelties”. But despite all those life restrictions and food cuts, as Allen Cronenberg says in his book Forth to the Mighty Conflict - Alabama and World War II, “one of the most vivid memories of World War II is of the 17,000 Germans and Italians who were held in prisoner of war camps in the state between 1943 and 1946”. He does not distinguish between Germans and Austrians, probably because at this time, all the prisoners coming from Europe who spoke German were seen as Germans, also because of the “Anschluss” (annexation) of Austria to Hitler-Germany in 1938, before the war had started.

Within the state of Alabama, four of the biggest POW Camps during the 1940ies were Camp Aliceville, Camp Opelika, Fort McClellan, and Fort Rucker. All in all, there

111 Ibid., p. 33.
112 Ibid., p. 34.
113 Ibid., p. 94.
114 Cf. David Michael Owings, A Cross Section of America’s World War II Prison Camps: The Lives of Axis Prisoners of War in Alabama, Their Memory, and Their Place on the Historical Landscape (Theses, Graduate Facility of Auburn University - Auburn 2011) - p. 2
were 26 camps (see also Table 1, following) with various capacities and different designations, some of them permanent, some of them only temporary.

But why were they built in Alabama, and why just then? Camps in the United States were constructed as early as 1942 as a reaction to the POW camps in England being full and overcrowded:

Having foreseen the likelihood of increased numbers of Axis war prisoners in Allied hands, the provost marshal general of the United States Army supervised the construction of POW facilities at existing military bases or at camps constructed for the purpose of holding prisoners until hostilities ceased and repatriation could commence. Construction of camps for an anticipated 70,000 war prisoners hastily began in late 1942. For security reasons these camps were located within 170 miles of seacoasts. Cheap land and mild winter temperatures led to the construction of camps in the southern and southwestern states, where approximately three-fourths of all POWs in American custody were eventually imprisoned (...). Construction of three base camps in Alabama had already begun by the time the Afrika Korps surrendered. A fourth camp was added in 1944.  

The first ones to arrive in Aliceville were soldiers from Rommel’s Africa corps - but not all of them were hard core Nazis. They came from various backgrounds, were of different ages and faiths, and “as Alabamians learned, most POWs were decent human beings whose greatest concern - other than their own survival - was the welfare of the loved ones at home”.  

Originally, Aliceville was designed to exclusively hold alien enemy civilians before it was rededicated to Prisoner of War Camp in July of 1943. During the early 1940ies the Government assumed that many aliens would enter the country during the course of the war and this seemed to present a security risk. Therefore the Government believed that there “was sufficient danger that a policy of internment should be put in place.” The plan was to build three internment camps, two of them in the southwest and Texas and one of them in the southeast – but it took until 1942 to start with the construction of those camps. Ultimately, when Aliceville was built, the aforementioned security risk had gone down reasonably. The intent to use

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116 Ibid., p. 94.
Aliceville to hold aliens changed to interning prisoners of war from Europe. The main reasons for using Aliceville as a POW camp were isolation, security, good transport facilities, as well as the labor market.\textsuperscript{119}

All in all, as already mentioned, there were 26 camps all over the state of Alabama, but not all of them were of the same capacity, neither were all of them permanent. The base camps were Aliceville, Opelika, Rucker, McClellan and also Sibert, a camp that was previously thought to be a branch camp only.\textsuperscript{120}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camp</th>
<th>Type – permanent (P) or temporary (T)</th>
<th>Maximum strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbeville</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliceville</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>6150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andalusia</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatom</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clanton</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clio</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadeville</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dothan</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elba</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprise</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evergreen</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foley</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geneva</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntsville Arsenal</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loxley</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luverne</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McClellan, Fort</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery H&amp;R Point</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northington General Hosp</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oneonta</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opelika</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>3060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rucker, Camp</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>2900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibert, Camp</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Prisoner of War Camps in the State of Alabama

\textsuperscript{119} Allen Cronenberg, Forth to the Mighty Conflict. Alabama and World War II (University of Alabama Press/Fire Ant Books 2003) – p. 94f.
\textsuperscript{120} E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham Alabama 1993) - p. 3.
4. Camp Aliceville

It has now been established that Camp Aliceville was first built to be an internment camp for “troublesome foreign nationals”\(^1\). Soon, it was redesigned to be a POW camp – on the one hand, this was something unfamiliar to Alabamians, but on the other hand also seemed to be something that could be beneficial for the struggling people of Aliceville. The aftermath of the Great Depression had left its mark on the population and on the area, and the building of the camp created jobs and new hope.\(^2\)

The numerical designation for Camp Aliceville was the 1434\(^{th}\) Service Command Unit (short: SCU) and it encompassed all parts of the camp, because “all organizations were part of this SCU, including Quartermaster, Signal, Transportation, Finance, Chemical Warfare, Medical, Ordnance, Military Police and Station Complement.”\(^3\)

In brief, Allen Cronenberg describes the establishment of the camp in Aliceville as follows:

The first and largest POW camp in Alabama was just west of Aliceville, a town of not quite 5,000 residents, in Pickens County and not far from the Mississippi state line. The site was located on land near the Frisco Railroad line so that POWs could be brought there by train. The 400 one-story dwellings and administrative buildings, constructed by the Algernon Blair firm of Montgomery, were designed to accommodate 6,000 prisoners and 900 guards and other camp personnel. Rarely did the population of the Aliceville camp exceed 3,500 during the three years of its existence.\(^4\)

It took ninety days to construct the camp and soon enough, “six large compounds were taking shape between the headquarters buildings and the large black water swamp near the banks of the Tombigbee River.”\(^5\) And just weeks later, “approximately 400 one-story, wood frame, tar-paper-covered buildings now dotted what had once been Tom Parker’s pastureland, along with several large mess halls and lavatories, a hospital, administration buildings, and sentry towers. The old


\(^{2}\) Cf. ibid., p. 36.

\(^{3}\) E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham Alabama 1993) - p. 3.


Carrollton Short Line had become the AT&N Railroad [...]. The Alabama Power Company had set up service for electricity.”

Within 1943, the camp was finished and the economy in Aliceville and its surrounding areas was booming like never before. But none of the expected masses had yet come to Aliceville and the population thought that the camp might never be used to its full capacity. Nevertheless, the planning of menus of the servicemen and for the arrival of the camp detainees was ongoing.

The first POWs arrived in the town of Aliceville on June 2, 1943 - they were captured in Africa and, as already alluded to, belonged to Rommel’s Afrika Korps.

I have already analyzed the layout of a standard POW camp in chapter 2.1. – the Aliceville Internment Camp (as it was also called) is no exception to the rule (see image 3 on the next page). The closest railroad was/is the Alabama-Tennessee-Northern-Railroad, parallel to Alabama State Highway No. 17. The camp itself was fenced off with a double fence on the outer borders of the premises and used single fences within the facilities to separate the individual rows of barracks.

Gravel roads connected the different parts of the camp and the guards lived in the facilities closest to the railway and the highway. As I am going to tell you in a later chapter of this thesis, my grandfather was eventually assigned barrack no. 4, which was one of the upper barracks (according to John Gillum, the museum director, the far right barracks in the most northern row of barracks); usually those barracks were considered the better ones due to their location.

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126 Ibid, p. 46.
127 Cf. Ibid, p. 94.
4.1. Location, location, location

Why were extremely remote locations (very much like Aliceville, Alabama) chosen to be a location to erect POW camps? The answer is quite simple – the word “remote” says it all. While the prisoners of war were treated with respect while imprisoned, they also should not be able to flee from the camp and be connected to the world outside too easily.

As already mentioned before, a railroad track was usually nearby (but still a foot march away) to transfer the prisoners back and forth to and from the camp. The journey was usually quite a pleasant one, as referred to by Barbara Schmitter Heisler when she recollects what a German POW named Horst told her about the transportation by train:

> On his train journey to Aliceville, Horst was particularly impressed by the luxurious quality of the train “which was first class” and equated his journey with “going on vacation”. Horst spent a year in Camp Aliceville where “[they] had excellent food [...] [and] except for the fact that [they] were behind barbed wire, [they] had nothing to complain about. [They] were treated well. [They] were safe.”

Also, another prisoner named Hermann that had been taken to Aliceville and “although he was worried about the future, in particular his family and fiancée recalled that ‘Aliceville turned out to be a nice camp.’”

This “nice camp” was located in Pickens County (a county that still bears this name today), an agricultural area west of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, close to the Mississippi border. The army criteria, according to Ruth Beaumont Cook, required a POW camp to be “more than 170 miles from the east or west coast, and more than 150 miles from the Canadian or Mexican border” - these criteria were easily fulfilled by Aliceville.

