

Exceptional Bonds: Revenge and Reconciliation in Potulice [Potulitz], Poland, 1945 and 1998¹

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The problem I have tried to understand for most of my life is that I came out of captivity so well but found freedom so overwhelmingly difficult. I understand this issue best as a biological process of adaptation to the environment. From this perspective I will consider affectionate bonds as my most adaptive approach to the past situations of revenge and reconciliation.

The concentration camp Potulice [Potulitz] was located in western Poland near the city of Bydgoszcz, known in German as Bromberg, in a region that had alternately belonged to Poland and to Germany. After 150 years of German dominion, it was ceded to Poland at the end of World War I. Many Germans remained in the region. When World War II broke out, the Nazi security forces were especially violent in subduing the former German West Prussia and Posen. Poland faced an overwhelming threat from the German Army. Polish authorities arrested 50,000 ethnic Germans, with the plan to evacuate them from the western region. In the ensuing outrage over the war, revenge, and suspicion of collaboration with the invader, 4,000 to 5,000 German-Poles were killed. During the worst outburst 1,000 people of German background were killed in the city of Bromberg on "Bloody Sunday" of September 3, 1939. The Nazi security forces and special commandos, or *Einsatzgruppen*, took a

¹ The main themes of this paper are treated in detail in my book, which will soon appear in German with Scherz Verlag in Bern, *Eine Porzellanscherbe im Graben: Über Gefangenschaft und wie man lernt, frei zu sein* (2003).

terrible revenge in Poland and killed 10,000 Poles in the following weeks.²

In 1940 the Nazi regime established the concentration camp of Potulice near Bromberg, to avenge and control acts of resistance. A compound with a capacity to hold 10,000 prisoners was built for the imprisonment of Polish civilians. In January 1945 the camp was dissolved, as the German guards and officials fled from the advancing Soviet army. In February 1945 Potulice became a concentration camp for German civilians who still found themselves in the western region of newly redrawn Poland. Polish former prisoners served as guards and commandants under the newly established Soviet power in Poland. In time, Potulice functioned as the central administrative camp for a network of camps and places of internment that operated in Poland until 1950 and later.³

That winter of 1945 all roads out of Poland were jammed by a huge westward escape and exodus of ethnic Germans living in and beyond Poland's new borders. My family joined the treks with two loaded horse-drawn wagons. I had barely turned five and had no understanding of the upheavals around me. Things just were that way. The running and hiding and shooting were normal. I had no other reality or perspective. My brother Gustav was ten years old then. I lately discovered that he had quite a cosmopolitan view. "That's a Ukrainian harness," he said when he visited me in Phoenix and we looked at photographs in Günter Böddeker's book on the great exodus of ethnic Germans

² Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens not Darken?* (New York, 1988), 181. The figures given by Mayer of the number of ethnic Germans killed in Bydgoszcz during the event of "Bloody Sunday" vary from author to author and with the prevailing climate of opinion.

³ There is one historical treatment of Potulice: Hugo Rasmus, *Schattenjahre in Potulitz 1945* (Münster, Westf., 1995). A contemporary journalist's perspective is Helga Hirsch, *Die Rache der Opfer* (Berlin, 1998). An old source with invaluable survivor testimony about Potulice is Theodor Schieder, ed., *Documentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ostmitteleuropa—I., Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus den Gebieten östlich der Oder-Neiße* (Munich, 1984; reprint 1960 ed.), 2: 578-606.

in 1945.⁴ I was impressed. For the first time I recognized how massive the dislocation had been—fifteen to seventeen million people. The wagons escaping with us had come from as far away as Ukraine.

