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Shakespearean Explorations in Captivity

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> *Portant un jour le regard vers la France,*
> *Je retrouvai, à Douvres sur la mer,*
> *Le souvenir de la douceur de vivre*
> *Que je goûtais jadis dans ce pays.*
> *Sans le vouloir, je fus pris de soupirs*
> *Alors même qu'il était apaisant*
> *De voir la France où mon cœur est resté.* (Charles d'Orléans, 2001, 146)

The author of these lines, Charles d'Orléans (1394-1465), was the cousin of King Charles VI of France. He was a nobleman with unusual literary ambitions and this is also how Shakespeare presents him in *Henry V*. The English dramatist even grants the rival Frenchman a certain knowledge of love poetry. When, on the eve of the battle, the Dauphin of France argues that he once wrote a sonnet to his horse beginning with the words "Wonder of nature" (3.7.39-42), the Duc d'Orléans ironically notes that he has actually read a sonnet which began with those very words, only that it was dedicated to a lady. But the Duc d'Orléans was also the nobleman taken prisoner after the famous battle of Azincourt in 1415, and who was to spend the next 35 years as a hostage in England where in May 1433 he wrote, among much other verse, his Ballad 75.

It has been argued that Orléans' reference to the sonnet in *Henry V* is "anachronistic" (Coldiron, 2000, 195), but this does not seem entirely fair. In his plays, Shakespeare uses the word "sonnet" to refer to more than simply the 14-line poem with its descent from Petrarch. Also, the medieval courtly poetry with its lyrical address of the unattainable beloved – like that written by Charles d'Orléans – has been widely recognized as a precursor of the Petrarchan sonnet.

Given the fact that in the imaginary world of *Henry V* Charles d'Orléans comes into focus between the laughable Dauphin and Shakespeare himself as the "bending author" of the play's auto-referential Epilogue – "Thus far with rough and all-unable pen / Our bending author hath pursued the story" (Epilogue, 1-2) – one is tempted to surmise that the poetry of Charles d'Orléans must have held an appeal to Shakespeare. Certainly, the deft way in which the Frenchman's verse, fusing the self-expression of the sonnet and the literature of imprisonment and exile, recalls the desperate attempt of Shakespeare's Bordeaux-born king of England, Richard the Second, to become a 'poet' once he finds himself behind bars at Pontefract (or Pomfret) Castle:

> I have been studying how I may compare
> This prison where I live unto the world,
> And for because the world is populous
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer't out. (*Richard II*, 5.5.1-5)

Charles d'Orléans and Shakespeare's own Richard II belong to a long line of writers who effectively captured, often in literary form, their complex experience behind barbed wire, in exile, or both, including Ovid, Casanova, Primo Levi, Varlam Shalamov, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as well as the poets of Guantanamo Bay. However, this essay is concerned not so much with known writers like these, as with less well-known individuals, including also anonymous admirers of Shakespeare. It is concerned with individuals who, at one point in their lives, were held captive, as citizens or as soldiers, in times of war, but also in times of peace under the totalitarian regimes that have determined the historical landscape of the twentieth century, and who sought to survive with Shakespeare. Their choice of Shakespeare as "survival poetry" – to adopt the term used by Manfred Pfister in a recent article about the Sonnets (Pfister, 2013, 250-56) – took place in the form of reading his work and of reading it to others. It was in the form of teaching and learning. It was in the form of translation,

adaptation, citation, and recitation. But it was also by way of performing Shakespeare, while celebrating his birthday or commemorating his death.

In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to wartime captives of the twentieth century. Most of the research has been devoted to World War II and the Holocaust, but also the work on prisoners of war and civilian internees of the Great War has expanded. There has been a tendency for historians across the field to concentrate ever more on the personal voices of the captives in diaries and letters. In this connection, considerable attention has been devoted to the cultural activity behind barbed wire, like the production of POW newspapers, reading practices, and theatrical activity (Hintz, 2006; Pöppinghege, 2006). However, there has been no sustained attempt to focus on the specific choices that the internees made of the authors that were preferred or texts that were read, or on the way in which we may analyse these choices and interpret texts that make up the literary canon behind barbed wire.

As Mechtild Gilzmer, among other literary historians, rightly notes in her *Camps de femmes* – which deals with two internment camps for women during the Second World War, namely the Southern-French camp of Rieucros and that of Brens in the French Alps – the artistic life of the camps has rarely been studied in any systematic fashion. Individual studies make standard reference to a number of cultural activities behind barbed wire, but in the majority of cases this tends to come as an afterthought, following a description of the circumstances and an analysis of the historical events. Cultural activity, like reading, writing poetry, or performing plays, generally serves as an illustration of daily life in the camps, and is often put aside as a mere attempt to counter the boredom of life behind bared wire (Gilzmer, 2000, 146).