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130 Ibid., p. 43.
4.1.1. The Origins of Pickens County and Aliceville

Pickens County, first called Pickens County in 1820, is a piece of land that was discovered by Hernando deSoto in 1520. Later, during the 19th century, the Native Americans were driven out of the state of Alabama - the European settlers were taking over. They established a well-working railroad system (less than five miles from Aliceville, the first railroad tracks had been built) but still, the nearest public road was a couple hundred feet away.\footnote{132}

The town of Aliceville was named for Alyce Searcy Cochrane, the wife of the founder of Aliceville, John Taylor Cochrane. John Taylor Cochrane decided to build a railroad station for his railroad, “The Carrollton Short Line”, in a place that is the town Aliceville to this day. This “Short Line” connected the communities of Franconia and Bridgeville, with a newly build stop in Aliceville.\footnote{133} Alyce and John Cochrane lived in Aliceville from 1903 to 1906 where John also funded the first bank, the Aliceville Bank and Trust Company. By 1907, the town was incorporated in the State of Alabama as a municipality. Alyce Cochrane, who had been born into a wealthy Tuscaloosa family, died in 1922 and is buried in her hometown. Her husband, John, died sixteen years later, in 1938 in Mobile, a nearby town where he and Alyce had lived for the remainder of their lives. He is buried in Tuscaloosa and his body was brought by train to the Tuscaloosa cemetery - using his own railroad tracks.\footnote{134}

\footnote{132} Cf. ibid. p. 26f. \\
4.2. Work and play at Camp Aliceville (Prisoners)

The POWs were eligible to work if they wanted to and had various different possibilities in regard to how to spend their free time:

Daily life for prisoners consisted largely of work and leisure. During their free time, prisoners participated in a variety of activities, such as soccer, and some even formed orchestras. Each of the major camps established a newspaper that featured prisoner essays, articles, short fiction, puzzles and cartoons. Each major camp also established a camp college and prisoners could enroll in a wide variety of courses, including history, mathematics, the sciences, vocational courses and preparatory classes for students seeking postwar careers in medicine, law, electrical engineering and architecture. 135

As already mentioned above, the free time at Camp Aliceville was very similar to the leisure activities that were offered at any other POW camp throughout the US.

Karl Netrval mentions that they had the chance to participate in sporting events on a daily basis, for example in this letter dated September 17, 1944:

Und wieder ist eine Woche vorüber. Ich weiß nicht vergeht die Zeit so rasch infolge der wechselvollen Ereignisse, oder der Abwechslung die sich hier durch Arbeit und Sport ergiebt. (sic)

(And yet another week as gone by. I don’t know whether time passes to quickly because of what is happening or if it is because work and sports provide variety)

The work – as a contrast to the sports and leisure activities at the camp – was manifold but often, especially after many years away from home, seemed superfluous (letter dated March 31, 1946, the last letter my grandfather wrote before his repatriation).

Hoffentlich komme ich bald heim. Es ist schrecklich wenn man hier weilen und verhältnismäßig unwichtige Arbeit leisten muss während in der Heimat jede Hand gebraucht wird.

(I am hoping to return home soon. It is awful to have to be here and to comparatively insignificant work while at home, every working force is needed.)

Unfortunately, we as a family do not have any more information on what my grandfather worked as in Camp Aliceville (also, the WaSt inquiry was unfruitful). Upon his return home, he worked as managing director of an electronics store, so we can assume that based on his knowledge, he did something similar in Aliceville.

Sometimes, the prisoners had the chance to watch movies, as previously mentioned. This often brought back memories of home and family live, which as usually quite hard to bear (letter dated October 15, 1944):


(Yesterday we had a movie screening, we watched “Tausend rote Rosen blühen” starring Louis Graveure. Do you remember? I was thinking of you during the whole movie; when it was over I felt as if someone had hit me on the head. Shared memories are the biggest treasure.)

4.3. Free time at Camp Aliceville (Guards)

During their assignment as guards in the Aliceville POW camp, the military personnel there also had free time when they were off duty. They could – in contrast to the prisoners – leave the camp when they wanted during their nights/days off and could spend their scarce leisure time outside of their designated post.

While on-site, they had the opportunity to go see a film at their own movie theatre, have a drink at an Officers’ Club, or enjoy some laid-back hours a club called “The Enlisted Men’s’ Club”. The guards could also spend their money at a small shop with a variety of goods (the “PX” store, short for exchange store/service) and they went for a shave to the camp’s barbershop.

In regard to sports, there was often not enough time to develop a consistent program because the soldiers were transferred throughout the state as well as throughout the country during the course of their assignments.

The American personnel also had the chance to listen to music as well as to participate actively in several musical programs: there was the 389th Escort Guard

136 Remark: The movie “Tausend rote Rosen blühn” does not star England-born Louis Graveure, but a German actor named O.W. Fischer. It can be assumed that my grandfather has mixed up the movies because “Tausend rote Rosen blühn” premiered much later (in 1952) - many years after my grandfather had returned from POW camp. Louis Graveure only starred in four movies: “Ein Lied klagt an” (1936), “Ich sehne mich nach dir” (1934), “A Waltz for you” (1934) and “Es gibt nur eine Liebe” (1933). Since Louis Graveure was predominantly a singer and sang a song called “Das Lied der Liebe (Tausend rote Rosen blühl’n)” in “A Waltz for You” it can be assumed that they watched “A Waltz for You”.

Company Field Band (with nine to ten musicians) and there was a dance band named “The Stardusters”. The Stardusters (six musicians and one female singer, usually the wife of one of the band members) played at the Officers’ Club as well as the Enlisted Men’s Club on various occasions.

### 4.4. Escapes from Camp Aliceville

Escapes from Camp Aliceville were a rare occasion. The ones that got away did not stay away for long because they were lost in the nearby swamps and/or attacked by mosquitoes. Most of the time, the prisoners tried to simply walk away from their workplace, usually not on the campsite but a little bit away from it, sometimes even downtown.\(^{138}\) The escapees were punished “as provided by the Geneva Convention, consisting at worse of 30 days in jail, with no more than 14 days of that on restricted diet of bread and water. This was provided no felony was committed during the escape, such as theft, destruction of property, sabotage, etc. That would have been a far more serious matter, resulting in court-material and a possible prison term. Even so, it was risky business as the escapee could be shot in the process.”\(^{139}\)

There was only one attempt of a bigger group to get away in October of 1943 which was unsuccessful. However, prior to that, two inmates were shot during what was considered escape attempts:

> Two prisoners where shot and killed by gunfire in what were considered escape attempts. Records show that on 1 August 1943 at 10:04 PM Rolf (NMI) Schneider, age 24, was shot my machine gun fire from a guard tower. He had a wire cutter in his hand was through the inner fence and starting on the outer one when he was hit. (...) Friedrich Rauschenberg, age 19, was killed by a shotgun 18 August 1943. (...) Reports indicated the deceased made threatening motions toward the guard, picking up dirt or gravel from the ground throwing it towards the guard. Officially, it was attributed to the prisoner’s own misconduct.\(^{140}\)

According to former POW Dr. Erich Moretti the escapees would not have been able to survive in Alabama – let alone in the entire United States - for a longer period of time

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\(^{139}\) Ibid., p. 24.

\(^{140}\) Ibid., p. 24.
because without money, acceptable English skills and connections, escaping to Europe seemed (and probably was) impossible.\textsuperscript{141}

\section*{4.5. The Closing of Camp Aliceville}

After the end of the war in 1945, the camp was to be deactivated. On September 39, 1945, the Service Command Unit of Aliceville was closed and the nearby district of Mobile was in charge of taking down the buildings and closing the plot of land:

At Aliceville the demolition job was one of the first where the government dismantled and sold all the useable materials for the benefit of the government. [...] By November 1946, the buildings had been dismantled and the materials stacked and graded, ready for disposition. It was “set aside” for a 10-day period for the National Housing Authority in accordance with the surplus property law. After that, the War Assets Administration offered for sale “on-site” the material the NHA did not want. [...] It cost about $50,000 for demolition, and the sale OP ceiling prices netted over $100,000, giving the government a net profit in excess of $50,000.\textsuperscript{142}

239 workers from Aliceville were employed during the demolition of Camp Aliceville, a source of short-term income they did not expect. Furthermore, they and the general population of Aliceville could buy leftovers from the demolition for a small price, such as firewood, nails, and pieces of scrap, mirrors, heaters, laundry equipment, lumber, wood panel doors, as well as bathroom fixtures.\textsuperscript{143}

In 1947, “after the real estate was cleaned of all the buildings, efforts were begun to sell the utilities – water pipe, electrical system and telephone system.”\textsuperscript{144} After the buildings that were not on-site but were connected in some way to the Camp were turned over to the Federal Land Bank and then the City of Aliceville, “the profit from this salvage operation helped to off-set the over $2,000,000 original cost. It also added to the combined value of military work and contract work of the entire POW program, with an estimated value of $230 million, of which the government realized as profit approximately $22 million cash.”\textsuperscript{145}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{141} cf. ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{142} E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham Alabama 1993) - p. 12.
\textsuperscript{143} Cf. Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p. 12.
\end{flushright}
Today, the site of the former POW camp is completely empty with the exception of parts of an old chimney. The only thing that reminds the visitor of the POW camp back in the 1940ies is a plaque that describes the place’s history.

Photo 1: This plaque is – along with the oven – the only thing that reminds the visitor of what once happened in the outskirts of Aliceville (source: private/Karl Netral)
Aliceville in Alabama

Aliceville in Alabama, where the sun is like a curse
And each long day is followed by another slightly worse,
Where the brick-red dust blows thicker than the shifting desert sand
And a white man dreams and wishes for a greater, fairer land.

Aliceville in Alabama, where a woman’s never seen
Where the sky is never cloudy and the grass is never green;
Where the mill’s howling whistle robs the man of blessed sleep,
And there isn’t any whiskey and the beer is never cheap.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the nights were made for love,
Where the moon is like a searchlight and the Southern Cross above
Sparkles like a diamond necklace in a balmy tropic night,
It’s shameful waste of beauty, when there’s no girl in sight.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the mail is always late,
And a Christmas Card in April is always up to date,
Where we never have a payday and we never have a cent,
But we never miss the money, ’cause we’d never get it spent.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the ants and chiggers play,
And a hundred fresh mosquitoes replace each one you slay,
So take me back to Berlin, where everything is swell,
for this godforsaken outpost is a Substitute for Hell.