What did I see then, when I was five years old? I saw basic properties of the things around me. A porcelain shard in a ditch had pretty blue flowers painted on it. Honey could be transparent, depending on whether there was a lot or a little in the can on our wagon. I saw mainly what was in front of my nose. The bricks in front of my face were pitted and rough. They were as rough as my father's whiskers when he hadn't shaved. "We're not leaving without him. You can shoot us," my mother told the militiamen who wanted to keep my father. We knew we wouldn't see him again. We knew they would kill him. At that brick wall we waited to be shot—seven children, my mother, my grandmother, and a Polish worker who persisted in staying with us. The militiamen let my father go. I saw the hollow stems of straw in front of my face, the ends cut clean, when we hid in a granary and soldiers searched for us, stomping and poking the straw above us. They ransacked our wagons and left an old woman naked, raped, and dead. In the midst of the violence, I saw how somebody bigger held somebody smaller. I didn't see Ukrainian harnesses, but I could judge the harm around me from what I saw in people's faces—my mother's pained face when our heads were shaved in Potulice, my father's face after his first beating, a gray face in the black night of the open door.

We were imprisoned from March 1945 until July 1949. Captivity formed my early memory. I had no memories of a better childhood or of better places. Captivity was my place of origin, my native land. And Potulice was my hometown. Captivity is the measure by which I still judge important matters of life and death.

⁴ Günter Böldcker, *Die Flüchtlinge: Die Vertreibung der Deutschen im Osten* (Munich, 1980).

For the first two years we were prisoners on a large farm, along with several other families. Our daily routine: heavy labor, not enough food, and beatings. Then my father, my two older sisters, and my grandmother were sent to a labor camp in Bromberg. Shortly thereafter all the small children on the farm and my mother were sent to Potulice. This included me, then aged seven; my little brother aged five; and my little sister who was three years old. Gustav and an older sister stayed behind. My family was now scattered in three different places.

That spring of 1947 Potulice became our life. "*Potulice, nasza matka*—Potulice, our mother," the prisoners said of the camp in Polish. "*Zum Leben zu wenig. Zum Sterben zu viel.*" "Too little for living. Plenty for dying," they said of the camp in German. For the next two years I would see nothing but Potulice. A tall embankment with rows of barbed-wire fences encircled the camp. On the walkway on top of the embankment guards paced back and forth between watchtowers. Each gray barracks was fenced off from the next one. Nothing grew on the ground covered with cinders.⁵

In the children's barracks we children lined up in the morning and evening for a tin of black barley coffee and a slice of coarse bread. At noon we had a tin of watery soup—cabbage soup, a soup of unprocessed buckwheat that looked like bedbugs. We called it "bedbug soup." And there was "UNRRA soup," the worst soup, made from rotten meal that came in sacks stamped with the letters UNRRA.⁶ On some days we marched and sang

⁵ Rasmus, 88. Rasmus describes well the extent to which Potulice was walled off from the outside world. He calls it *hermetisch abgeschlossen*, hermetically sealed off. During my stay in Potulice, the embankment enclosing the camp gave the impression that the camp was sunk below the surface of the surrounding region, none of which could be seen from inside. It left me with quite a sensory deprivation that made the earth appear extraordinarily magnificent when we were freed.

⁶ The "bedbug soup" was actually cooked unprocessed buckwheat. The disk-shaped kernels, the size of lentils, looked like the flat brown bedbugs in our barracks. UNRRA soup was made from a meal that came in brown paper sacks stamped with the letters UNRRA. Many years after our release from Potulice I discovered that UNRRA was the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

Polish songs in our tiny patch of yard. With shaved heads and gray prison clothes we sang "*Miała baba koguta, koguta, koguta*—a little old woman had a rooster, a rooster, a rooster." On Sundays I was allowed to visit my mother for an hour. Once a month we left our barracks for a shower in the big kitchen building. From our fenced-off patch we children looked into the main yard. We saw prisoners harnessed to loaded wagons. They pulled them across the yard. My mother pulled such wagons. For punishment prisoners repeatedly ran and fell down. My mother did too.

In the sea of cruelty the few small gestures of kindness made my world good and whole. They stood out, were figure, while the rest was ground.