In an attempt to change this trend, this essay tries to explore, by way of an open experiment, the possibility of studying 'Shakespeare' not in quantitative or peripheral terms, but as a process of signification. Focusing on the camps, it seeks to answer not the question what Shakespeare means, or how successful a particular production of the plays was, but on what the engagement with Shakespeare might have signified for those involved in its staging, or, what the internees meant by Shakespeare.

If we wish to study the phenomenon of 'Shakespeare behind barbed wire' in all its complexity, there are a number of sources to consult. These include camp journals and newspapers, the correspondence that survives, diaries, as well as posters and programmes of musical and theatrical productions, which have been preserved in large quantities, in libraries across the world, collected especially during the 1970s (when historians began to devote themselves to "history from below," the accounts of simple or anonymous individuals at the bottom of the social and military hierarchy). In addition, a vast amount of secondary literature has been produced about the experience of the camps, historical studies of wide-ranging quality. Finally, the cultural life of the prisoners has increasingly come to play a role in new musical compositions, novels, plays, films and television series, and these too, in one way or another, have to be included into the discussion, because they create an image not so much of the historical reality that I study, but of its perception in our own time, and of the perception across the cultural field: François Dupeyron's dramatised recital set in the labour camp of Rechlin, around the music of Schubert, Schumann and Hugo Wolff (*Conversations à Rechlin*, 2009); Arthur Miller's heavily contested stage play *Playing for Time* from 1985 (about the French pianist Fania Fénelon who would have survived Auschwitz/Birkenau thanks to her musical talents); movies like *La Grande Illusion* (dir. Jean Renoir, 1937), *The Captive Heart* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1946), and *To End All Wars* (dir. David L. Cunningham,

2004); or television series like *Hogan's Heroes* (1965), *Colditz* (1972-1974), or Israeli television's more recent *Prisoners of War* (2009-).

Moreover, personal accounts by internees have never been published in larger numbers than has been the case during the twentieth century – from prisoners of war, officers, and resistance fighters, but also from ordinary citizens who became innocently involved in military or political events, and were imprisoned in the camps of the two world wars, or the Gulag of the Soviet Union. Partly, it concerns memoirs here, but also (transcribed) interviews with ex-internees, so forms of oral history.

At the same time, we should not forget that this gigantic flood of publications – and I am limiting myself to ego-documents here – represents only a fraction of the total number of individual experiences that humans ever underwent in times of crisis or war. Most of the experiences were never recorded at the time, in whichever form, and we are really dealing with a deafening silence because those who had these experiences, either did not survive, or did not have the inclination or the gift of the word to record their experiences on paper, or because they wanted to get on with their new lives after their release and forget about the past, whereas a large group of victims never told the world about their exile or captivity, because they felt ashamed, protective …

In recent years, the theme of "silence" has received much attention, as in the work of Jay Winter, Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Ruth Ginio into the social history of silence during the twentieth century, a phenomenon that is closely related to the cultures of memory and oblivion. The work of Winter *cum suis* demonstrates how in various social contexts (like Spain after the Civil War, South Africa after Apartheid, and the troubled Middle East of our own time) a debate has been generated around the so-called silence which should enable the traumatised citizen to come to terms with the consequences of armed conflict. The silence in

such cases is a constructed social space within which certain topics are not discussed, or words uttered. This space is protected by groups or individuals who, at a given moment, wish to distinguish between what is speakable and what is not, what needs to be discussed or not, for an indefinite period (Ben-Ze'ev, *et al.*, 2010).

Inspired by this work about "silence" – "silence" which sometimes proves to be permanent, and may hence induce social forgetting – I try in this essay on Shakespeare, conflict, and captivity, to develop by means of a cultural trajectory, and, more particularly, via the various kinds of activity in the literary field, to make audible again the often muted voices of the internees, make them heard, in order to rescue their often silenced experiences from oblivion. Here, it is my firm conviction, Shakespeare – the man, his work, and their unparalleled status – represent a valuable key to unlock what may seem lost. Because by reconstructing the various complex forms of engagement with Shakespeare in captivity, I believe, part of these lost experiences may again be made visible, audible, and recognized. By not primarily studying the text of Shakespeare for its own meaning, but by concentrating on the appropriation of that text, on the signification process in which the internees engaged, we should be able to reconstruct an experience which otherwise might be lost forever.

