

**Return to Moosburg:  
Sharing War Memories with Paul Gilroy**

*for Scott Sills*

Robert J.C. Young

How could I return to Moosburg—when I had never been there? Paul Gilroy sent me back.

I was supposed to be writing a commentary on Gilroy's *Between Camps* for a critical symposium on the book in a sociology journal, but I was finding it increasingly hard to respond in purely sociological terms. From the moment I thought about the implications of the title, I couldn't think about it outside the context of Gilroy's own move across the Atlantic, which echoed and repeated the transcultural effects that he was analysing. At the same time, the whole book had an engaging, improvisatory quality, like the Creole modernism of the great Cuban jazz pianist Ganzalo Rubalcuba. Gilroy invokes his fluid presence at the very end of a book in which he has himself restlessly moved between history and autobiography in order to produce his own account of a creolised modernity. Then I read the Preface, and suddenly realised why I found the book so compelling, so entirely on a different register: this was not just his autobiography. In a curious, disjunctive way, it was also mine.

In the Preface, Gilroy gives an evocative account of his childhood, of growing up as a boy in a North London suburb, still imaginatively gripped by the shadow of the Second World War. That moment was also mine: I too was brought up in that Manichean world where everything was still imaged and imagined in the terms of the war--*Eagle's* Dan Dare and the Mekon, Biggles and Luck of the Legion, a world of rockets, blueprints and boffins, that left the belated, lingering dark-blue dog-eared copies of *Our Empire Story* lying unread on the classroom shelves. Closer to home even than these was the War Picture Library, small non-humorous comic-books of fictional war stories first produced in the late 1950s, roughly printed in black and white, where the always amateur but plucky English would be pitted against suavely uniformed Nazis who would, at strategic moments, emit speech bubbles filled with the German phrases (alternatively abusive and submissive, always ending in an exclamation mark) familiar to every British man over thirty—'Schweinehund!' or 'Jawohl, mein Fuhrer!'. This world of battle was central to our sense of who we imagined ourselves to be, in our fantasies through which we identified with our fathers and mothers who had fought in the war against that ruthless enemy. For boys in particular, to internalise the cosmology of the war was the way in which you achieved access to virtually the only model of masculine identity available. As Gilroy relates, it was those identities which we lived everyday through the games that we played outside, and, inevitably, it being Britain, even more through the rainy day games played inside, in which platoons of light green plastic British soldiers would

be lined up against the Germans in their rather darker blue plastic, the metal field guns arrayed menacingly against them, springs ready loaded to fire burnt match sticks in a sequence of remorseless obliteration. After that, it would be on to the Airfix kits of Spitfires, Lancasters, Messerschmitts, Stukka dive-bombers, and the never quite so satisfying US Mustang ('all to the same 1/72nd scale'). It is hard to convey now how much in the fifties Britain lived in the shadow of the war, not just because of ration books, the still bombed out blackened buildings and the wobbly thirties cars caught in a time-warp like the old American cars in modern Cuba, but because the war had touched and disrupted everyone's life, materially as well as psychologically, and had been experienced as nothing less than a national trauma which everyone had shared and lived through, from resilient despair to final triumph. Everyone still talked about it constantly—memories were of nothing else, they always invoked that world of heightened excitement, dramatic danger and intense adventures that we had been born too late to experience. The shadow of this phantom child's war hovers over Gilroy's book in its constant return to the phenomenon of German fascism. Penguin Books have, I assume unintentionally, contributed to this effect by producing the book according to the crimped standards of Wartime Economy Book Production which gives it the physical feel, and virtual unreadability, of their old rationed wartime books: the print, on yellowed paper, is somewhere around 8 point crammed up hard to within an inch of its life against the margins of the page—all it lacks is the customary advert for Pears' Jif shaving stick on the back cover ('Built for Comfort. A comfort-loving man needs a comfortable shave. No hacking at the rough for him—he uses Jif and revels in the daily delight of a smooth shave') and, at the bottom of the page, the familiar Book Production War Economy Standard insignia with its magisterial lion sitting on top of an open book looking westwards, with the legend beneath 'This book is produced in complete conformity with the authorized economy standards'.