I remember the time my mother stole some cooking grease. She had wrapped it in a scrap of paper and had stuffed it into the tip of her shoe. She fed it to my little sister who was always on the brink of dying from starvation. My mother told my little sister the fat was a gift from a parcel one of the women had received. The truth, if found out, would have killed my mother and Elfie. How dangerous these small acts of kindness had been. Reaching through barbed wires to touch my head could have cost my mother a beating, the bunker, and standing for days in the bunker's water. With such few and fleeting acts I was cherished and could cherish in turn. Even when I didn't see my mother for a long time, I could have a sense of preciousness for everyone around me. I could look at death and tell its coming, a talent I have to this day when I walk through a hospital and recognize the dying.

Administration. But why were we fed the rotten corn meal when we were starving? It was bitter, acrid, and very unpalatable. I am indebted to Paul Boytinck for directing me to relevant Senate debates in the *Congressional Record*. UNRRA was actually prohibited by its own constitution from providing food to any German national. It did provide relief to all other countries, including Italy, an enemy country of the Allies during World War II. In the case of the rotten UNRRA soup, the Poles most likely received the rotten corn meal from UNRRA, found it unpalatable, and fed it to the prisoners in Potulice. See Kenneth S. Wherry, "Investigation of Starvation Conditions in Europe," *Congressional Record—Senate*, January 29, 1946, 509-520.

One day my mother and little sister disappeared. I thought they were dead. People who disappeared were simply dead. Many months later my mother reappeared. She had been sent to a hard-labor prison because she would not give up any of her children. After my mother's return early in 1949, we were sold for a short while to a farmer for labor. I have since learned that it was called a "rent." The farmer paid the camp a rent for our use.

Potulice changed that spring of 1949. Everybody had hair. We could walk around in the main yard. One Sunday I saw a man wearing sandwich boards. The words on his chest and back said, "I have stolen from my comrades two pairs of socks, cigarettes, a spoon, a pencil..." On another Sunday a woman with sandwich boards stood on a table. The boards said "Thief." This was the man's and the woman's punishment for petty theft, something Potulice hadn't punished among prisoners before. In freedom theft wouldn't be allowed. We had to look more *normal* for when we were free, my mother explained. It was a terrible punishment, I thought. I'd rather have had a whipping.

On July 3, 1949, we walked through the gate of Potulice to freedom. I didn't know what freedom was. I couldn't imagine it. I thought it would transform me in some big way. Perhaps the change would feel like falling rain. The earth looked unbelievably beautiful and green. I had hardly seen any of it for over two years. The train took us to East Germany. From there we escaped to West Germany, to a small settlement of barracks in Hessen, a former *Stalag* called Trutzhain. I revelled in the magnificence of the earth, its creatures, flowers, and trees. The idea of greetings, of saying "Good Morning" and shaking hands, thrilled me. It was so superior to beatings and yelling.

I had left captivity with an intense sense of the preciousness of people. For years I puzzled over why I had this feeling of wanting to cherish everybody around me. I came to the conclusion that I had this inclination because it had been good for me. It had helped me live. It had let me grow up and flourish in very harsh places. There were ways of being in extreme danger

without experiencing overwhelming stress. Recently I looked for similar situations. My favorite example is a man who spent six years in captivity. He had seen his wife and five children executed. He determined that he would not hate, but love and be helpful to everyone he met. After six years, he looked remarkably well, even though his rations had been the same as those of all other prisoners.⁷

Threat intensifies bonds. We see this in natural disasters. Every life is precious, and we save whomever we can. This strategy is very adaptive in disasters. It was adaptive for us in captivity. Even my little sister instinctively knew it when she asked my mother to be nursed. She was four years old, long weaned, long past breast feeding. My mother let her nurse. Nursing increases the neurotransmitter oxytocin. It is calming, is incompatible with the stress response, and enhances the immune response. Nursing was good for my sister and for my mother. The rag doll my mother made for my sister also came with this calming parasympathetic response. One could say that I had grown up in a hurricane that had lasted four years, a time that made every life precious.⁸

We had intense caring bonds in captivity. I lost them in freedom. In August 1949 I started school in Trutzhain. I had had no schooling, no concept of school, and only a few reading lessons from my mother. With great timidity I sat in that first classroom in Trutzhain and went along with whatever was required of me. I glanced at the arm of the girl sitting beside me. The teacher told me not to turn around. Then he called me to the front of the

⁷ George G. Ritchie with Elizabeth Sherrill, *Return from Tomorrow* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 114-116.

