

"My time in America was the most valuable of my life" – America through the eyes of P.O.W. Josef Krumbachner

Josef Krumbachner was born in 1919 in Halsbach near Altötting in Bavaria, one of seven sons in a farming family. After primary school he first attended the Salesianer Gymnasium in Burghausen before switching to the Humanist Gymnasium in Passau in 1937. His life and the Catholic seminaries in Burghausen and Passau had a deep effect on him, and determined his attitude to the Nazi regime. As a member of the Catholic Youth Movement he was soon in sharp opposition to the nationalist socialist view of the world. His decision to become a priest was thus probably the logical consequence of his spiritual and political attitudes. After he completed his school-leaving examinations he did a spell of work in the Reichsarbeitsdienst, however. In 1939, six weeks after starting his studies at the Catholic University of Eichstätt, Krumbachner was conscripted into the army. In a technical unit, he took part in the western campaign and in the attack on the Soviet Union. Despite his openly expressed Christian views he was promoted in 1941 to the rank of Lieutenant. In November 1942 he was wounded and flown out of Stalingrad, and after his recovery was employed by the Army High Command in Berlin. As the commander of an observation division along the French coast, he was taken prisoner by the Americans during the 1944 invasion. He now experienced the perfect organisation of the American troops, and enjoyed and appreciated the humane treatment he and his fellow German POWs received.

After spells in POW camps in England and Scotland, he was taken by ship from Glasgow to America in the summer of 1944. Josef Krumbachner describes the Atlantic crossing as one of the finest experiences of his life. He noted that the sight of the Statue of Liberty in New York gave him more of a feeling of impending freedom than of captivity. From 1944 to 1946 he was interned in a POW camp in Como, Mississippi. Even though he was pleased at the good treatment and comfortable conditions, he was appalled that even though the camp was guarded by American soldiers, it was actually being run by German officers with strong Nazi tendencies. Krumbachner surmised that the Americans had such a democratic attitude that they refrained entirely from intervening in camp life. Since the officers did not have to work, a great deal of education opportunities were organised, and this was fully supported by the Americans. The POWs were kept fully informed about the military situation, because the camp was provided with newspapers and radio reports. The preferential treatment given to the German POWs only changed in early 1945, when the first news of Nazi wartime atrocities in concentration camps began to emerge.

The Nazi functionaries were now removed from the camp, enabling Krumbachner and his Christian friends to take over "government" themselves. After Germany's capitulation, as part of the "re-education programme", Krumbachner came into contact for the first time with the

literature that had been forbidden by the Nazis, including the works of Thomas Mann. Amused by the "pedagogical optimism" displayed by the Americans, he refused to take part in the democracy course: "We know what it's all about, we don't need to be re-educated". He also rejected an offer of courses in politics, which might have enabled him to pursue a political career in the new Germany. His aim was to get back to university as quickly as possible in order to complete his theological studies. To speed up his discharge he volunteered for work in a cigarette factory. It was only now that he made his first fleeting contacts with ordinary Americans, and befriended several black people – who were much in the same boat as him in the strongly racist state of Mississippi. In the camp he had only experienced America indirectly, largely via the media. In 1946 Josef Krumbachner was taken back to Europe on a "liberty ship", and the good treatment in the American POW camps was now followed by near-starvation in the European ones. On Ascension Day, 1946 he arrived home. "My time in America was the most valuable of my life." This statement of Josef Krumbachner related less to his experience of the country and its inhabitants than to life in the camp, being confined together with others, and having intellectual encounters with his fellow inmates, all of which made a deep impression on him for the rest of his life. At the bottom of it all, however, were the liberal views and the tolerance of the country in which he spent two years as a prisoner-of-war.

Thomas Felsenstein

Based on an interview with Georg Schmidbauer, 2003

Sailor's kitbag of Josef Krumbachner from the time of his imprisonment in the US

Josef Krumbachner as a soldier in France, October 1940

Holy Mass in the POW camp in Como/Mississippi, 1945/46, watercolour by Günter Hempel, a fellow prisoner of Josef Krumbachner; standing to the right are Josef Krumbachner and Paul Schmidt