I am aware that "Shakespeare" is not and has not been the only cultural reference for people in times of crisis during the twentieth century. Even if we limit ourselves to literature – and leave aside, for the time being, the role of music, which is thought to have played an even more important role in the lives of the internees, which also explains why this has been the subject of systematic research – we are confronted with all of world literature, from canonical works during a particular period to popular fiction, from Homer to Sherlock Holmes. In the diaries, memoirs and camp journals that have been produced, we are continually reminded of Ovid, with whom it was easy to identify because of his exile on the

Black Sea; or Primo Levi, who was certainly not the only internee opting for Dante's *Inferno* as a reference point or metaphor in his work (Levi, 1959, 127-34).

In his memoirs of Camp Westerbork, Gerard Durlacher confirms this impression. "During the day," Durlacher wrote, "I forget much of the misery around me when Otto, my paternal comrade in this compound of near-corpses tells me, while adjusting our bed springs, about *Bauhaus* and Rilke, about Shakespeare and Goethe, about Mann and Schnitzler, about Mozart and Bach" (Durlacher, 1996, 81). And let us not forget the diary that Nico Rost kept, with the perfectly justified title, *Goethe in Dachau* (Rost, 1963). Even Marcel Proust was read and studied within barbed wire, as becomes clear from the remarkable Proust lecture that the Polish artist Joseph Czapski wrote during the winter of 1940-41 when he was a prisoner of war in the Russian camp of Griazowietz (Czapski, 2011). Also, one of the stories in Varlam Shalamov's *Stories from the Kolyma* is devoted to a copy of Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, and to the disappearance of the material copy of this book which internees with a less literary bent, turned into playing cards. Not everyone in captivity had the same taste, and literary culture behind barbed wire, therefore, was also precarious (Parrau, 1995).

So Shakespeare was certainly not the only author who was read behind barbed wire, and we know of extensive discussions also about artists and musicians. Yet, more than any other national writer, artist or musician, Shakespeare constituted a fixed part of what one should, perhaps, term the 'cultural life' of the camps. Time and again, Shakespeare was taught, read, acted, discussed, and cited. A telling example of this may be found in the various journals that the British internees in Ruhleben Camp produced in World War I. It is remarkable that the quotations here are signed with the phrase, "Shakespeare, K.G." – meaning as much as "Shakespeare, Kriegsgefängner," "Shakespeare, Prisoner of War," but also "Shakespeare, Kaiser's Guest." In a process of fraternization, of identification, the

author from Stratford-upon-Avon came to be perceived as a fellow prisoner, and, however paradoxical this may sound, as a "War Poet" whose verse expressed the experience of the internees better than many of them thought they themselves could.

The fact that Shakespeare was ubiquitous – not only in Ruhleben, but also elsewhere – offers many advantages for our research. A detailed reading of these manifestations enables us to establish connections, similarities, patterns, or what one might call certain 'cultures of internment'. These various moments shed light on one another and, together, in the case of Shakespeare, bring into focus a unique moment in the European reception of Shakespeare. A number of examples should illustrate the life of 'Shakespeare behind barbed wire', the phenomenon of internees turning to Shakespeare in order to survive.

I begin with the story of P.G. Wodehouse, the English author best known for his witty stories and novels about the idle aristocrat Bertie Wooster and his servant Jeeves. At the outbreak of World War II, Wodehouse found himself in the French town of Le Touquet (where he had been living since 1934). He was arrested and taken to Tost in Upper Silesia. Given his advanced age, however, he was released relatively quickly.

The detailed account of his captivity, in which Shakespeare plays a not unimportant role, is compulsory reading. On his liberation, Wodehouse said how much time he had devoted to packing:

> I would like my biographers to make careful note of the fact that the first thing that occurred to me was that here at last was my chance to buckle down and read the complete works of William Shakespeare. It was a thing I had been meaning to do any time these last forty years, but somehow, as soon as I had got, say, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* under my belt and was preparing to read the stuffing out of *Henry the Sixth*, parts one, two and three, something like the *Murglow Manor Mystery* would catch my eye and I would weaken.
>
> I didn't know what internment implied – it might be for years or it might be for ever – or it might be a mere matter of weeks – but the whole situation seemed to point to the complete works of William Shakespeare, so in they went. I am happy to say that I am now crammed with Shakespeare to the brim, so, whatever else internment has done for me, I am at any rate that much ahead of the game. (Donaldson, 2014, 227-28)

In this bizarre account – the tone of which is occasionally light, if not downright flippant – a number of themes occur that we also find in many other ego-documents about captivity in wartime: the continuing uncertainty about the duration of the captivity, the fear of boredom, and, nearly as a matter of course, the search for a remedy, in books, reading, Shakespeare. The fact that the spiritual father of Wooster and Jeeves in this interview, given shortly after his release, should sound so inappropriately glib, funny but with an unbearable lightness of being, could indicate a degree of post-traumatic stress disorder. It could also point at an attempt, by means of facetiousness, to hide any deeper emotional conflicts.