⁸ For a current review of the neurobiology of bonds see C. Sue Carter, "Neuroendocrine Perspective on Social Attachment and Love," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 23 (1998): 779-818. For a conceptualization of parasympathetic autonomic nervous system responses in calming threat and their evolutionary significance see Stephen W. Porges, "Love: An Emergent Property of the Mammalian Autonomic Nervous System," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 23 (1998): 837-861.

room. He hit my hands and made me kneel in front of the class. This was worse than anything I had known in captivity; a whipping and a humiliation when I expected bonds to govern all relations. The cruelty in captivity had been the "weather;" the ordinary, usual background of my life. Indeed, we called the guards the "Weather" to warn of their approach. We protected ourselves against cruelty with bonds.

We immigrated to Canada in 1952. My parents had been farmers in Poland. They took readily to farming in our new country. I found our immigration unsettling. The loss of language was yet another dimension that took away my moorings. However, there were more powerful imperceptible forces outside language and culture that eroded the basic foundation of my life. These were part of my nature and physical makeup, of how the cells in my body responded to harm and to bonds. They were part of my manner of being in the world. My experience of bonds had not included harm. All harm came from events and people external to our family, from guards, soldiers, and our captors. The guards were a force of nature to be feared like the weather. In freedom harm could come from anyone around me. But I had no expectations of such harm, could not recognize it, and had no responses to it or ways of defending myself against it. Instead, I expected bonds, affiliation, appreciation, and happiness over being with others and seeing how they flourished. A child hitting another child on the playground in Hessen or in Canada seemed very strange to me. I had seen only guards, soldiers, and our masters use physical force.

When we immigrated to Canada, curiosity was often the first response we encountered. To the good people of Alberta, Canada, curiosity was simply a view of novelty. To me being conspicuous, standing out from the rest of the crowd, had killed people in captivity. Something harmless could appear very threatening to me. Conversely, something seen as harmful by people in freedom could make no impression on me. I expected bonds in various situations while freedom offered indifference

and sometimes the destruction of bonds through hate and violence that overwhelmed me.

My family changed. Older siblings pursued their own interests. My parents had been so capable in taking care of us in captivity. In freedom they could do little to help us with the new struggles in school, with anything English, or Canadian. It seemed that people in freedom often stood by and let harm happen, as in the classroom in Trutzhain. In Alberta some people had "salvation," while others were "sinners." The idea of people as "sinners," as "bad," was more strange than English. It was an alien concept and an alien landscape, with nothing my mind could grasp. I developed recurrent nightmares of running over a charred hollow earth shot full of holes, dragging my little brother and sister along. If we lost our footing, we'd slip into a tear in the earth and fall through endless clouds. I had this dream already in eighth or ninth grade. I would have it for decades.

In 1960 I came from Canada to the United States to attend the University of Michigan. The violence against civil rights protesters shocked me. I had known a web of connectedness. Racism was a web dedicated to harming people. Films of Holocaust camps shocked me even more. The films showed a whole social system created for the deliberate destruction of people. This was a most extreme destruction of bonds, the extreme opposite of the sense of preciousness I had known in captivity. Then, while in graduate school, a professor greeted me with a mocking "*Sieg Heil!*" I could hardly mention my childhood in captivity. On rare occasions when the subject came up, people said that Potulice was "nothing." The mere mention of my captivity called forth statements of distress and grief over the atrocities of the Nazi era. That was the harm I should have experienced, some people said, the silence said, the photographs and film images said. Indeed, I got off lightly. "Whose fault is it, after all?" a German writer wrote of our captivity in Poland.⁹ That

⁹ Martin Grzimek, *Trutzhain: Ein Dorf* (Munich, 1984), 107.

young writer with a broken heart only said what others easily thought. My apprehension that I would perish grew with each year and each decade. Freedom became the fear that I would die.

