

TRANSCRIPT FOR 1990 INTERVIEW EXCERPT

Amy Rowlinson: You were a prisoner of war for five years in Germany?

George Kerr: Yes.

Amy Rowlinson: Yes. And how has that affected you and your attitudes towards Germans?

George Kerr: I came out feeling pretty tolerant really. Because I think a prisoner of war is a fairly balanced character.

Amy Rowlinson: How old were you?

George Kerr: About 20.

Amy Rowlinson: So you were very young. So you weren't quite sure what was going on?

George Kerr: No, not at all. At 20, do you know anything?

Amy Rowlinson: No, not a lot.

George Kerr: You just play it by ear.

Amy Rowlinson: Okay, going back to your prison days?

George Kerr: Yes?

Amy Rowlinson: How were you treated? Were you treated badly or what happened?

George Kerr: Well, we never knew what was going to happen because the Germans were a mad lot and they tended to take hostages, they tended to do certain purges and shoot people. They tended to parade you at three in the morning and you wondered why. Then they marched you off to another place altogether, a barn, and put you in it, you didn't know if you were going to be shot there. In fact, it was retaliation for something that had been done to German prisoners in Jersey and Channel Islands, put them in chains, in cufflinks, in handcuffs, not cufflinks, and so you never knew which way they were going to bite, jump and that was for five years so you get a bit tense, really. You didn't know how long it was going to last but you had written home to your family saying I'll see you in Canada if necessary. Don't wait for me in Great Britain if we are invaded and so on. I also reassured my family I said don't worry, I shan't try to escape. That meant that I would get back alive at least but join them elsewhere if they felt that they were in danger in the country.

Ruth Kerr: Most of your friends who tried to escape were shot.

George Kerr: Oh, yes.

Amy Rowlinson: Did you get letters back from them or did they not let...?

George Kerr: Oh yes, they came back. They were all censored of course but we got letters. We were only allowed to write a letter a month, I think it was, or a letter a fortnight. But it was a fairly interesting monastic life for me at that age. It was like a university because they had a small library, eventually they got a bigger library from the Swiss Red Cross and people, and then eventually you could study anything really and I did an external London BA and I learned and passed exams in Spanish and French. Well, I knew French but I learned Spanish and did the various examination bodies had for exams. I learned to play the flute. I learned to dabble at water painting. I did a lot of writing and did a lot of reading. I did acting and it was a very rounded life. I played cricket when we had a ball. Rounded, yeah.

Amy Rowlinson: It was ok, really?

George Kerr: Well, no, people still committed suicide. I thought it was okay. I also knew these were the happiest days of your life but I was certainly, I was not in the majority on that. I mean they thought I was daft. And I suppose to the...

Amy Rowlinson: Who thought you were daft?

George Kerr: Well, I was unmarried, the other prisoners especially the married ones, I suppose. They would keep getting Dear John letters from their wives, you see. 'I met this Polish Officer' and I hadn't got that problem. I liked it. It was like a university. But of course it was hungry, and it was cold and it was miserable. You had no friends apart from in (inaudible). But the thing you noticed was I spent five years there, I only saw one fight in my life.

Amy Rowlinson: Really?

George Kerr: In all that time. You learned to live. I can live with anybody at close quarters. You notice their idiosyncrasies and funny habits and so on. And you may hate them but you control it.

Amy Rowlinson: So you think everyone should have five years in prison then?

George Kerr: I think it wouldn't be bad that, monastic, yeah, especially if there is a library, but of course it doesn't suit people who are not academic.