We may be inclined to give Wodehouse the benefit of the doubt, but his contemporaries certainly did not, because the utterly naïve Wodehouse made these confessions immediately following his release from captivity in Upper Silesia, on German radio, in Berlin! To speak so light-heartedly about the Nazi camps, Wodehouse was suspected of sympathising with Hitler's regime, and the matter has never been fully resolved. That he was knighted for his contribution to the nation's literature shortly before his death in 1975 was really a polite gesture of the British government, but not a measure of the support on which he could count in his native country. The recent publication of MI5 reports has not helped to solve the problem. We may never get more certainty about that strange Wodehouse, and one believes that he would have done better to limit himself to utter his hilarious statements in his novels and short stories. But his repeated allusions to Shakespeare deserve further investigation, certainly also those used in his own public defence to go on radio.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

P. G. Wodehouse was a reader of Shakespeare. However, the plays were also performed behind barbed wire during the First and the Second World War. When it comes to theatre

productions, we see that the internees opted for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on quite a number of occasions. In 1941, for example, there was a production of this comedy in the Dutch camp at the town of Westerbork, that is, before it became the infamous transit camp for the deportation of Jews, like Anne Frank, to Germany and Eastern Europe. In 1941, Camp Westerbork still served to accommodate refugees: "In the course of 1940 and 1941 an increasing number of German and Austrian refugees arrived in the camp, including a theatre director. In order to divert their mind, the residents decided to work on the production of a play – Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*" (Abuys, 56). It is not easy to ascertain what determined the choice of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although – as we can gather from Michael Dobson's recent *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance* – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has always been one of the most popular plays for amateurs. This is not in the last place due to the fact that within the play itself a company of amateur theatricals plays such an important role, a bunch of amateurs who, in the final act, also put on a hilarious production of the 'Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe' (Dobson, 2011).

One might be tempted to think that the genre of comedy was ideally suited to entertain the internees at the time. Reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with some care, however, we realize that the characters who leave for the Forest of Athens in the opening act of the play, have serious problems with the authorities in the city: Hermia's father wants her to marry Demetrius, whereas she loves Lysander. If she does not comply, Theseus tells her, she could face the death penalty, and in the best-case scenario even be denied any contact with men: "Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men" (1.1.65-66). Read in this way, the comedy becomes a fairy tale about tyrannical men (Egeus and Theseus), but also about such vulnerable individuals as Hermia and Lysander who choose to become refugees and flee from tyranny. Would the refugees from Nazi Germany, housed at Camp Westerbork

in 1941 and deciding to stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, have been oblivious to the parallels between the play and their own political reality?

One small detail in the surviving materials suggests that this was not the case, and that the refugees knew very well what they were doing. As was the case with a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Ravensbrück (dealt with in greater detail below), there was music. In both cases it concerned the *Bühnenmusik* (opus 61) by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. But had not the music of this Jewish composer been forbidden by the Nazis in 1937? Had not even the statue of the composer been removed from the Gewandhaus in Leipzig? Surely, it had been Carl Orff who, because of his success with the *Carmina Burana* (and, of course, because of his Nazi sympathies) was invited to compose the incidental music to replace the score of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*? Given the broader cultural context of the music, the situation at Camp Westerbork in 1941 suggests that – due to the choice of a forbidden composer – the production may have been more politically and emotionally loaded than the bits and pieces of the production that survive might at first sight seem to suggest.

More is known about the second production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that took place in Ravensbrück, partly thanks to the writings of the Dutch resistance fighter and poet, Sonja Prins. At an advanced age she still remembered how, together with a group of Dutch and Polish girls, she rehearsed Shakespeare's comedy:

> In England I had been introduced to Shakespeare while at a Dalton school. On Saturday, the principal would read out loud to those who were interested. Staging *A Midsummer Night's Dream* now meant that the Polish and Dutch girls would be doing something together, and this made me happy. (Prins, 2014, n.p.)

The comedy was staged by the women and performed for the German soldiers and citizens at Christmas, and it was a great success.

In her autobiographical *Dwangarbeid en verzet in Mecklenburg 43-44* (Forced Labour and Resistance at Mecklenburg, 43-44), Sonja Prins describes in greater detail how the idea for a theatre production was born as an attempt to boost the morale of the political prisoners. Marie Pelletier in the account [Sonja Prins herself] was at the centre of it all, and adapted the text, at night, "by the light of a tiny oil lamp" (Prins, 1985, 69). Yet, everyone helped – by donating shreds of old newspapers to write on, and pencil stumps to write with. The creative preparations seem to have been almost as important as the production itself that Prins describes.

