

Casualty of History A WWII Prisoner of War Grave at the San Antonio National Cemetery

by Gaëtan Carpentier

Under the vivid blue springtime sky and on the green native prairie grass of Texas, white headstones are aligned in geometrical and military order. Buried within these hollowed grounds at the San Antonio National Cemetery are the remains of one hundred and forty-one men who died in prisoner-of-war camps during World War II. Among them rests German-American Hugo Krauss, born November 1, 1919, in Oberlangenstadt, in rural Bavaria. Behind the tranquility, serenity, and peacefulness of the cemetery lies the trauma of the war.

I have been interested in World War II narratives since my father revealed to me, through many anecdotes, his experiences in the war years as an eight-year-old boy living in Charleroi, an urban center in the southern part of Belgium. He told stories related to his experience as a Catholic altar boy and his erudition, under the benevolent eye of the priest, in the art of tasting the wine and knowing to whom it might be served during mass. My father's accounts were also about wandering the countryside to steal apples on trees, about walking the family dog to the meat market, and about the German *Kommandantur*,¹ abiding by the *Flamenpolitik*,² mistakenly demobilizing his father at the surrender of the Belgian Army in May 1941. His stories were not all light-hearted and entertaining; they also contained violence and hatred. In one, he recalled a German officer of the *Wehrmacht*³ whose dress dagger had inadvertently scratched the face of a little girl standing behind him; he always thought the Wehrmacht sent the officer to the Eastern Front. In another story, he told of his encounter with the? Belgian *Black Shirts*,⁴ a neo-Nazi political activist group. They kidnapped him in broad daylight off the streets of Charleroi and took him to Germany during their retreat in the late summer and early fall of 1944. This anecdote was the most dramatic of all. During an Allied air raid, a German officer freed him from the bed of a truck where he was tied. After wandering in the countryside for few days, he found refuge with one of his relatives. A few days later, a company of *Waffen-SS*⁵ rounded up the village and gathered the inhabitants in an adjacent field. While surrounded by machine guns ready to fire,

¹ *Kommandantur* is the term used to describe the organizational structure of a military command; it is also metonymic term to designate the office building from which this command exerted its power.

² *Flamenpolitik* was a German policy aimed at the Aryanization of Belgium in separating Walloons and Flemish populations. This policy included the demobilization of the drafted military personnel who had successfully taken a linguistic test demonstrating their knowledge of Flemish language.

³ *Wehrmacht* is the generalized term for the German Armed Forces from 1935 until 1945.

⁴ *Black Shirts* were a sort of political militia generally formed with Flemish separatists or Walloon Rexists. Both group were neo-fascists and collaborated with the Nazi force of occupation.

⁵ *Waffen-SS* is the term for the German Nazi Militia associated and fighting alongside with the Wehrmacht.

my father remembered the chaotic entrance of the schoolteacher in the village that caused the Germans to flee; he was riding his bike and shouting, “*Les Américains! Les Américains!* [The Americans! The Americans!]”⁶ This was the second time in a few days he had his life saved from certain death. These fascinating stories captivated my imagination.

My initial research on German POWs in Texas permitted me to combine my personal interest, my father's experience of the war, and my academic curiosity on topics of this project began with a graduate course titled Writing Public History under the close and attentive direction of Dan K. Utley, who wanted the full engagement of his students and sought in each of us the signs of deep commitment to our projects. The assignment called for a topic related to Texas. Unfortunately, I had little background on Texas history, but I discovered quite by accident the existence of POW camps in Texas as I was watching the Military History Channel documentary *Nazi POWs in America*.⁷ With my knowledge and this potential topic, I started looking around and began seeking information at the Fort Sam Houston Museum in my hometown of San Antonio. From thread to the needle, I discovered that the San Antonio National Cemetery was the last resting place for 141 German prisoners of war.

After a quick visit to the cemetery, I selected a few names and started researching the life of these individuals. Among those randomly selected, the name of Hugo Krauss caught my attention because the inscription on the headstone was in English, with not a single word in German. As I was reading literature on POW camps in the U.S., I realized my randomly selected individual was “popular” – Hugo Krauss earned appearances in many books. His popularity in the literature is not due to the individual’s character *per se*. Instead, it comes from the circumstances of his life and the participation of the military court to investigate his murder and try his assassins.