In *Between Camps*, Gilroy is looking to rebut the secret kernel of racial thinking in the grim history of fascism's simplistic seductive ideologies, but he is also trying to align this ancient enemy of childhood with the enemy of a slightly later awareness, the internal enemy of British racists. Gilroy describes walking with his father among the bomb-damaged buildings in the City of London and encountering the slogan KEEP BRITAIN WHITE painted on a wall, accompanied by the insignia of the British Union of Fascists. The British fascist? This was a contradiction that the boy Gilroy found unimaginable in his war-game world: 'how could *English* people be Fascists?' At this point, a traumatic possibility opens up that the world is not just the reassuring world of good and evil, the British against the Nazis, but that he could find himself between *Kampfs*—between Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and some British fascist equivalent. This is the ultimate threat, the almost unthinkable possibility, which hangs over Gilroy's book and drives his argument. He was in one camp, but then found himself between it and another, in a third space: at this point the reasons for the deep significance for him of the syncretic, transnational music of the black Atlantic become apparent. Long before the term 'Fusion' was ever invented, the flows of musical influence circulated along the Atlantic seaboard of Africa, Europe and the Americas offered the practice of a different kind of cultural identification. Throughout this book black music silently plays as the antiphonal counter-culture to all forms of nationalism and exclusive cultural boundedness. Gilroy speaks of his long 'passionate obsession' with music, often from distant sources around the world, and stresses the significance of his trafficking in the 'intricate circulatory network' that it

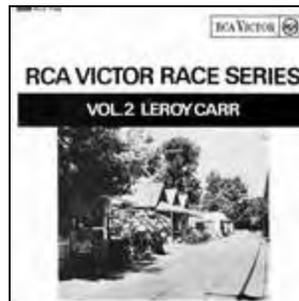
created. Here was a vast, half-hidden web of subaltern relations and counter-values generated from the marginal modernity of slavery, which flowed restlessly around the globe throughout the long anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, creating what Gilroy calls ‘an anti- and transnational ecology of belonging’.

An alternative belonging: finding yourself suddenly expelled from your own camp was an experience that I shared only in a much milder way, as humiliation and exclusion rather than exclusion and physical menace: my skin colour was not the problem—it was just that I was not the right social class. It was not that I was working class. The problem was that I wasn’t middle class either. Or more accurately, I wasn’t the right middle class, just somewhere in between, in a kind of social no man’s land. No one in my family had ever been to college or university; compounding that, my father was in business, and, even more ignominious, working for an American company. He had started work after the war as a salesman for Mars, and had by then risen to a senior management job. This meant that he worked in Slough, which was the final straw for the vicarious values of English snobbery, every bit as complex and stratified as any caste system. The great bonus was that every Friday, along with a copy of *Eagle*, in his generous way he brought home a large packet of sweets, wrapped up in a sheet of the brown shiny paper used for Mars bar wrappings. Stacked inside were all the reject Mars, Milky Way, and Bounties, taken out of the assembly line because the chocolate on top was doubly thick, or so full of coconut that the sides was splitting open. My friends at school would cheerfully eat them when I offered them round, but of course it made no difference to the fact that socially I was still not quite right. I had a Triang train-set, not a Hornby; my father drove a Ford, not a Rover. Later when I abandoned *Eagle* and started reading proper Literature, I found that it was the same there too. John Betjeman’s much-loved poem, invoking ‘friendly bombs’ to fall on Slough, was a call to have my father killed, blown to smithereens as he sat at his desk genially puffing on his pipe, working out the Mars Bar sales targets, or as he harmlessly ate his lunch in the bright factory canteen. Had Betjeman had his way, my father would have left for work one day and then just not come home that evening. It was on occasional visits to the Mars factory in Slough that I first became aware of the presence of people who weren’t white. It was always obvious to me when I read Betjeman’s poem that those bombs weren’t just meant to be aimed at my father, at work in the Slough Trading Estate—along with the factory buildings, they were doubtless intended to obliterate those strange, dark people who had come to live and work in the town alongside him, threatening Betjeman’s English Victorian heritage values. My father, characteristically, never minded them at all, just as he was completely unperturbed when, years later, I married the daughter of Pakistani immigrants, who had lived all her life in Hounslow, a mile or two from Slough. Soon after I encountered Betjeman, we read Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in class at school. I soon realised that as the son of a salesman my life was doomed in the eyes of the world of cultural power, British or American, that I was an outcaste forever assigned to meaningless materiality, a person whose ‘tinned mind’ would always be alien to the rich humanist values of the middle class which I was being taught.