Author unknown, as cited in E.B. Walker, A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville (Braxton Walker, Birmingham Alabama 1993).
Part II – My grandfather and his time in Aliceville

In Part II of my thesis I go into detail about the circumstances under which the letters were written and I am going to hermeneutically analyze both my grandfather’s as well as my grandmother’s letters. I will also give a brief overview about hermeneutics and its origins, as well as its various methods.

Then, I will provide the reader with information about my grandfather’s capture, his time in Aliceville, my unfruitful attempts to find more documents concerning my grandfather’s time in the service and his time as POW as well as my father’s and my visit to the Aliceville Museum in Alabama.

The author of the texts, my grandfather, was born on September 2, 1907, in Vienna, Austria. He did not join the Wehrmacht at the beginning of the Second World War voluntarily; we assume that he was drafted sometime during 1940 or 1941. At that point in time, he was thirty-three or thirty-four years of age and his wife was soon to be expecting a child, Karl Netrval jun. - my father.

The body of letters I am about to analyze consists of forty-two letters: eighteen written by Emilie to Karl, twenty-four written by Karl to Emilie. Furthermore, there are sixteen cards, also written by Karl to Emilie. Furthermore, there are cards that document his transfer via England to Aliceville and via Pine Camp to Austria. Also, there is the letter that informed my grandmother about my grandfather’s disappearance during the fights in Normandy (see also Document 1).

The timeframe of the correspondence stretches from July 1944 to March 1946, this overlaps with the timeframe of when he was taken POW until the time when he was among the first to be repatriated to Austria.

The letters written by my grandfather are all handwritten; some of my grandmother’s letters are typed. This is due to the fact that she worked as a Diplomkauffrau in a bank and had access to typewriters, thus making the writing more legible.

The main topics are issues of everyday life, such as health, the well-being of his son, the well-being of his parents, the timing of the mail delivery system, and memories that my grandparents had made together. Camp-life itself is mentioned a couple of times; the war itself is not referred to at all. This – one can assume – is because the American allied forces censored the letters. There is only one letter (dated April 5, 1945) where two lines of writing were marked in red brackets (parts of which can still be seen on the letter) and physically cut out.

In the following analysis, I will elaborate on all of this in more detail.
1. Method: hermeneutic analysis

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term *hermeneutics* refers to “the study of methodical principles of interpretation / a method or principle of interpretation”\(^{146}\). According to E.D. Richards in his book *Hermeneutics* (1969), quoting E.D. Hirsch, “hermeneutics can and should serve as a foundational and preliminary discipline for all literary interpretation”\(^{147}\) and he refers to “the central important of hermeneutics in three humanistic disciplines – theology, philosophy, and literary interpretation.”\(^{148}\)

As E.D. Richard’s book on hermeneutics was published in 1969, one can see that the idea and the origin of the field of hermeneutics go back a long time and hermeneutics might be regarded by some as old-fashioned and outdated - but it serves as an ideal method of my analysis of the corpus of letters that I have in front of me as it is very broad and takes lots of issues into consideration.

But what is hermeneutics in detail and how can it be beneficial to my interpretation at hand?

1.1. The origins and manifold methods that are hermeneutics

Mainly, the term hermeneutics was (and still is) used in a theological context, which shall not be the focus of this thesis. Much rather, the focus lies on the literary interpretation which is also considered to be part of the wide field of hermeneutics. E. D. Richards defines this strand of hermeneutics as being

(...) the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts (...). Hermeneutics achieves its most authentic dimensions when it moves away from being a conglomeration of devices and techniques for text explication and attempts to see the hermeneutical problem within the horizon of a general account of interpretation itself. Thus it involves two different and interacting focuses of attention: (1) the event of understanding a text, and (2) the more encompassing question of what understanding and interpretation, as such, are.\(^{149}\)

\(^{146}\) Merriam-Webster online dictionary - https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hermeneutics (September 12, 2017)


\(^{148}\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^{149}\) Ibid., p. 8.
Origin wise, the word *hermeneutics* comes from the Greek word *hermeneutiké* which roughly translates to the art of interpretation, the art of explaining and the art of translation. It is linked to Hermes, the mediator between the Greek gods and mankind.\(^{150}\)


Hermes, according to Thomas M. Seebohm, citing Plato in *Hermeneutics. Method and Methodology* (2004), did not know whether what was he was communicating was true or false, he just communicated what he read or what was said, with his own interpretation of a situation, without any circumstantial knowledge. Plato does not make any further reference to rules and methods for interpretations but it can be deduced that he did know about approaches to interpretation.\(^{152}\)

Thomas M. Seebohm then refers to three stages of hermeneutics and sums up those three stages on as follows:

- *hermeneia or elocution*: the pre-given written text;
- *hermeneia or interpretation (translatio)*: the interpretation or translation of the text;
- *hermeneia or explication*: the text of the interpreter as the results of his/her interpretation.\(^{153}\)

Summing up all this information it can be said that the field of hermeneutics dates back to ancient Greek philosophy as well as ancient Greek mythology and stems from the individual interpretation of texts. It then evolved to be an all-encompassing method of interpretation, taking into consideration the text, the interpretation of this text and then – consequently - the result of both looking at the text, understanding its origin and its circumstances and deducing one’s own interpretation of everything the text comes with.

After that, the idea behind hermeneutics - up until the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century - was to only/simply decode symbols of speech. Friedrich D. Schleiermacher, a German

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\(^{151}\) Ibid.


\(^{153}\) Ibid., p. 11.
theologian who lived in the 18\textsuperscript{th}/19\textsuperscript{th} century, went a step further and included the author’s individuality as well as the specific historical circumstances of the creation of the literary corpus in his hermeneutical decoding of a text (or a text corpus), thus making the hermeneutic approach more all-encompassing. This connection between the text itself, the author, as well as the background of the author as well as the circumstances of the creation of the texts lead to the problem that one text can barely stand on its own – the whole corpus of texts needs to be taken into consideration, as well as everything surrounding it. The interpreter of the text needs to have more knowledge that just the bare minimum stripped from the texts, he/she needs to have an all-encompassing pool of knowledge in order to see through the text corpus and its meaning/interpretation as a whole. Schleiermacher does not see this as a problem, as long as the interpreter finds his/her way into the “hermeneutic circle” as it is called.\textsuperscript{154}

Many other important names that coined the field of hermeneutics were, among others, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Johann Conrad Dannauer, and Martin Heidegger.

There is no specific hermeneutic method with certain fixed rules, but hermeneutics includes many different methods of asking questions and uses a great variety of approaches. The authors Stary and Kretschmer list a number of methods/questions/procedures that can (and should, if possible) all be included as much as possible in a hermeneutic analysis:\textsuperscript{155}

✓ ...asking for the connection between the work at hand and the life of the author (asking for the “why”, the motive)
✓ ... checking the authenticity of the text(s)
✓ ...mapping out the author’s style of writing (is there one?)
✓ ...asking whether the text(s) accurately reflect real social conditions and circumstances of the time of its creation
✓ ...comparing the text(s) to other text(s)
✓ ... analyzing the ideology and world-view of the author
✓ ... checking for the interpretation of parts of the bible
✓ ... discussing the meaning of the text(s) in relation to its linguistic features and historical context as well as in connection with an intuitive interpretation of the texts


\textsuperscript{155} Cf. Ibid. p. 70f.
... taking a look at the text(s) on its/their own, without any historical or biographical information

They also provide a handy schematic that depicts a possible way of hermeneutically interpreting a text and/or a collection of texts. It involves various questions posed to the author, the text as well as the reader:\footnote{cf. ibid., p. 75.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>author</th>
<th>text(s)</th>
<th>reader/audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the author?</td>
<td>What is the main focus or the main problem?</td>
<td>What does the author want?</td>
<td>What are the argumentative methods used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is his/her political stance?</td>
<td>What questions does he/she ask?</td>
<td>What is the author’s motive, his/her interest?</td>
<td>Which linguistic methods are used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is his/her ideological stance?</td>
<td>What are the main statements?</td>
<td>What is his/her audience?</td>
<td>Manipulative methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key words? Definitions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main ideas?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>Linguistic analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text analysis</td>
<td>In a narrower sense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asking questions about the author and the target audience is text analysis in a broader sense, asking question direction to the text is text analysis in a narrower sense. I am going to decipher the corpus of letters my grandparents wrote based on the questions that can be asked of/to a text/many texts and also based on the schematic depicted above.
1.2. The hermeneutic analysis of the letter corpus in two parts

Taking into condensation the aforementioned various methods that can be part of an hermeneutic approach, I will now continue to analyze the collection of letters that were exchanged between my grandparents. I will do so in two steps: on the one hand I will hermeneutically analyze the letters that my grandfather wrote as a whole, and on the other hand the letters that my grandmother wrote to answer his writings, also as a whole.