The dramatic life story of Hugo Krauss begins in 1920 with his birth in the land of economic and political turmoil that was post-WWI Germany. Hugo’s father, Heinrich Krauss, was a veteran of the Great War and had experienced the collapse of the German society following the Treaty of Versailles.⁸ Heinrich Krauss migrated to the United States of America on July 11, 1928, and one can assume he was perhaps looking for better employment opportunities.⁹ After finding a job as a janitor, he rented a small apartment in a five-story building at 329 East 88 St, in Yorkville, one of many small villages on Manhattan Island in New York City. He rented the apartment for \$50 a month.¹⁰ He soon anglicized his name, so Heinrich became Henry. On June 17, 1929, Henry reunited with his wife Margaret and his two young children, Hugo and

⁶ Marcel Carpentier, interview by the Gaetan Carpentier, Erquelinnes, Belgium, 1992.

⁷ *Nazi POWs in America*, Military History Channel, January 31, 2014 (originally aired January 27, 2002).

⁸ "Kriegstammrollen, 1914-1918," Volume: 7454. Kriegstammrolle: Bd.14, Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv., Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Germany; "Kriegstammrollen, 1914-1918," Volume: 5486. Kriegstammrolle: Bd.6, Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv., Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Germany; "Kriegstammrollen, 1914-1918," Volume: 698. Kriegstammrolle: Bd. 3, Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv., Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Germany.

⁹ "Petition for Citizenship," NARA Series: M1972; Reference: (Roll 0937) Petition No- 242462, Petitions for Naturalization from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, 1897-1944, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.

¹⁰ "Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population Schedule," Microfilm Publication T626; Roll: 1568; Page: 9A; Enumeration District: 0735; Image: 1047.0; FHL microfilm: 2341303, United States of America, Bureau of the Census, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.

Lena. The family had arrived in New York after an eleven-day journey from Bremen, Germany. Although Hugo was only nine years old when he arrived in America, he likely experienced a grim childhood in Germany because of the disastrous economic and political downturns of the era.

With the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany and its ideological movement, Hugo Krauss, as an easily impressionable young boy, grew up in the German community of Yorkville. In his little village, the German-American Bund, a pan-Germanic organization in the United States with more than twenty thousand members, found support with the German immigrant population for the dissemination of the pro-Nazi ideology. According to an article in the *New York Times*, Hugo Krauss may have received, in 1939, financial support from the German-American Bund to travel back to Germany to visit his relatives.¹¹ Sadly, perhaps, on September 1, 1939, after twenty years of peace, Germany declared war and invaded Poland. According to the newspaper article, after being drafted into the Wehrmacht, Hugo managed to avoid conscription in claiming he was an American citizen.¹² Although his American citizenship cannot be affirmatively confirmed, his father had indeed filed a petition for citizenship in the mid-1930s with the U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and had later declared to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census that he was a naturalized citizen.¹³

After the rapid defeat of Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France, Hitler's popularity was at its highest in Germany. Driven by ambitions and cultural hatred, Hitler declared war on his former ally, the Soviet Union, in June 1941. On December 11, 1941, Nazi Germany also declared war on the United States of America. Hugo Krauss had to choose his side: America or Germany. Trapped in a Germany at war since 1939, the young German by birth, feeling more at home in his native land than in the U. S., joined the Wehrmacht and fought the Communists on the Eastern Front.¹⁴

With two major frontlines, in Russia and North Africa, Nazi Germany stretched its resources thin. This strategic mistake accelerated the downfall of the regime, and on May 13, 1943, the recently reinforced and refitted German Expeditionary Corps in Africa (commonly known as the *Deutsches-Afrikakorps* or DAK), led by the famous Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, surrendered in Tunis, Tunisia, to British, French, and U.S. Allied Forces.¹⁵ Hugo Krauss, a

¹¹ Russel Porter, "Ex-Yorkville Man Slain As Prisoner," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), January 17, 1945, Late City edition, 11; Michael R. Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 121.

¹² Porter, "Ex-Yorkville Man Slain As Prisoner," 1.

¹³ "Petition for Citizenship," NARA Series: M1972; Reference: (Roll 0937) Petition No. 242462, Petitions for Naturalization from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, 1897-1944, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.; "Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population Schedule," Microfilm Publication T627; Roll: 2658; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 31-1435, United States of America, Bureau of the Census, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C.

¹⁴ Heino R. Erichsen, *The Reluctant Warrior: Former German POW Finds Peace in Texas* (Fort Worth, TX: Eakin Press, 2001), 64; Porter, "Ex-Yorkville Man Slain As Prisoner," 1.