By 1985 I found that I had lost all language for myself. I couldn't speak or write anything about myself. Such loss of language is documented in some ancient and interesting sources. Nearly four thousand years ago a Hittite king lost his speech during a severe storm. The Seventy-seventh Psalm says: "I'm so troubled that I cannot speak." John Krystal, a psychiatrist treating Holocaust survivors, found that his patients had great difficulty labeling emotions and speaking about the past. This state was called alexithymia.¹⁰

I didn't know of these examples of lost speech in 1985. I only knew that what I had was an acquired physiological response, and that I hadn't had it in Potulice. If it was acquired, there had to be a way out of it, I reasoned, without knowing what the way out could be.

Since I couldn't speak, perhaps I could write about my life. Perhaps the written word would lead to speech. I tried to write. To my complete dismay I found that I couldn't write either. Like a newly paralyzed person who might test his muscles for the slightest movement, I probed for what I could write. I started to describe how I learned to read from the Old Testament at our first place of captivity. Reading about the Covenant had thrilled me. We could do things with such agreements. If we had agreements, we wouldn't need yelling, whipping, and killing. In my writing I polished that scene for months. Eventually I turned to *Plattdeutsch*. It was my parents' private language, the language they spoke to each other. I had never heard anything harsh in it. I checked out a *Plattdeutsch* dictionary from the library and read *Plattdeutsch* stories. In time I found words for Potulice. Eventually I found words for the school scene in Trutzhain and the "Sieg

¹⁰ Henry Krystal, *Integration and Self-Healing: Affect, Trauma, Alexithymia* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1988).

Heil!" in graduate school. I imagined and wrote how I stood on a small table, as the woman thief had stood in Potulice. I imagined the teacher in Trutzhain hitting my hands, the professor shouting his "*Sieg Heil!*" and the whole graduate class yelling and throwing things at me, even though they hadn't done so. I experienced myself in that scene with the empathy I had felt for the woman thief. I was there with the neurobiology of a caring response. Then I imagined and wrote about how I stood in line and waited for death in places of great atrocity. The bricks in front of my face had the feel of my father's whiskers, as they did when we waited to be shot for him. I stood in scenes of great atrocity with a soothing response. The words I had found at the start of my writing, the words that let me return to great harm encountered in freedom, these were words that I had experienced in a certain neurobiological state.

Recent imaging studies show that cerebral blood flow decreases in the left frontal speech area of the brain when subjects are exposed to their own taped traumatic scenes.¹¹ Most likely my return to past harm used language that had normal cerebral blood flow and the physical state that came with those calm and unstressed experiences. How fantastic! I used to say facetiously that my writing was improving the circulation in my left middle cerebral artery, the artery that supplies circulation to the speech area. I may well have done so.

In the examples of empathy for the woman thief, the feel of my father's face, and *Plattdeutsch* I was engaging a physiologically ancient emotional template. Survival requires a successful response to threat. Since Walter Cannon's work of the 1920s, the fight-or-flight response has dominated all thinking to

¹¹ Scott L. Rauch, Bessel A. van der Kolk, Rita E. Fisler, Nathaniel M. Alpert, Scott P. Orr, Cary R. Savage, Alan J. Fischman, Michael A. Jenike, Roger K. Pitman, "A Symptom Provocation Study of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Using Positron Emission Tomography and Script-Driven Imagery," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 53 (1996): 380-387.

the near exclusion of other possible responses to threat.¹² Cannon's conception does not fit my family's situation in captivity. We could not escape or fight our very threatening circumstances. Some of our responses are better described as care, rescue, and empathy for one another. Rather than fight-or-flight, this is a soothing or calming response to threat. It is the neurobiology of bonds, of connection, and social affiliation that had allowed me to flourish. It comes with a lower metabolic rate, requires less food, and restores the body in an efficient manner, with an efficient immune response. If you had to live in extreme situations, you would want to do it with bonds and their neurochemistry of oxytocin and related hormonal and cellular functions. These block the noradrenaline, cortisol, and related responses of stress. Undoubtedly several emotion subsystems are involved in this adaptation.