1.2.1. My grandfather’s letters

| Motive | My grandfather wrote the letters to my grandmother as the only means of communication during his time as a prisoner of war. He wanted to keep in touch with his wife and his young son and also passed on greetings to the rest of the family. |
| Authenticity | It can be said that the letters are without a doubt my grandfather’s letters because it is – in comparisons to other writings that we have that were made by him – his handwriting. |
| Style | My grandfather had a very particular writing style which indicates that all letters (in conclusion with a comparison of his handwriting), were composed by the same person. Linguistic/stylistic writing features:

- He starts every letter with *Meine liebste (kleine) Emilie* or *Mein liebes liebes Weiberl*
- He uses very many commands, such as *Bitte schreibe bald/Ich bitte dich/Bitte kümmere dich*...
- Also, he poses many questions throughout all letters, such as *Wie wird es wohl dem kleinen Karli gehen? Wird er mir die Türe öffnen? Was machen die Zähne und Haare? Wie mag es euch wohl gehen?*

Every letter is well structured and shows that he arranged his thoughts before starting to write; he references the letter that he is replying to in the beginning of each letter as well. Overall, he seemingly maintains a positive attitude, using certain verbs, phrases and adjectives to encourage his wife and himself, such as *reichlich Essen, reichlich zu rauchen, du wirst das schon meistern, dass ihr gesund bleiben möget, Küsse in der Hoffnung auf ein baldiges/gesundes/frohes/glückliches Wiedersehen, alles erdenklich Gute, ich bin wieder lustiger, , nur Geduld, lange dauert es nicht mehr...* |
| Circumstances of creation | The letters were written from 1944 until 1946 during WWII and the post-war era thereafter; the reason for writing was his being taken captive as POW. The times when he was allowed to write was restricted, one can assume that they had a “writing day” once a week, most likely a Saturday or a Sunday. |
| Comparison to other texts | none |
He does not say anything about his ideology and/or his world view in his letters; but even though he never speaks ill of his captors, he also refers to wanting to help at home instead of working in a POW camp. This is done without any reference to for whose benefit he wants to help at home.

My grandfather’s letters, based on an intuitive interpretation, were probably written in a very careful manner in order no to be censored by the United States/the Allied Forces; that’s why it can be deduced that this is the reason why the main topics of conversation are very casual, universal and might seem trivial at times; in combination with the historical context of the time of creation of the texts this makes perfect sense; thus also influencing the linguistic and stylistic features of all of the letters.

The sometimes trivial nature of the letters (linguistically and content-wise) can also be explained by one’s need for human interaction with a significant other; in such a situation of distress any sign of normalcy is more than welcome and also needed in order to stay focused, alert and motivated to live through such tough times. Thus, normal and trivial interactions are what keeps one sane.

Standing on their own, the letters can be viewed as a conversation between two spouses, regionally separated, taking about their well-being, their family and their everyday issues.

In reference to the table on p. 66 I want to sum up the analysis of the letter corpus in a broader as well as in a narrower sense.

The author is Karl Netrval, Sr., whose political stance is more or less unknown. He did not volunteer to go to war for Adolf Hitler, but he did not offer resistance either. The main focus of the letters is to keep in contact with his wife and their son at home.

The questions he asks are mainly of a very trivial, everyday nature – he asks about their son, about the health and wellbeing of the family and about a possible reunion. The main statements are not about war, but rather about what he does in the POW camp (that he can watch movies, buy beer, has to/can work, can write and receive letters, that he can read books in a library and that he can have some personal effects such as photographs). There are no key words, no definitions, but the writing style he uses is very similar in every letter.

The purpose of the letters is to keep in touch with back home during the last years of WWII and the post war era. The motive and the interest is to keep himself motivated and keep his spirits up during his time in the United States as POW. The audience is very limited: mainly his wife, Emilie, and his son, Karl. He also references other family members which those letters, though, are not directed to. But it has to be kept in
mind that the letters all went through the hands of a censor as well before reaching their final destination, hence influencing the content of the letters as well as the style of writing, too.

Concerning the methods of writing it can be said that he uses many commands (see table on p. 68 for examples) and asks lots of questions – which is understandable because he wants to know everything about what is going on at home. As far as I can see, there are no manipulative methods used as the letters are of a very private nature. The letters are addressed to Emilie Netrval, his wife, and the reader knows him very well but she does not know about the circumstances he is in in detail. She knows about that greater circumstances, such as WWII and its effects, but not about being in a POW camp. Of course there is a bias as they are married. The intention of the letters is to inform the family back home that my grandfather is alive and well and that they should not give up hope. The content of the letters, as already referred to, is very personal and of course I, as the granddaughter, I am very much biased.

1.2.2. My grandmother’s letters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>My grandmother wrote the letters to keep in contact with my grandfather during his time as a POW overseas and to keep him informed about life and home and about the wellbeing of their son, herself and the rest of their family (both her and his parents).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Her letters can also be confirmed as being 100% authentic because her writing can be clearly identified as her handwriting (in comparison with other pieces of writing that we have of her). The letters that were typed (the first ones) were most likely typed in her office, which she then had to leave during the course of the war. The other letters are either written on normal paper or on her own personal stationary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Having been an accountant and a numbers person, she wrote matter-of-factly but yet also in a very loving and affectionate way. Her letter are well structured, some of them were even composed on a type-writer due to her profession as a Diplomkauffrau (this stops when she had to give up her position in her office due to the war; from that point onwards all the letters are handwritten). Every letter is full of stories of their son, Karli, and the health of other family members. She affectionately tells her husband in every letter how much she misses him, that he does not need to worry about them because all is well, and how much she looks forward to being reunited. She apparently re-read all her letters before posting them off to the United States because he few typing mistakes that he made were corrected neatly with a sharp pencil. If a letter has more than one page, all the pages are neatly marked with page numbers. Also, she often wrote additional letters, not only answering to the previous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emilie Netrval, my grandmother, wrote those letters in a very hard time in her life: once her husband was missing in action (more on the possible circumstances of capture in Normandy are in the following chapter) her only way to getting in touch with him as via writing, not knowing when and even if those letters would make their way to the POW camp. At first, she did not even know where he was and whether he was still alive. Thus the main purpose for the writing was to gain information about his location and his well-being. The main statements are about family (in every single letter), especially about their son. She wants information about and – ideally – by her husband, who all the letters are addressed to. The letters are being read by her husband, of course, but also by the department of censorship – this certainly influenced both her husbands as well as her style of writing and her willingness to provide certain information as mentioned above.

Of course the reader was biased because they were husband and wife. Also, the censor(s) who read all the letters were also biased because they had the assignment to black out information which was not supposed to leave the walls of the POW camp.

But how did my grandfather fall into the hands of his captors?

| Circumstances of creation                      | same as above, see 1.2.1. |
| Comparison to other texts                     | none                      |
| Ideology and world-view                       | She does not make any reference to her ideology and/or her word-view. |
| Bible interpretations                         | none                      |
| Meaning of the texts                          | same as above, see 1.2.1. |
| linguistic + historical context; intuitive interpretation | same as above, see 1.2.1. |
| Text corpus on its own                         | same as above, see 1.2.1. |
2. Circumstances: Capture in Normandy

There is no proof of the very exact date and time Karl Netrval was captured in Normandy. Several inquires to the “Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht (WASt)” did not yield any results (see below for more information). There is, however, a letter (dated June 20, 1944) from a friend of Karl Netrval’s informing Karl’s wife, Emilie, my grandmother, of the disappearance of her husband. He was registered as missing in action (short: MIA) on June 10, 1944. This leads to the conclusion that he had been captured during the invasion of Normandy by the allied forces on or shortly after D-Day (which was on June 6, 1944). Since the German military troops probably checked the strength of their troops every evening or so, it can be assumed that he went MIA in the early days of June in 1944.

Document 1 Letter to Emilie Netrval that her husband was MIA (missing in action), June 10, 1944
2.1. The Battles of Montebourg and Cherbourg

In the letter (Document 1) there is a reference to the town of Montebourg, a French city in Normandy. The site/military location of Montebourg is better known as part of the “Utah Beach” area, an infamous location during the D-Day operations in June 1944. Via Montebourg, the allies looked to make their way to the port of Cherbourg.

Map 1 Location of Montebourg

A stubborn German line of defense blocked the first offensive by the allies to get to Cherbourg. The port of the town of Cherbourg was a target that was crucial to Operation Overlord (the codename “Operation Overlord” was used by the Allies to refer to their landing in Normandy). It can be assumed that Karl Netrval was a part of this German line of defense to block the allies out and destroy their plans to move inwards via Cherbourg. After June 10 (the day my grandfather was reported missing in action and four days after D-Day on June 6, 1944), the Americans were able to move forward and closed in on the Germans situated at the front lines.

157 Google Maps https://www.google.at/maps/place/Abbaye+De+Montebourg/@49.6009652,-1.1622029,8.26z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x480b7b45941dd167:0x34535b4c8af19189 (June 17, 2015)
As Stephen E. Ambrose states,

D-Day was a smashing success for the 4th division and its attached units. Nearly all objectives were attained even though the plan had to be abandoned before the first assault waves hit the beach. By nightfall, the division was ready to move out at first light on June 7 for the next mission, taking Montebourg and then moving on to Cherbourg.  

It took the allies until June 17, 1944 to finally get to Cherbourg successfully, defeating the German military boundaries that were set up to protect the town.  

The importance of Cherbourg is undeniable:

The port city of Cherbourg was one of the most important objectives of the Allied armies following the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944. Although immediate logistical needs could be provided by over-the-beach delivery and the revolutionary Muberry artificial harbors, the Allies needed a significant port for prolonged operations. Cherbourg was the most feasible port near the landing beaches, and its rapid capture was an essential Allied objective.  