Stunning about the description of the production is the way in which the comedy was rewritten. Oberon's servant Puck was granted a central role. Puck, as Prins herself describes it, looked upon "people as enemy creatures," and this applied in particular to the man with the ass's head, in this case not the familiar Nick Bottom, but a "poacher" who offered "a parody of a drunken SS guard trying to walk in a straight line, and in a circle next, before falling asleep" (Prins, 1985, 82-83). Puck was, we read, played by an actor with a talent to improvise, someone who, in the course of the production, managed to hurl a considerable amount of wisdom into the auditorium, wisdom which, as Sonja Prins informs us, would have been cut by the censor had it been on paper, until Oberon orders Puck to relieve the "poacher" of his donkey's head, turning Puck in the model of regenerative human justice and charity (Prins, 1985, 85).

One may wonder how the text of this subversive adaptation apparently failed to alert the censor who did not take preventive action. According to Prins, it was the name of the original author that explains it. "For a week, the play was on the desk of the senior guard, Fischer," she writes, and when it came back, "no cuts appeared to have been made" (Prins, 1985, 69-70). Not without a note of irony, she adds: "How could one expect the guards to

change the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare at their own convenience? Because *this* is what the title page read: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by W. Shakespeare, a comedy in four acts, a German adaptation" (Prins, 1985, 70).

The canonical position that Shakespeare had acquired in the course of the nineteenth centruy – in Germany he had even been elevated to the status of the third classic alongside Goethe and Schiller – offered the Polish and Dutch women at Ravensbrück of whom Sonja Prins writes, a chance to undermine the power of the authorities and to strengthen their own sense of social cohesion.

Something similar occurred in the East Bloc during the Cold War. Since the 'classical' work of Shakespeare was permitted at the time, whereas the work of most modern writers was forbidden, these writers often sought refuge in Shakespeare's text, trying to translate, adapt, or perform it in order, via Shakespeare, to comment on the current political situation. For this reason, Dennis Kennedy has called Shakespeare the "Cold Warrior" *par excellence* (Kennedy, 2003). Given the parallel with the story of the women of Ravensbrück who gained a voice through Shakespeare, Shakespeare clearly also deserves recognition as a "War Poet."

Julius Caesar

When Shakespeare was staged behind barbed wire, there was no automatic preference for the comedies – although it should be obvious that their complex nature allowed sufficient room for subversive creativity. Looking at the choice of plays, it is interesting to see that for a remarkable number of internees, especially during World War II, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was a favourite text. This will not only have been determined by the fact that it was easy to improvise a Roman toga with plain bed sheets. The most remarkable feature, however,

certainly during World War II, is that we are dealing with a highly political text, with the murder of a tyrant as the pivotal event.

A clear example may be found in Engeland, in 1941. Here, at the outbreak of the war, Winston Churchill had interned all refugees from Nazi-Germany (including Sebastian Haffner and Norbert Elias), for fear that a number of them might be spies, and represent a fifth column. Especially on the Isle of Man (where no less than 30,000 Germans had been interned during the First World War) a rich and varied theatre life developed among the internees, and here Shakespeare played an important role. German plays – the most obvious choice for internees from Germany and Austria – were strictly censored by the British authorities. Shakespeare, however, the popular hero of the English, created surprisingly few problems, despite the unmistakable political tenor of a tragedy like *Julius Caesar*.

This is not the place to describe the production that the internees mounted of *Julius Caesar*, in modern dress (not to lose any of the play's then current relevance), and with a remarkable variety of (involuntary) foreign accents. Important is, in any case, that the surviving materials indicate a reading that was in favour of the assassination of the Roman tyrant, who resembled the Führer and his terror from which they had recently escaped.

This amateur production of November 1940 must be regarded as one of the most politically charged and at the same time one of the most neglected theatrical events of the early years of the war. Compare this most politically expressive production with the production which premiered in Stratford-upon-Avon in mid-April 1941. In his review of 18 April 1941 John Borne (who had already served in the British army) wrote that matters at the Memorial Theatre in Warwickshire were so very dull, and so escapist: "Once upon a time – to which we should not hark back too much – men died vigorously on the Memorial Theatre stage. Now it is all very polite – even when they fall – and not a sword is bloody. Thus we go

home to use our imagination on the midnight news" (Hoenselaars, 2013, 230). Against the background of what is perhaps best referred to as establishment Shakespeare, one appreciates all the more the courage and determination of the political refugees during their detention on the Isle of Man.