Bonds are as old as the caring response of any mammal to the distress call of its young. Indeed, bonds made possible the very life and evolution of mammals. I believe I engaged this ancient emotional template in my personal return to harm in the past fifteen years of my writing. The words that I found at the start of my writing were part of my experiences of bonds in captivity. I was able to use these to dispel the physiological hold of the stress response in freedom. This is my reconciliation. I'm using old bond responses from captivity to quiet the entrenched distress in freedom, a kind of "delayed calming." We are made in astonishing ways.

In 1998 I returned to Poland for a reconciliation with the historic past. For years Potulice had had a memorial for Polish prisoners who had perished under the Nazis. Now a group of German survivors formed an Initiative Group to mark a mass grave of German prisoners who had perished in the camp and to undertake a reconciliation between Polish and German survivors.

¹² Robert Sapolsky provides an entertaining and accessible review of the autonomic nervous system and the stress response in his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: A Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (New York, 1994).

I joined the efforts of the Initiative Group to support the concept of reconciliation and to meet people from Potulice. Since 1949 I had not heard of Potulice or met anyone from that time. Above all, I simply wanted to celebrate the astonishing acts of compassion and love I had seen—the Russian soldier who handed us a Bible and asked us to pray for him when he found us in our hiding place, the Polish worker who would not leave us, my mother who bartered a jacket for my father's life, my father who begged for food to save his children and took beatings. I had nothing to reconcile with Potulice, with the Polish people, or with Poland. When I left captivity, I felt I was a cherished child and not at all abused.

Thus, on an early September day a tour bus picked up Potulice survivors across Germany and headed for Bydgoszcz, Poland. On the day of our celebration we assembled at the cemetery of Potulice. To our surprise a huge crowd gathered, perhaps a thousand people, many more than we had expected. The parish priest of Potulice, Stanisław Zymuła, and the Protestant pastor, Klaus Zimmermann, conducted an ecumenical mass and service. A number of people spoke, including Gustave Bekker, our organizer, who had been in Potulice as a boy. Stanisław Gapiński spoke for Polish survivors. He had been imprisoned in Potulice as a boy under the Nazis. I read the Twenty-third Psalm for children who hadn't known freedom, for snatches of love that had been as important as a crust of bread, for the Russian soldier, the Polish worker, and the militiamen who hadn't shot us. Afterward our group walked around the walls of Potulice, now an ordinary prison in Poland for ordinary criminals. Only the watch towers reminded me of the past. The embankment had been replaced by tall masonry walls. To our surprise the officials let us into the prison. Inside the compound all barracks had been replaced by two-story masonry structures. The kitchen building still stood in the same central space. A guard handed out two loaves of bread. We broke off pieces and

ate. An astonishing moment. Potulice still was a place of intense preciousness to me.

After leaving Poland, I returned to Germany to visit my old teacher, Rudolf Filtz, in Trutzhain. The former *Stalag* had become a village; the sturdy barracks stood preserved as homes and shops. We walked down the main street, now paved. We stopped at the cemetery. At the grave of my first teacher, I pulled out the undergrowth that covered his grave. This was my reconciliation, a reconciliation with events after Potulice, with silence, with a distorted reality that contained nothing of my life or of the bonds I had known. These aspects of freedom had harmed my sense of being in the world much more profoundly than Potulice ever had. At the same time, this has been an astonishing life project. I am exhilarated that I have found my way with it. Freedom is the choice of love. With it the deepest dungeons crumble. Without it freedom can be a jail and we the prisoners and guards.