According to Steven J. Zaloga in his book Cherbourg 1944: The first Allied victory in Normandy, the German Wehrmacht had anticipated some sort of attack on or at least towards any of the ports in Normandy and had therefore already taken precautions, even making Cherbourg a fortress in the early months of 1944. The Americans, as already discussed, did not land in Cherbourg directly, but had to get there somehow to take the port – thus the entry via Utah Beach and thus their march via Montebourg. The Germans had also started to tear down Cherbourg’s port in order to make it useless for the Allied forces, but the Allies were quick to rebuild it once they had taken over the port. Within two months, the port was able to be used to full extent.  

Geographically, Cherbourg “is located in a shallow bowl surrounded by hills on all sides, making it very difficult to defend close to the port itself” - therefore, the German Wehrmacht had to build little nests in proximity to the city of Cherbourg,

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160 cf. ibid.
162 Cf. ibid., p. 4.
163 Cf. Ibid., p. 5.
164 Ibid., p. 45.
with trenches and artillery.\textsuperscript{165} Those circumstances, in combination with the naval possibilities of the Allied forces, made it even harder for the German Wehrmacht to defend the entire area around and leading up to Cherbourg, including the town of Montebourg.

Looking back, Cherbourg’s history in regard to military and strategic importance goes back to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, to the Napoleonic era. After taking precautions to protect it from the weather at sea, it had quickly become an important passenger port, making it possible for passengers of transatlantic liners to board a train to get to Paris, and from there to everywhere in Europe:

Curiously enough, the Fashoda crisis of 1898 between Britain and France led to another spasm of construction – the modernization of the seaward bastions and the addition of a ring of forts on the landward side. Cherbourg saw brief military action in 1940. [...] Early British planning for landings in France in 1942 such das Operation \textit{Roundup} considered the seize of a port as an essential ingredient. Cherbourg and Le Havre were the most likely Norman candidates, with Le Havre often favored because of the nearby airfields. [...] Cherbourg was the firth-highest capacity port under Allied consideration after Antwerp, Rouen, Bordeaux, and Rotterdam, but the most attractive on account of its proximity to the Normandy beaches.\textsuperscript{166}

During the German preparation for the arrival of the Allies forces, they decided to have “fortified coastal artillery positions” because “this was a more economical solution than large numbers of infantry units since a single gun battery could cover about 10km on either side.”\textsuperscript{167} This line of defense, however, was only intensified after 1942 when Rommel wanted that more attention should be directed towards the beaches and the Normandy coastline. All of this might have seemed as if the Germans were armed to the teeth and ready for the enemy – but appearances can be deceiving: the German troops were generally older-than-average (36 years of age), ill-equipped, low on morale and had a lack of war-experience (which are all criteria that fit my grandfather: he was older, probably not there voluntary, thus low on morale and did not have any previous war experience whatsoever). This does not mean that they were not a force to be reckoned with but they were not to be compared with,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{165} Cf. Ibid., p. 45.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Ibid., p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Ibid., p. 12.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
for example, Russian troops. After Rommel had decided to stock up on manpower, the divisions stationed in Normandy were expanding extremely fast:

In spite of the mediocre quality of the troops, by May 1944 the 709. Infanterie-Division was relatively large for a static division, with 12,655 men including about 2,155 Georgian and Ukrainian troops, and 335 unarmed Soviet “Hiwi” used for construction and non-combat roles. [...] After Rommel’s inspection of the 709. Infanterie-Division on May 11, the division was forward deployed to defend the western coast taking over about 100km of coastline. The average age was [now] 31 years old, and it contained about 30 percent Volksdeutsche, mainly Poles.

2.1.1. Utah Beach

Map 2 shows Montebourg’s location relative to Utah Beach, one of the entry zones of the Allied forces in France. The beaches next to Utah Beach were called Omaha Beach, Gold Beach, Juno beach and Sword Beach.

Map 2 – 82nd and 101st Airborne Division Drop Zones

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168 Cf. ibid., p. 13.
169 Ibid., p. 15.
Cherbourg was, as already discussed, a potential objective to the allies from the very beginning of the planning of Operation Overlord (the German had already assumed the Cherbourg would be a point of entry) and a lot of energy was put into possibly freeing Cherbourg by June 21, 1944 - at the latest. But the Allies encountered many problems in taking Cherbourg as quickly as possible: it was about 50 kilometers from Utah Beach and the environment in France’s Normandy gave way for formidable German defense possibilities. Furthermore, long marches on foot as well as the road conditions were unfavorable for the invaders (long walks as well as bumpy, narrow roads).\textsuperscript{172} On top of that, the aforementioned precautions that were taken to make Cherbourg even more fortress-like than it had already been.

But, despite the German efforts to hold off the enemy (or anyone else, for that matter) for good, the Allies made it to Cherbourg ahead of their goal date June 21, 1944 – nevertheless, it took them roughly eleven days to get there.

In reference to the letter that Emilie Netrval received in regard to her husband’s disappearance it can be assumed that she was captured directly within the perimeter of the town of Montebourg when the Americans were en route to their main objective, Cherbourg – during the so-called “Battle for Montebourg”, which lasted for about one week.

\textbf{2.2. The Battle for Montebourg, June 1944}

In Montebourg, the German troops were able to delay the Allied forces on their way from Utah Beach to Cherbourg for some time, especially at the beginning. But this defense came at a high cost:

Even though the assorted German units holding the Montebourg sector had held back the Americans another day [...], personnel losses had been high. Among the casualties that day where the Commander of GR 1058, Oberst Kurt Beiging, and the commander of III./GR 739, Maj. Ebrecht. The Sturm-Abt. AOK 7 went from an initial strength of about 1,100 men to an effective strength of only 100 after two days of intense fighting.\textsuperscript{173}


It can therefore be deduced and assumed that Karl Netrval possibly could have been among those 100 German soldiers that survived this fight of the battle of Montebourg since he was reported missing only shortly after, on June 10 (before the battle for Montebourg ended on June 14, 1944).

Apart from the aforementioned *Sturmabteilung*, there were two other troops stationed directly in Montebourg, both belonging to the *Kampfgruppe Simoneit*: III./GRG 919 and Pz.-Abt. 206. They battled the American taskforce Steiner when Montebourg was “reinforced late on June 9, including the light tanks of Panzer-Abteilung 206.”174

The Allied forces left Montebourg for good between June 19 and June 20, 1944. Even though the Allied Forces had won that battle, “the town of Montebourg itself suffered badly [...] as the naval shells exploded, setting fire to a number of shops. In the main square, the statue of Jeanne d’Arc remained undamaged when all the buildings around were smashed. Since Montebourg sat astride the main road to Cherbourg, the Germans were busy fortifying the *abbaye* for a determined defense of the town.”175

Assuming that Karl Netrval fell into American hands within the timeframe of 72 to 96 hours from June 7 to 10, 1944, most likely during the initial taking of the town of Montebourg when the American and German forces’ battles where at their peak, his journey to the American POW system began shortly after his capture.

In his writing, he does not mention how he fell captive. It can only be assumed that this was the case because he feared that the letters would otherwise be censored and/or not reach the designated address, namely my grandmother’s apartment. In his second letter, dated July 16, 1944, he writes:

> 11 Tage sind wir schon hier und haben uns eingewöhnt. Wie ich in Gefangenschaft fiel und hierher kam werde ich Dir bei meiner Heimkunft erzählen.

(We have already been here for eleven days and have become accustomed. When I come home I will tell you how I fell into the enemy’s hands and was transferred here.)

174 Ibid., p 40f.
Therefore it is very hard to reconstruct how his captivity came about. There are various – three, to be exact - possibilities:

- he surrendered to the enemy voluntarily and relatively fast (a very plausible possibility since it can be deduced that he did not enlist into the *Wehrmacht* by choice from what we as family know);
- he was taken captive while in combat: his battalion/troops lost a siege/a raid/an invasion of some sort and all the soldiers fell into the Allied Forces’ hands (maybe after having offered armed resistance);
- he was taken hostage while being asleep/unconscious during a possible night time effort of the Allied Forces to surprise the *Wehrmacht* troops in Montebourg.

Unfortunately, those circumstances are still unknown and even my father does not know the truth. It is highly possible that my grandfather had told my grandmother how he was taken after his arrival back home once he had been repatriated but neither she nor my grandfather ever talked to anybody else about this.

Since he did not have any injuries whatsoever, at least according to his *Card of Capture* (see Document 2 in the chapter on the circumstances of his arrival in the United States) one can assume that he was either taken while asleep or unconscious (with no time to defend himself) or that he surrendered himself to the Allied Forces and thus did not sustain any injuries.

He also did not talk about his actual arrival in Camp Aliceville in his letters, but he puts emphasis on the fact that he was in good hands. In his fourth letter - dated July 30, 1944 - he writes that he is now able to communicate on a regular basis but that he can’t say everything that he wants to say in his letters: “Ich kann schon regelmäßig schreiben. Leider kann man nicht alles, was man gerne schreiben möchte, solch einem Brief anvertrauen.” He repeats this issue in his letter written on August 27, 1944: “Das Schreiben fällt mir nicht leicht. Da der Brief durch viele Hände geht, kann man ihm nicht alles was man gerne mitteilen möchte anvertrauen.”

Among many other things, it was not possible for my father or me to reconstruct many of the things he experienced and wanted to tell my grandmother in his letters but couldn’t.

But in the following chapters I focus on what we *DO* know about his stay there.