The story of *Julius Caesar* and the political engagement of a tiny bunch of amateurs would not be complete without reference to the production of the same play by a contingent of German prisoners of war who had, during the final months of the war, ended up in the prison camp in the southern French camp of Hyères. They, too, played Shakespeare, but it was emphatically not a glorification of the Führer, as had been the case in Berlin during the war itself, or in the free adaptation of the Caesar story by Benito Mussolini and Gioacchino Forzano (Tempera, 2005, 336). The German POWs at Hyères now played this Shakespeare in an attempt to represent Brutus as a hero like Claus von Stauffenberg, who famously tried to assassinate Hitler, and on whose office desk at Berlin's Bendlerstraße, following the attack, the police had found a copy of *Julius Caesar* with a pencil-marked part of Brutus (something, incidentally, the POWs at Hyères could not possible have known) (Hortmann, 1998, 143). Erich Dorn was there in Hyères, and recorded his memories on paper. This production, he wrote, "unambiguously" demonstrated the will of the German soldiers to make their own contribution to the reconstruction of democracy and the cultural life in the new, postwar Germany (Dorn, 1948, 198).

Shakespeare behind barbed wire was not only performed in front of audiences made up largely of other internees. There was also a more personal, private engagement with his work. This engagement is more difficult to identify and to research, but the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London, or in the unique Liddle Collection at the Brotherton Library in Leeds, soon yield much to rely on, like the following two examples from Ruhleben

Camp in Berlin. It concerns the notebook kept by the otherwise fully unidentifiable electro-technician from Leipzig, George Beringer, and the liber amicorum section of a jotter by W.E. Swale.

Like so many of his countrymen in Ruhleben, George Beringer followed a series of lectures at what has become known as the 'University of Ruhleben', and, as we gather from his notebook, he also followed a course in English Literature during which, unsurprisingly perhaps, much attention was devoted to Shakespeare. Curiously, though, the notebook does not contain any notes taken during these lectures, or any form of reflection on the texts that Beringer studied. We do find a number of quotations from *Hamlet*. It is easy to underestimate the relevance of a notebook containing quotations only (Beringer, RUH 4, n.d.). It is important, therefore, to realize that for Beringer recording quotations was useful – as indeed it was for Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. When Hamlet learns that his father has been murdered by a Machiavellian Claudius, Hamlet exclaims:

> O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!
> My tables,
> My table – meet it is I set it down
> That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain. (1.5.106-109)

The text is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but the quotations that Beringer records are his own. He is Shakespeare's ventriloquist. But we hear Beringer's own voice, his quotations, and his canon. And what does Beringer record, this electro-technician who has been sleeping in the straw of a horse stable for years, with the cold air blowing straight across the terrain from Siberia, with not a single prospect of freedom, because the internees were the pawns in a political game of negotiations between the German and the British governments? What did George Beringer choose to cite?

> O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God,
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed. (1.2.129-36)

The next lines from Beringer's notebook evoke the comparison between man and the animal world – self-evident during the Renaissance, perhaps, but by no less so for those interned at the racecourse of Ruhleben:

> What is a man,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? – a beast, no more.
> Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and god-like reason
> To fust in us unused. (4.4.23-30)

This small selection of texts from *Hamlet* – the tragedy of a hero who describes his country, Denmark, as a 'prison' – exposes the helplessness and melancholy of Beringer, a prisoner for no reasons of his own making. Eventually, however, we witness an attempt on Beringer's part to accept his fate, because it might be part of God's larger plan:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.9-10)

Of an entirely different nature is the response to imprisonment by Beringer's fellow-internee at Ruhleben, F. C. Milner, who, in the *liber amicorum* of W. E. Swale, identifies with Shakespeare in another way, namely by signing a Shakespeare quotation with his own name. The 'quotation' is a drop of real blood (meanwhile turned rusty and brown), spread across a page and a half, with, under it, the reference "*Macbeth.* Act 1. Sc. 2. Line 49." It is far from Beringer's aim, by means of Shakespeare to propagate and support a stoic view of life. In the event, the Shakespeare 'reference' – "Act 1. Sc. 2. Line 49" – even proves to be

fictitious, and with this pseudo-Shakespearean volley it is likely to have been Milner's intention to give vent to his anger and frustration about his predicament. In essence, the unresigned Milner states that according to him Ruhleben Camp was a "bloody mess," utter misery, an absolute disaster (Swale, RUH 52, n.d.).