Reconciliation to me starts as an individual endeavor and with our own experiences. It is first and foremost a restoring of bonds and connectedness within ourselves. In restoring our own relatedness, we reclaim our bonds with all human kind. I welcome the break in silence created by this conference for myself, for people with no language, for people with unspeakable events in their lives. There is a biological route to speech, to human connectedness, and to being cherished members of creation.

Addendum

Gustav Bekker reports on the developments since that first memorial celebration September 8, 1998 when Polish former prisoners and German former prisoners met and marked a grave site with a bilingual inscription: "For the German Victims of the Lager Potulice, 1945-1950, from the survivors." The contacts established on that day did not end with the memorial. Official

representatives of both countries, who had attended the event, initiated discussions on the establishment of partnerships. One year later, Lechosław Draeger, the representative of the district Nakło nad Notecią, and Walter Kroker, the representative of the district Elbe-Elster, signed a partnership agreement. The Polish city of Nakło nad Notecią and the German city of Elsterwerda also entered into a written agreement. The aim of these agreements was to establish and support cultural, economic, and personal contacts between the people of both countries.

Dr. Bekker reports on the rapid developments that followed the agreements. Lively exchange between youth orchestras and sports groups came into being. Official delegations of district representatives and city parliaments exchanged visits.

Particularly important are the exchanges between youth groups. There are multiple contacts between the students of the Gymnasium at Elsterwerde and the Lyceum at Nakło nad Notecią. These students are working on a joint history project to research the tragic events of this region during the Second World War. Survivors from Germany, Poland, and the U.S.A. are being interviewed. Students in the city of Nakło nad Notecią learn English and German. Students in Elsterwerda learn Polish. Dr. Bekker reiterates the goal of these efforts: it is to learn from personal tragic histories so that children and grandchildren can have a peaceful and happy future in a united Europe.

A Polish high school student who visited one of the resulting reconciliation meetings in Potulice became the writer of one of the first high school honors essays on the concentration camp Potulice. The writer was Jakub Leszczyński, who completed his paper at the International Baccalaureate School in Gdynia in the spring of 2001. In his essay Mr. Leszczyński asks one central question: Was Potulice a “displacement” camp or was it a “labor” camp. He comments on the lack of knowledge about Potulice in Poland. The existence of a Polish camp for German prisoners from 1945 to 1950 was a secret, one supposedly guarded by the Communist government. Moreover, there was even very little

knowledge of the fact that Potulice had been a camp for the Polish people themselves, imprisoned by the Nazi regime from 1941 to 1945. Mr. Leszczyński found very few newspaper articles on the imprisonment of Poles in Potulice.

To answer his question, Mr. Leszczyński interviewed survivors of Potulice. He found that Polish former guards of Potulice described Potulice as a “displacement” camp. When Mr. Leszczyński interviewed German survivors, he found that they said something very different of Potulice. To them it was a hard-labor camp. The question concerning the nature of the camp at Potulice is treated in detail in six parts of the essay.

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, displacement camps accommodate temporarily a large number of displaced persons that require resettlement. Concentration camps confine political prisoners or members of national or ethnic groups for state security, exploitation, or punishment without trial. In work camps prisoners are forced to work under very harsh conditions, without remuneration, and for benefit of the camp authorities. Armed with these definition, Mr. Leszczyński reviews the information he has collected.

The essay details how the German people were forcibly taken into captivity. These people carried out forced labor on farms and in the workshops in Potulice. They were “rented” out to whoever needed labor and could pay the “rent” to Potulice. On the farms and in the camp the prisoners were not fed well and they were beaten. One of Mr. Leszczyński’s informants, Ms. Elen Guse, developed night blindness from malnutrition. At the end Mr. Leszczyński states, “I believe that Potulice was a hard-labor and not a displacement-camp.” He concludes that the graves of Potulice are a reminder of the harm and tragedy produced by revenge.

This is a courageous essay. It asks an important and difficult question and, in the process, uncovers important truth, suffering, and moral culpability on a scale that touches the historical

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experiences of two peoples. May the young students working on this subject find new affirmations of life in a common tragedy.