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176 Translation: I can now write on a regular basis. Unfortunately, I can’t put everything in writing that I would like to. Writing is not easy for me. Since a letter goes through so many hands I can’t trust it with so many things that would like to talk about.
3. Circumstances: Transfer to Aliceville

My grandfather, Karl Netrval Sen., was then shipped via Burry, England and probably also via Fort Bragg (North Carolina) to be finally detained as a POW in Camp Aliceville, Alabama. This transfer is partly documented with his “Card of Capture for Prisoners of War” which was sent to his wife, Emilie Netrval, after he had been taken into custody.
On this card, his POW number is indicated for the first time: 31-G-70559. The “G” stands for “German” (see Part I of this thesis) – again, therefore it can be assumed that the captures soldiers were automatically all considered German, since Austria and German had been a unit since the annexation of Austria 1938. There was no distinction, even though as place of birth, Vienna (“Ostmark”) is listed on the card. It is indicated that he had come from Burry, England, and now had arrived in Aliceville, Alabama. The POW Camp in Aliceville did not have a camp number, only initials were given: P.W.C. Those initials can be interpreted as “Prisoner of War Camp” (which is highly likely) but it is unknown why the camp was not given in a numeral code at time of issue (possibly lack of information).

On the second POW Card of Capture, there is no such indication. The localities as well as the camp number and are blackened out, a typical procedure back in the day to obscure locations. Therefore it is not possible to know when it card was sent and between which camps he was relocated.

It can be assumed that he was brought from Burry, England; to Fort Bragg, North Carolina (this was a usual center of distribution for POWs that arrived in the US from Europe) and from Fort Bragg he was transported via truck or train (possibly train) to Aliceville. There is no record of his transport because the transport itself was usually concealed, according to the director of the Aliceville Museum, John Gillum.
Shorty after he was captured, the Americans filled in a form called “Statement of Inventory” (dated June 18, 1944) where they meticulously recorded the personal property that my grandfather had on him when he fell captive. Apparently, the only things in his possession were money and stamps: 30 France, 8 French coins and one German stamp.
On the form, he had to “certify that [he has] accompanied the inspecting officer in his inventory of [his] funds and personal effects and find the same to be true and correct. It is understood that such personal property, except that confiscated, will be returned at the conclusion of this trip or voyage. It is further understood that all funds taken, after deduction of proper charges, if any, will be returned upon termination of my internment or detention.” At this point, I do not have any evidence to whether he really received the money and the stamp at the end of his trip or if any “proper charges” were applied and he received some or none of it. No personal property is listed on the inventory list.

As mentioned before, usually a soldier was in the possession of a booklet with information about him. This booklet, however, is not mentioned on this inventory list – this might be because often, those booklets were taken as souvenirs by the captors.

On the top of the inventory list, his prisoner number is stated (31G-70559) and again, his nationality is recorded as “German”.
4. Circumstances: The arrival of D-Day prisoners in Aliceville

The transport from one continent to the other was made with huge ships (vessels) with probably too many people on board. Often, “Nazi officers [...] reinforced their discipline over the troops and established the military order that had existed before the capture.”

Before or upon arrival (sometimes later, sometimes never; see information above) they were divided into two groups: the Anti-Nazis and the Nazis, according to how they behaved, what they looked like and what their history was (had they volunteered before the war? Had they been with the Wehrmacht for long? Did they have a record of any kind?).

Once they had arrived in the United States, the POWs boarded trains and/or coaches to get them to either an interim destination or the camp that they had been assigned to, for example Aliceville (see Image 5).

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177 David Michael Owings, A Cross Section of America’s World War II Prison Camps: The Lives of Axis Prisoners of War in Alabama, Their Memory, and Their Place on the Historical Landscape (Theses, Graduate Faculty of Auburn University - Auburn 2011) – p. 23.

Often, this arrival was a big happening and the inhabitants of Aliceville came out to see the German soldiers arrive: “[...] residents of Aliceville, Alabama, famers, merchants, mothers, children, and many others watched the arrival of the first prisoners by train [...].”

Meanwhile, the camp in Aliceville was already preparing for the prisoners that were to arrive from Normandy in late July:

Back in Alabama on June 28, August Wanders recorded the arrival of the first D-Day POWs at Camp Aliceville. Ernst Schlacht [a German solider] was among the 450 prisoners who arrived by train from Boston early that morning. The county newspaper reported that these

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prisoners were of all ages, some as young as fifteen. A few spoke English and told their guards they were glad to be safe in America. We can only assume that Karl Netrval was probably on one of the next trains or wagons to Aliceville, maybe even on one of the first ones. Many of the arriving Wehrmacht soldiers were reporting that the Germans were on the verge of losing the war. But since many of those already in Aliceville came from Rommel’s Africa Corps, a lot of the already interned soldiers believed that the Germans might still win the war and why morale and hope were low:

He [a German solider who had served in Rommel’s Africa Division] does remember hearing their discouraging reports – Germany was losing ground in Europe, supplies were dwindling, morale was low, people at home were starving. He and others in his compound wondered if perhaps these new prisoners, who had so recently fought in France, were not such good soldiers as the North Africa men had been.

Despite the fact that not all soldiers were members of the Nazi party, most of them took pride in their military service and how they had served during their time in the Wehrmacht. The news of Germany losing the war and the fact the casualties were piling up quickly made the rounds in Camp Aliceville and some of the soldiers had a hard time believing that their home nation was overtaken by the allies.

After their arrival, the prisoners were put into their respective barracks. As already mentioned before, there were particular barracks for certain inmates, so to speak. Depending on whether the American allies knew about a soldier’s stance on Hitler the prisoners were put in lower and upper barracks; the upper barracks being the better ones, according to the director of the Camp Aliceville Museum, J. Gillum. In the first letter, the words “Co. 19” are on the bottom of his address. From the second letter onwards, my grandfather states “Co. 4” as his location. According to Mr. Gillum, “Co. 4” refers to barrack number 4, the fourth shack in Camp Aliceville – the lower the number, the better the accommodation.

But what makes a barrack “better” than the others? Heating, for once. Despite the fact that Alabama is located in the South of the United States, there are still times when heating (especially in relatively poorly built wooden shacks) comes in handy.

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181 Ibid. – p. 384
Karl Netrval describes his barrack as follows (letter dated November 19, 1944):


(Today is Sunday. I has been raining since yesterday afternoon. It seems as if the rainy season has set in. It is very cozy and heated in your barrack. Most of my companions are preoccupied with something. It is quiet, only every once in a while you can hear a low voice. It is so important to have a day to reflect and a day of contemplation.)

The lower barracks, so Director Gillum, were more prone to small flooding (they were located more towards a creek) and possibly were not heated properly.

Image 6: Camp Aliceville as of ca. 1943 (Aliceville Prisoner of War Camp photograph album and scrapbook, LPP7, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama (date unknown).
5. Karl Netrval’s Stay at Aliceville

After his arrival at Camp Aliceville, Karl Netrval immediately started to write back home and inform his family about his condition and the circumstances that he was in now.

In general, he describes life in the early stages at Aliceville as pleasant in his third letter from Camp Aliceville, on July 23, 1944:


(The small things that I am missing I’ll be able to buy soon. We have the opportunity to work a bit and earn some Dollars. I work constantly, of course. Time passes much quicker this way. We sleep in great beds. I have your photo on my nightstand and the little one looks directly into my eyes. I have enough to smoke, too. Every now and then I can also buy a bottle of beer.)

This confirms the previous descriptions of POW camps in general and Camp Aliceville in particular. He is now able to write regularly but has – at that point (July 1944) - not yet received a letter back from his wife:


(You first letter will probably take until the end of the year to get here. Yes, we have to adjust for the long haul [...] All the best for your birthday. I sincerely hope that my wishes reach you on time.)

He repeats this many times, over and over again.

Concerning the climate in Alabama he writes in his fifth letter – dated August 6, 1944 – that he has already accustomed to the tropical heat.

He also states that he does not wish to receive anything more than letters and photographs because everything else he has (letter dated August 27, 1944):

Hier gibt es auch eine Bibliothek und Du kannst Dir ja vorstellen dass ich sie gehörig ausnütze. Ich bin mit allem versorgt bitte mir nichts zu schicken außer Fotos und viele Briefe.
(We have a library here and – as you can imagine – I am capitalizing on this! I have everything that I need and I beg you not to send me anything but photographs and many letters.)

Furthermore, apart from work, he also describes the possibilities to do sports and even celebrate birthdays. In his letter from September 17, 1944, he makes a reference to this:


(And again, a week has passed. I don’t know whether a week passes so quickly because so many things happen at the same time or whether it’s the variation between work and sport. I assume that time shouldn’t pass as quickly because we anxiously await the mail delivery every day. But after some time we have come to the conclusion that when the time has come that we are sure not to receive mail, time will stand still. [...] I thought of my father on the 13th. It was his birthday. Here at the Camp we have a tradition: every time one of us celebrates his birthday, he is congratulated in front of the company and then given a cake. This gives him joy, at least for this day. This is nice.)