¹⁵ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness, 1942-1945*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 198-200, 222; Michael D. Richards and Paul R. Waibel, *Twentieth-Century Europe: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan-Davidson, Inc., 2005), 133-134; Roderick Stackelberg, *Hitler's Germany: Origins, Interpretations, Legacies*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 237.

corporal in the Wehrmacht and a storm trooper, was among those who surrendered in North Africa.¹⁶

Hugo Krauss's childhood and teenage years had definitively influenced his views of his world. His experience led him to choose his path: his political orientations and his family experience of the crisis in the beginning of the twentieth century were the perfect pretext for rallying the Nazi cause. Maybe reluctant at first to join the Nazi war effort, he later chose to fight for Germany. Less than four years after his departure from New York City, Hugo Krauss was back in the United States of America, this time as a POW at Camp Hearne, in Robertson County, Texas.

Camp Hearne was one of the first POW camps in Texas and by far one of the largest, designed to house a maximum of forty-eight hundred prisoners. The construction of Camp Hearne started in March 1942 and finished in February 1943. The U.S. Army built the camp on fifty-eight acres and laid 250 buildings. The camp was composed of three POW sections. Each section was laid out on approximately eight acres each and had roughly fifty buildings, including barracks, mess halls, lavatories, and company offices. Annexed to the POW compounds were the hospital and the U.S. Army barracks.¹⁷ The first POW contingency, part of Rommel's DAK, arrived at Hearne on June 3, 1943.¹⁸ For these German POWs, Camp Hearne was the best accommodation they had had in years, despite the difficulties many prisoners experienced in adapting to the hot humid climate of Texas.¹⁹

Hugo Krauss might have arrived at Camp Hearne in the mid-summer or early fall of 1943. With his fluency in English and the lack of German speakers among the U.S. Army personnel, Krauss became one of the camp interpreters, translating communications between the camp commander and the prisoners. In addition to his interaction with his American captors, Krauss benefited from the leniency of U.S. Army regulations, as his parents were allowed to visit him at the camp. According to Heino Erichsen, one of Krauss's barrack mates, Krauss's parents brought their son a sewing machine. With it and his *antebellum* training as a tailor, Krauss quickly established a little business inside the camp.²⁰ His parents also mailed him a radio, which he used to listen to American news broadcasts.²¹ Unlike most POWs, Hugo Krauss's life in the camp did not seem extremely difficult psychologically; however, consciously or not, Krauss attracted much attention from his fellow POWs with his pro-American relations and activities. As tension built up between Krauss and other German patriot POWs, he revealed to U.S. authorities the names of the non-commissioned officers who were instigating the POW labor strike and also reported the existence of a clandestine homemade short-wave radio in the camp.²² The confiscation of this piece of equipment definitively unleashed a feeling of hatred toward Krauss. In the eyes of the German POWs this act of denunciation called for punishment by means of *Der Heilige Geist* [The Holy Ghost]. The Holy Ghost, a form of hazing designed to

¹⁶ Dawson Duncan, "Nazi POW Admits Role In Murder," *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), January 27, 1946, Metropolitan edition, sec. One, 1.

¹⁷ Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German*, 3-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-15.

¹⁹ Erichsen, *The Reluctant Warrior*, 60.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

²¹ Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German*, 120-121.

²² *Ibid.*, 122.

punish with severe beatings any soldier whose behavior jeopardized the unity of the corps, was a common practice in the Wehrmacht since World War I.²³

At 11:45 P.M. on December 17, 1943, as most camp residents slept, a group of fellow prisoners visited Hugo Krauss and beat him severely for several minutes. In the confusion, he called for help, screaming, "Meyer, cut it out, for I'm already bleeding."²⁴ Krauss had his skull fractured from a blow to his head with a pipe. In the uproar, the entire camp awoke. POWs helped the bleeding Krauss to the camp clinic, where he stayed in observation until the next morning. On December 18, the army transferred Krauss to McCloskey General Hospital, fifty miles away from Camp Hearne. McCloskey General Hospital was located in Temple, Bell County, and was a branch camp of Camp Hood, in Killeen. It was in this hospital that POWs with long-term injuries received medical care.²⁵ Sadly, Hugo Krauss suffered from multiple traumatic lacerations, a concussion, and a fractured skull, and died on December 23, 1943, at 11:03 P.M. in the hospital. Three days later, the army transferred Krauss's remains back to Hearne, where he was interred in the camp cemetery. Unlike the other burial ceremonies, Krauss only received American military honors; his parents and sister attended the funeral ceremony.²⁶