Karolina Lanckorońska

A final example of the way in which Shakespeare could play a role in the lives of prisoners may be found in the diaries of Countess Karolina Lanckorońska. Lanckorońska was born in Austria in 1898. She studied in Vienna and became an art historian with a Renaissance specialization at the University of Lviv (then Lemberg). When the Russians occupied the city in 1939, she soon became suspected of resistance work, and was imprisoned. Lanckorońska managed to get away to Cracow and was subsequently active in the Polish resistance against the German invader who had declared war on Russia in 1941. In 1942, she was arrested by the Germans, interrogated and sentenced to death. Thanks to her family connections – including the Swiss diplomat and historian Carl Burckhardt, who was the head of the Red Cross at the time – Lanckorońska's sentence was suspended, and she was transferred to Ravensbrück. She survived the war and left an account of her experiences in her memoirs, which appeared in the UK as *Those Who Trespass against Us: One Woman's War against the Nazis*, and in the US as *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück*. The first English translation of these memoirs appeared posthumously in 2005, several years after the death of the countess in Rome, at the honourable age of 104.

The memoirs of Lanckorońska's time in captivity are based on the diaries she kept during the war, and they directly relate to her imprisonment in Poland and in Ravensbrück. She sketches the image of an intellectual who, even under gloomy conditions, refuses to give

up the struggle, the image of an academic who is determined to find solace and support in the very same culture that the Nazi's were about to destroy. In her Lemberg diary, we read:

> A fortnight ago, at my request, I was sent Shakespeare. That for me has been the most significant event of recent times. My life in prison has been totally transformed. I have read Shakespeare before and read a lot, but in my present circumstances the mind's apperception is weaker, so I did not gain as much of it as I ought to have done, whereas my sensitivity to an artistic masterpiece has decidedly increased. I have read and am reading. I note down extracts and re-read, but it is as though I had never before heard Shakespeare. (Lanckorońska, 2005, 168)

As a prisoner, Lanckorońska developed a veritable reading culture of her own, and quoted Shakespeare time and again in an attempt to unravel her own situation and in order to achieve an act of inner emigration, or, as she describes it herself, an ability "to escape into the realm of intellectual riches" (Lanckorońska 269). The many references to Shakespeare enable us directly to trace the events in the emotional life of the internee. The first entry of the diary that she began in the Lemberg prison on 18 September 1942, reads:

> I have been studying how I may compare
> This prison where I live unto the world:
> And for because the world is populous
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer 't out.
> My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
> My soul the father: and these two beget
> A generation of still-breeding thoughts.
> And these same thoughts people this little world,
> In humours like the people of this world
> For no thought is contented … (Lanckorońska, 2005, 161-62)

Lanckorońska takes the initiative creatively to counter life in prison – much like Richard the Second in Shakespeare's history play – by taking it as a creative challenge, and she finds that in being "contented" herself, she actually differs from the medieval monarch. Where medieval texts – as Jean Dunbabin has demonstrated – looked upon prisons and captivity as a taste of the real Hell and damnation to come, Shakespeare's Richard the Second, rewritten as an early modern monarch, seeks to import this terrene world, *not* Hell, into his cell, and

proceeds to people it with his fertile brain, and it is this tradition of the humanist subject that we also find in the Renaissance art historian Lanckorońska.

However, feelings of melancholy nevertheless manage to quench her optimism at times. This explains why several days later, on 20 September 1942 to be precise, the countess spoke to herself in a stern voice, reminding herself of the words of Edgar in *King Lear*:

> What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
> Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
> Ripeness is all. (Lanckorońska, 2005, 167)

This insight also prepares us for the next quotation, from *Julius Caesar*, where the stoic world view of *King Lear* is expressed even more explicitly:

> Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
> It seems to me most strange that men should fear
> Seeing that death, a necessary end
> Will come when it will come. (Lanckorońska, 2005, 168)

These are only a few examples in the memoirs of moments when Shakespeare functions as a touchstone for her emotions, as he is read and cited to describe the unusual conditions in which she finds herself, or to serve as a source of moral strength at moments of intense emotional crisis. Together with Shakespeare the countess succeeds in approaching the thoughts and feelings that she herself cannot or will not express otherwise.