He was given a cake on his own birthday as well, as he describes to my grandmother in his next letter, written on his birthday, September 24, 1944:


(I know that you are thinking of me today and I am with you and little Karli in spirit. I am sure that you are having your afternoon tea with Karli and are telling him that today is his father’s birthday and that he is very far away. My close comrades were very thoughtful and my company has gifted me with cake with the wishes of returning home soon. Such wishes are taken directly from my soul.)
To Karl Netrval it was very important to make sure that his family back home was safe and sound. He repeatedly asked his wife not to worry about him because he was doing fine, such as in this letter, dated September 3, 1944:

Ich warte schon sehr lange darauf zu erfahren, wie es euch geht, ob Ihr gesund seid, wie Du die Wohnungsfrage und das Büroproblem gelöst hast. Am Ende schreibe ich in unsere Wohnung und du wohnst, was sicher der Fall ist, schon in Hadersdorf oder bei Susi. Wenn es Euch nur gut ginge, das heisst dass Ihr gesundheitlich keinen Schaden nehmt, ware ich schon zufrieden. Um mich brauchst Du Dir keine Sorgen zu machen. Ich bin gesund und es geht mir gut. Bleibe froh und guten Mutes, habe Geduld, es geht doch, die Zeit bleibt nicht stehen, alles vorüber.

(I have been waiting for a long time to hear from you, if you are going well, if you are healthy, how you have solved the living situation and the office problem. I might even be writing to you as if you still were in our apartment, but you are – as I am sure – already in Hadersdorf or living with Susi. If only you’d be doing well, that means that you are healthy, I’d be happy. You don’t need to worry about me. I am healthy and I am going well. Stay happy and brave, time does not stop and everything will pass.)

His wife – my grandmother – had to move to Hadersdorf, a small town outside of Vienna, because of the war situation in the city at the moment. It was not sure at the time whether they’d move directly to Hadersfeld or move in with a friend of my grandmothers’ first, Susi.

As already discussed in part one, writing letters to the respective families back home was a right that every POW had – but the mail delivery service took its time. It seems as if my Karl Netrval did not receive letters from back home until January 1945, many months into his stay at Camp Aliceville. On February 15, 1945 he wrote to my grandmother:

Heute kann ich Dir wieder einmal einen Brief schreiben. Vor allem danke ich Dir für die am dritten und fünten eingegangen Briefe, vom zehnten und vierzehnten Oktober sowie vom vierundzwanzigsten November, für die schönen Bilder und die lieben Grüße. Es freut mich was Du mir von Dir, Klein-Karli und den Angehörigen schreibst.

(Today, I am finally able to write you another letter. First and foremost I want to thank you for your letters that I received on the 3rd and on the 5th [of this month], dating back to October 10 and 14, as well as to November 24, and for the nice photos and the warm greetings. I am happy to read what you tell me about yourself, little Karl and our relatives.)

He also received reading material at some point during his internment: James Truslow Adams’s “The Epic of America” (1931). It is interesting to note that he was
given a German version of the book (“Der Aufstieg Amerikas vom Land der Indianer zum Weltreich”). The book was reprinted by “Kriegsgefangenenhilfe des Weltbundes der Christlichen Vereine junger Männer” which roughly translates to “POW-Aid of the International Alliance of the Christian Union of Young Men”. There are also two stamps on the very first page of the book that read “passed by US Army Examiner” and “1209th S. C. U. P. W. Canteen, Pine Camp, N.Y.”

5.1. His repatriation

On January 2, 1946 my grandmother had high hopes for my grandfather’s immediate return to Austria and to his family:


(A new year has begun. The year of seeing each other again. Via radio they said that all POWs from America would be brought back home until April 1946. Since you are Austrian and politically spotless I do hope that you are not among the last to return. Now that there is the possibility of a reunion in the near future I can hardly wait. I can’t believe that one was able to bear this burden for six years.)

Once it was clear that Karl Netrval really was among the first prisoners of war to be repatriated he was transferred to Pine Camp, NY, in order to be shipped to Europe from there (see Document 5 on p. 91). According to this next of kin notification card he was already re-located to Pine Camp, NY, in November of 1945 from which point onwards it would take a couple of months more until he would be home with his family in Austria. His family was notified that he was unharmed but still in American custody.

While interred in Pine Camp and awaiting further transfer, he documented that he was not allowed to communicate with family for twenty-two days in a row and that the correspondence generally had been very slow:

Jahr her dass ich Deinen letzten Brief bekommen habe. Was ich in diesem an Ereignissen reichen Jahre an unruhiger Sorge und Angst um Euch mitgemacht habe kannst Du Dir ja vorstellen.

(To my greatest joy I have received three letters from you on March 4. One dates back to October, one to November and one to January 2. The joy was tremendous but we only got clearance to write back today, after 22 days. It has not been a full year since I last received your last letter. I am sure you can imagine what I have been through during this eventful year, full of concern and fear for you.)

Again, we lack information about the exact date of his homecoming but it must have been some time in late spring/early summer because his last letter was posted on March 31, 1946. Taking into consideration the long travel he could have been home as early as April 1946 and as late as May/June 1946. After the reunion with his family, he was never to set foot in the United States ever again. He spent lots of time with his family, went hiking and kayaking in Austria and got to see his granddaughter be born.

![Document 5: Card of notification for next of kin – documentation of Karl Netral’s repatriation.](image-url)
6. WASSt

During my visit to the Aliceville facilities, the “WASSt” was mentioned numerous times. The WASSt is the German bureau for notification for the next of kin for fallen soldiers that were enlisted in the German military/Wehrmacht (“Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht”). I made an enquiry to the WASSt on July 16, 2015, hoping to receive information about my grandfather’s whereabouts before, during and after his stay at Aliceville POW. I was especially interested in his journey to and from the POW and the logistics of the transfer.

After a couple of months, at the end of October 2015, I finally received a letter from the WASSt, informing me that all documents pertaining to my grandfather’s stay in Aliceville in particular and his status as a POW in general had already been destroyed many years before: namely in the month of June 1957. Why, one might ask. The General Services Administration (the respective office was then located in Philadelphia, PA) offered the documents to the Austrian government on July 27, 1955. The Austrian government did not want to have all of those materials in their custody and therefore, the papers were destroyed in June of 1957, roughly two years after they had been offered to Austria.

The only information that the administrator could provide was that he actually was a POW in the United States as well as my grandfather’s POW number – two facts that we already knew from the beginning.

Thus, the inquiry to the WASSt proved to be an unfruitful one.
Deutsche Dienststelle

für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht

Deutsche Dienststelle (WAS), 13400 Berlin

Frau
Lena Katharina Netrval
Kollburggasse 25
1160 WIEN
ÖSTERREICH

Geschäftszeichen:
(Ihre Rückfragen bitte Geschäftszeichen, Namen und Geburtsdaten angeben)
IIA2112/360-15

Karl Netrval * 24.09.1907

Bearbeiterin:
Frau Hoffmann
Zimmer:

Telefon:
030 41904-264
Telefax:
030 41904-100

Datum:
16.10.2015

Sehr geehrte Frau Netrval,

auf Ihre Anfrage vom 16.07.2015 muss ich Ihnen leider mitteilen, dass hier über den Aufenthalt Ihres Großvaters

Karl Netrval, geb. am 24.09.1907 in Wien

in amerikanischer Kriegsgefangenschaft keine Unterlagen vorhanden sind.


Ich bedauere, Ihnen aus diesem Grund die gewünschte Auskunft nicht geben zu können.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Im Auftrag

Hoffmann

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7. My visit to the former POW camp in Aliceville

Disclaimer: all photos used in this chapter are my own, taken in April 2014 in Aliceville, Alabama, USA.

As previously alluded to, my father and I took a trip to Aliceville in spring of 2014 to see the area and what is left of the POW camp for ourselves. The POW itself does not exist anymore (the area is plain land as for now) but there is a POW museum in the town of Aliceville – this is where we met with John Gillum, the current director. An interesting fact is that, adjacent to the showrooms, the building was formerly uses as a bottling plant for Coca-Cola back in the day and the machines are still on display for those who are interested.

John Gillum welcomed us with open arms and showed us around the museum first. We provided him with various photos as well as with copies of my entire grandfather’s and my grandmother’s correspondence throughout the years but unfortunately, he does not speak and does not understand German at all and nor does he have any employees that do (not fluently, at least). This is, so he explained, a major problem for the organization that runs the museum because the people working there (either voluntarily or as employees) can’t make sense of lots of the documents that they still have in their archive.

Nevertheless, after the quick museum tour we then drove out to the POW site where we saw the only remnants of what once was the POW camp: the old chimney previously referred to. Everything else, including the watchtowers as well as the barracks, was torn down after the war was over but the land has not yet been dedicated to be reused in any other way. As aforementioned, the wood panels that the barracks were made of, for example, were bought by the people of Aliceville and were then immediately reused, so John Gillum.

The museum itself has a relatively large collection of items that the either the German and Austrian soldiers had left there and of various items connected either to the war or to the time during which the POW camp was in use (see photo 4). There are many more things in the archives, John Gillum told us, but unfortunately the museum does as of now not have the resources to go through everything they have archived and make an even more extensive collection out of it.
Furthermore, they remodeled what a POW’s “space” in one of the barracks probably looked like during the 1940ies, including clothing, personal items as well as a small sink (see photo 5).

In the evening, we were invited back to the museum to join them in a celebration of some of their financial supporters as well as a small welcome party for us as son and granddaughter of a former inmate. We got to meet many people who were children during WW II and hung out around the camp in their free time. They had very many intriguing stories to tell.

Another interesting thing about the museum was that they also featured some newspapers from the 1940ies and the catchiest headlines were on display: “German War Prisoners At Aliceville Obedient and Happy Over Internment,” for example, was featured in *The Birmingham News* on June 13, 1943 (see photo 8). 25 years after the construction of the POW camp, *The Tuscaloosa News* featured it yet again on their front page: “When The Nazi Supermen Came To Aliceville” (see photo 7; probably published around 1969).