Although the U.S. Army launched an official investigation into the murder of Hugo Krauss a few days after the incident, the investigators held no evidence against any suspects. With the lack of evidence or suspects, the Army simply closed the file.²⁷ With the war ending, one of Krauss's assailants, Günther Meisel, came forward with a confession letter in which he described his participation in the victim's beating. His motivation for the confession was a heavy conscience. Nevertheless, upon Meisel's confession, the army re-opened the cold case, started a new investigation, and uncovered significant evidence against seven prisoners of war who had allegedly committed the crime at Camp Hearne two years before. The men were Sgt. Anton Böhmer, Cpl. Günther Meisel, Cpl. Heinrich Braun, Pvt. Werner Hossann, Cpl. Erich Von Der Heydt, Cpl. Werner Jaschko, and Sgt. Helmut Meyer. They were charged with the murder of Hugo Krauss and court-martialed at Camp Swift in Bastrop County. Their trial took place on January 22, 1946, and closed on January 30, 1946. According to the *Dallas Morning News* dated January 31, 1946, the army court-martial sentenced the seven men to "life imprisonment at hard labor for the slaying of an anti-Nazi fellow prisoner."²⁸ After an initial examination of the trial, a review board confirmed on March 14, 1946, the sentencing and the transfer of the seven prisoners of war to the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas.²⁹

Interestingly, the sentenced POWs did not transfer to Fort Leavenworth immediately. On June 5, 1946, Sargent Böhmer and Corporal Meisel escaped from the Dodd Field POW camp. Dodd Field was located north of Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, in Bexar County. Dodd Field was an Alien Internment Camp since the beginning of the war. As the war progressed, it

²³ Ibid., 132.

²⁴ Dawson Duncan, "Nazi Rule of Fear Shielded Slayers At Hearne Camp," *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), January 26, 1946, Metropolitan edition, sec. One, 1; Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German*, 127-130.

²⁵ Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German*, 131.

²⁶ Ibid., 71-72.

²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁸ Dawson Duncan, "Seven Nazi POWs Given Life Terms," *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), January 31, 1946, Metropolitan edition, sec. One, 1.

²⁹ Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German*, 133-134.

became a POW camp with a planned capacity of one thousand, but it eventually held up to 3,500. On Friday, June 7, 1946, two cowboys from the Briggs Ranch – Jeff Tumlinson and Frank Hernandez – captured both escapee POWs. Briggs Ranch was located on Uvalde Highway, known today as U.S. Highway 90, some twenty miles west of San Antonio, and a few miles outside present Loop 1604. The exhausted prisoners had walked continuously since their escape from the camp two days earlier and were trying to flee to Argentina.³⁰

In December 1946, a review board overturned the sentence for Cpl. Werner Jaschko and Sgt. Helmut Meyer. In addition, the board reduced Meisel's sentence to fifteen years and reduced the sentences for the four other convicted to ten years. In 1949, as the Cold War heated up, Pres. Harry S. Truman paroled all five POWs. Sgt. Anton Böhmer, Cpl. Günther Meisel, Cpl. Heinrich Braun, Pvt. Werner Hossann, and Cpl. Erich Von Der Heydt were deported in May 1949, from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and they arrived on June 1, 1949, in Southampton, England.³¹ Their journey home continued.

For Hugo Krauss, although his journey ended on December 23, 1943, the army transferred his remains from Camp Hearne cemetery to the San Antonio National Cemetery, along with the remains of one hundred and forty men who died in prisoner of war camps in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. Initially buried in the direct vicinity of the camps where they died, the remains of these German, Italian, Japanese, and Austrian men were reburied in the San Antonio National Cemetery, in section ZA, starting on February 17, 1947. Behind the tranquility, serenity, and peacefulness of the cemetery lies the trauma of the war. Hugo Krauss was one of the many victims of WWII; a war between two nations he called home. He is a casualty of history.

Gaëtan Carpentier is a veteran of the Belgian Armed Forces and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and is a naturalized citizen of the USA. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in History and French with mention Summa Cum Laude from Texas State University at San Marcos in 2013. Currently, he is working on a Master of Arts in Public History.

In his academic carrier, Carpentier mostly engaged with the origins of the Era of Catastrophe (1914-1945) in associating the collapse of the Age of Empire with the beginning of World War I and the rise of extreme and radical nationalism, which dominated the inter-wars years and led to the beginning of World War II. Although his focus has been initially on European history (with focus on German, Belgian, and French history), he has recently focused on the involvement of the United States of America in the European question because he believes the U.S. involvement is quintessential in understanding the outcome of the era and its postwar legacy.

³⁰ "Cowboys Find POWs," *The San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, TX), June 7, 1946, Home edition, 1.

³¹ "UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960," Class:BT26;Piece:1253;Item:24, Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors: Inwards Passenger Lists, National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, Surrey, UK.

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