Interestingly, she appears to speak on behalf of many other internees who have not left us any testimony of their experiences. This becomes clear from Lanckorońska's diary after she has been transferred from Ravensbrück, her "homeland" – as she herself put it – into exile (Lanckorońska 181). For miraculously, Shakespeare made an unexpected appearance behind the barbed wire of Ravensbrück:

> In this connection, a great delight came our way. One of the Polish women brought with her from Auschwitz a treasure that, because she was travelling on with the transport, she had to leave with us. That was a one-volume edition of the complete works in English. The book was stamped with the number of an officers' prisoner-of-war camp, from which it had by some miracle been smuggled to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. (Lanckorońska, 2005, 269)

One tries to imagine the situation: the way in which the same physical copy of the complete works of Shakespeare was in three camps of World War II, and one wonders how many internees would have read it. At Ravensbrück it was not only the countess Lanckorońska who read Shakespeare. In her own words: this copy of the complete works of Shakespeare was "secreted in my straw matress, from which I used to lend him out to the occasional reader" (Lanckorońska 269). This sharing was not a problem, because there were days when the countess herself did not read, although this was not the playwright's fault. Yet, when she did not read Shakespeare, she remembered what she had read:

> There were days when reading was out of the question. I had neither the time nor the energy, but for us the mere awareness that King Lear or Richard II was with us was proof that the world still existed. (Lanckorońska, 2005, 269)

Conclusion

Via the excentric P. G. Wodehouse, the amateur thespians of Camp Westerbork, the political refugees on the Isle of Man, the German POWs at Hyères, and the notebooks of Beringer and Swale in Ruhleben, we arrive at a coterie of readers around the countess Lanckorońska in Ravensbrück. Reading Shakespeare, but also *not* reading Shakespeare, kept the memory of the poet and playwright alive, and confirm his essential presence in captivity, to convince those readers trapped in the Hell of the twentieth century "that the world still existed."

The account of the Polish countess – about the relevance of the mere existence of something called "Shakespeare," and about the way in which this might make our lives more valuable and liveable, as indeed it does – makes an important point about Shakespeare. A number of years ago, with reference to a scene in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Jonathan Bate argued that Shakespeare was part of the "constitution" of the Englishman (Bate, 1989, 3). The account of the countess Lanckorońska demonstrates that the statement applies no less

to the various cultures of the European continent. Shakespeare is part of the Englishman's DNA, but it is also shared by all Europeans.

In this essay, I have looked at the phenomenon of "Shakespeare" behind barbed wire in the twentieth century. I have tried to demonstrate that, precisely by looking more closely at the various manifestations of "Shakespeare," in the hands of amateur and professional users, we may break through the existing silence, and gain a better insight into the historical experience of the internees. To break through the prevailing silence by making the camps speak through "Shakespeare" I have tried also to balance existing pessimism with regard to the human ability to remember, as expressed in one of the poems that Sonja Prins wrote in Ravensbrück in 1944:

> All has been for nothing, of no value,
> with us as captives stringing the withered
> years into a chain of memory.
> Not a trace will remain of the sorrow and the pain
> When we're no longer here. (Prins, 2014, n.p.)

As a critical reader of today, it seems appropriate to question the suggestion (made at another time, and under conditions that cannot be compared to ours) as though all traces of this sorrow and this pain would meanwhile have been wiped out by time. Even the words of the poet herself undermine what she claims, because they communicate to us, as the modern reader, the experience of over half a century ago. I would even go one step further, and try to show that there are more traces than we tend to suspect, also when those involved in the original experience were not in a position – for whichever reason – to relate in their own words of their gruesome experiences and the effect of these on their consciousness, as individuals.

I am not suggesting, in the way P. G. Wodehouse did, that it can be so agreeable behind barbed wire, if one does not forget to bring one's complete works of Shakespeare. We

have witnessed the existential doubt of George Beringer, and something similar may be found in the work of the American poet e.e. cummings, who was a prisoner of war in Northern France during World War I. As he describes it in his novel *The Enormous Room*, he too had expected he could kill time and survive camp life with Shakespeare, only to discover that this did not always work. He describes how he managed to order the complete works in Paris, and received it in the form of a heavily censored Everyman edition. Reading, however, did not have the desired effect. "Somehow or other, reading Shakespeare did not appeal to my disordered mind. I tried *Hamlet* and *Julius Cæsar* once or twice" (cummings, 1922, 263). When a less highly trained fellow-internee asked him who this Shakespeare was – "'Shah-kay-spare, who is Shah-kay-spare?" – and cummings heard himself answer that "Mr. S. was the Homer of the English-speaking people," he lost all remaining faith in Western civilization (cummings 263). Such reading experiences, too, determine the image of Shakespeare in captivity.

More research into this phenomenon needs to be done and should always look beyond national borders, in particular the borders of England. Given the near ubiquity of barbed wire, the nearly ubiquitous phenomenon of Shakespeare as a War Poet in captivity needs to be studied and contextualised from a transnational perspective. Only then will we be able to realize our ambition to make the camps truly tell us the silenced stories that we must want to hear.

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