Unfortunately it was not possible to get my hands on more newspaper articles from that time because they were locked up in state archives with no access to foreigners. Of course newspaper headlines (this is more than true today, still) don’t always tell the whole truth and can’t be trusted – but at least I gained the insight that the Alabamians were quite occupied with their “guests” and the camp was the talk of the town for quite some time – even 25 years later.

John Gillum, together with his wife, his employees and volunteers, is constantly updating, renovating and re-inventing the museum (see photo 9) and often welcomes German and Austrian visitors who are searching for their family roots and their ancestors’ history. Currently, the museum is a conglomeration of many different items with very interesting histories each. Gillum runs a website as well as a *facebook* site where he updates everybody on current happenings and exhibitions.
The only remaining item of the POW camp – the chimney

Inside view of the chimney

Inside view of the Museum 1

Inside view of the museum 2 (staged barrack corner of a POW)

My father and me in front of the Aliceville POW Camp plaque
The newspaper “The Tuscaloosa News” with an article on the opening of the POW camp on their front (date unknown).

The newspaper “The Birmingham News” with an article on happiness and behavior of the POW (June 13, 1943).

Conclusion

Concluding such an interesting yet emotionally difficult topic is not very easy.

In summary, it can be said that the notion of taking prisoners of war goes back to ancient history and the issue of coming to terms with being taken a POW (whether it be via surrender or capture) goes hand in hand with that. After the Geneva Convention of 1929 had started regulating the treatment of prisoners of war, especially the Americans tried to follow those regulations as closely as possible, of course with certain exceptions.

Overall, it can be said that the early (think Hitlerjugend) indoctrination of the importance of sacrificing one’s life for one’s country plays a very vital and central role in how a soldier approaches war, its outcome, its consequences and his individual role in it. For a long time, surrendering to the enemy was considered betrayal of one’s country, which is taken to extremes in May of 1945 when the Führer himself refuses to give himself up to the Allied Forces, despite the overwhelming and dooming defeat at the dawn of the Second World War, and - along with his wife as well as Goebbels and his family – commits suicide in his Berlin bunker.

But, as stated in this thesis, this idea that surrendering to the enemy is unmanly and non-heroic might primarily be applied to those who were engaged in the war voluntarily. Those who were drafted, especially during the later stages of the war, might differ from the hardcore Nazi soldiers – one can say the main focus of the involuntarily drafted was survival; thus making surrender a way out of their lives at the frontier and/or out on the battlefield.

But – irrespective of why and how a soldier entered the war and came out of it – the prisoner of war camps in the United States usually were model camps where the POWs had the opportunity to work and play sports; a place where they were (well) fed, where they kept in shape and where they were entertained and could entertain themselves. The layout of such a camp was designed to hold up to 5000, sometimes 6000, POWs; the POWs were allowed to have leisure time, to – for example - form their own theatre companies and host performances of plays that reminded them of home and do gardening work around the yard of the POW camps.
Is all that glitters gold?

No, definitely not. Life in a POW camp, just as my grandfather experienced it, was not all honky-dory and fun. He, along with his fellow soldiers/inmates, was still incarcerated, separated from his family. Not knowing when this all would come to an end cast a shadow on the unusually positive and good reputation that being an American POWs gets on paper. Despite the fact that the POWs could/should/had to work, as already mentioned before, and also were allowed to contact their loved ones back home and that they were able to lead a relatively normal life (as can be, being in a POW camp with watch towers and supervision) in the US, most of them longed to be home and some never set a foot in the United States again after their repatriation back to Austria or Germany. Of course, some stayed, even got married and built a life in the US, but most of the POWs did not. My grandfather did not even want to return to the US as a tourist, not even with me, his granddaughter.

As illustrated in my grandfather’s letters, living in some sort of created normalcy was important to him; knowing what was going on back home with his wife and my father, who was a newborn at the time who had never met his father back in war-torn Austria. The main topics of conversation were everyday concerns about birthdays, the tardiness of the postal services both in the US and in Austria; as well as the endless days of work the POW camp in Aliceville, Alabama, where he was sent after having been captured in Normandy.

He often states that he does not lack anything and that the only things he wants (except, of course, his repatriation) are photos and lots of letters in order to keep up with what was going on back at home. He often imagines how is young son might open the door for him upon his repatriation.

The education and the possibilities the POWs in Aliceville received surpassed the Geneva Convention by far, one could argue. The prisoners were artistically active, studied and worked every day to make time pass quicker. In 1946, finally, the first repatriations were initiated and my grandfather was among the first to be repatriated back to Austria via Pine Camp, New York.

For people of my generation it is very hard to fathom what life must have been like during the Second World War and what life must have been like as a prisoner in a POW camp. Even visiting the Aliceville Museum as well as the former grounds of the camp was a very humbling experience but I still can’t put myself in my grandfather’s
shoes, torn between the service for one’s country, the love for one’s family and one’s own instinct for survival.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to obtain any more official records concerning my grandfather’s war history than we had in the boxes that we found due to the fact that all those documents had been destroyed years earlier.

Nevertheless, even though lots of issues are still unsolved, the research I did for this thesis was very interesting and opened a very new world to me. I wish my grandfather had told us more about his time in Alabama while he was still alive, so that, as a contemporary witness, he could have shed some light on some of my/our unanswered questions.
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Abstract (English)

In my thesis I write about my grandfather’s (Karl Netrval Sen.) stay in an American POW Camp in the small town of Aliceville, Alabama, after he was taken captive on D-Day in France’s Normandy by the Allied forces.

In the beginning – in the first part of this thesis – I will shed a light on the history of prisoners of war in general, which has been part of history since the codex Hammurabi. The Geneva convention, which regulates the taking, the situation as well as the rights and duties of prisoners of war, is also included in this text, as is the fact that many of the soldiers felt that they should rather die the Heldentod than fall into the hand of the Allied forces. Furthermore, it is explained prisoners of war were taken, how those prisoners were categorized, sent to various camps and which problems (key word: language barriers) were omni-present.

The structure of POW camps is also highlighted as is the personnel structure in those camps; as is the everyday life in those camps (both from a prisoners’ as well as as form a guards’ point of view). This thesis also explores why such a prisoner of war camp is located in one of the most southern states of the United states and why Camp Aliceville was special.

In the second part of this thesis I use the method of hermeneutics to analyze the corpus of letters that my grandparents wrote back and forth during his two years’ stay in Aliceville from 1944 until 1946. I also outline the circumstances, the content as well as the style of the letters.

Furthermore, the circumstances of how my grandfather was transported to Aliceville and his personal experiences there are depicted, as well as his repatriation to Austria in 1946 – to the best of my abilities and my sources.
Abstract (Deutsch)

In meiner Diplomarbeit beschäftige ich mich mit dem Aufenthalt meines Großvaters Karl Netval Sen. in einem amerikanischen Kriegsgefangenenlager in der kleinen Stadt Aliceville im Bundesstaat Alabama, nachdem er rund um den D-Day in der Normandie in Frankreich von den Alliierten gefangen genommen wurde.

Ich werde anfänglich - im ersten Teil dieser Diplomarbeit - die Geschichte von Kriegsgefangenen im Allgemeinen aufarbeiten, die ja seit dem Kodex Hammurabi auch schriftlich in der Geschichte festgehalten worden ist. Die Genfer Konvention, die die Situation, die Rechte und Pflichten der Kriegsgefangenen und Quartiergeber schließlich genauer regelte, wird ebenso einbezogen wie die Tatsache, dass oft von Soldaten (indirekt) verlangt wurde, eher einen Heldentod zu sterben als sich dem Feind zu ergeben. Ebenso gehe ich darauf ein wie generell Kriegsgefangene genommen wurden und wie sie kategorisiert und auf die Lager verteilt wurden - und auch welche Probleme (Stichwort: Sprachbarriere) sich präsentierten.

Die Struktur von Kriegsgefangenenlagern wird ebenso beleuchtet wie die Personalstruktur in ebendiesen; genauso wie der Alltag in den Lagern, sowohl von Seiten der Gefangenen als auch von Seiten der Wärter. Natürlich gehe ich auch auf die Frage ein, warum genau einer der Südstaaten für ein solches Lager ausgewählt wurde und was das Besondere an dem POW Camp in Aliceville war.

Im zweiten Teil gehe ich – mittel hermeneutischer Analyse – auf die Briefsammlung meiner Großeltern ein und umreiße die Hintergründe, den Stil und den Inhalt der vielen Briefe, die in zwei Jahren ihren Weg über den Atlantik gefunden hatten.

Darüber hinaus werden die Umstände unter denen mein Großvater nach Amerika kam und seine persönlichen Erfahrungen im POW Camp in Aliceville beleuchtet, ebenso auch seine Repatriierung im Jahr 1946, sofern es die vorhandenen Quellen zulassen.
Thank you

Besonderer Dank geht an:

Dr. Karl Netrval

Birigt Netrval

Mario Lexmüller

John Gillum
Eidensstattliche Erklärung

Ich erkläre hiermit an Eides Statt, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig und ohne Benutzung anderer als der angegebenen Hilfsmittel angefertigt habe. Die aus fremden Quellen direkt oder indirekt übernommenen Gedanken sind als solche kenntlich gemacht.

Die Arbeit wurde bisher in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form keiner anderen Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegt und auch noch nicht veröffentlicht.

Wien, im Herbst 2017

Mag. phil. Lena Katharina Netrval, BA