The effect was that my self-imaginings became displaced in unpredictable directions. Whereas Gilroy’s identification with the heroes of the Battle of Britain might now appear eccentric but was, as he points out, in the context of his London childhood completely

understandable and acceptable, mine lacked all obvious rationale or social context. At thirteen, I developed a deep emotional identification with the strange, bitter fruit I had discovered by chance in the then obscure, and hard to find, blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, and the ‘broken, hungry, ragged and dirty too’ rasping songs of Sleepy John Estes. I would listen transfixed for hours to the haunting, overwhelmingly poignant voice of Leroy Carr, his offbeat melodic piano poetics rolling against the disjunctive harmonies of Scrapper Blackwoods’ guitar. Brought up in the Chilterns where everyone I had ever met was white, never having left the shores of the British Isles beyond a school trip in a Royal Navy Destroyer round the appropriately named Isle of Wight, it was a strange antiphonic world in which to locate and find myself, and in so losing myself to confront the radical ex-centricity of my self to any cultural self to which I had been inculcated. In this early encounter with the blues, I first learnt of the racist realities of life in the American South, of the experience of being black in the harsh plantation economy that lived on in the aftermath of slavery, of the open talk about sexuality, together with the tireless complaints about loveless life or lack of whiskey, of life as the gruelling physical endurance of picking cotton, of migrant existence travelling the railroads and living in hobo jungles, or the brutal world ‘round the bend’ of the jailhouse, a world as seductive as it was alien, with its strange dry landscapes, featureless townscapes, old photographs of forgotten singers whose voices would echo with memories lost and re-remembered in my dreams. I would stare at the photograph on the cover of my EPs of the ‘RCA Victor Race Series’, a high contrast black and white picture of a street in Clarksdale, Mississippi, showing a featureless row of clapboard houses baking in the noonday sun quite unlike anything I had ever known. The shadow of the overhead electricity wire ran straight down the dirt street to the lush vegetation beyond. After a while, I would notice that almost invisible in the deep shadows, a man in a striped T-shirt was sitting outside his house, gazing silently at the ground, refusing to acknowledge the camera’s stare.

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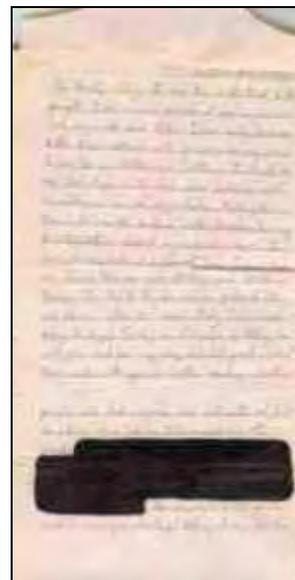
This strange intense world fascinated me, in the fullness of its desire and loss and the formal emptiness of its unrecorded histories: ‘Virtually nothing is known of blues singer and guitarist Julius Daniels. It is likely that he was of North Carolina origin; this is, however, by no means certain...’. In this unique music I heard a voice from elsewhere, speaking of a violent unknown, of the lived experience of being black, inside another inside from a far away outside, singing not to me but to other brothers and sisters, of an unfamiliar world that was also somehow a world of a tumultuous emotional reality in which I could locate something of myself, a part of me that had found no home elsewhere beyond these remote figures of my transcultural imaginings. I have lived at the edge of the exit curve that I rode then out of Anglo-England ever since.

There is a sense in *Between Camps* that Gilroy too is still fighting the enemies of his childhood. His continued preoccupation and critique with the idea of the nation as a homogeneous organic unity seems somewhat strange today given the demise of the autonomous nation state under the remorseless pressures of globalisation. Moreover, the critique of the Nazi model of the nation is directed at a target now far removed from a heterogeneous Britain that seems for the most part to have become relatively at ease with its intercultural identities. Racism of course continues in Britain, but when official reports can accuse the metropolitan police of ‘institutionalised racism’, that also means that there is something of a public consensus against it. It is striking that the major contemporary theorists of cultural hybridity in the west—Bhabha, Gilroy, Hall, Rushdie—have developed their analyses out of the experience of living in Britain. Though I am always suspicious of taking individual films as evidence for changes in social attitudes, I was struck by the recent enthusiastic response to the British Asian film, *Bend it Like Beckham*. This was shown in the mainstream cinema, not the art houses. Going to a packed performance on a Friday night with a largely working-class audience who clearly enjoyed it hugely, who could all relate in different ways as I could to its setting in the downmarket nineteen-thirties semi-detached houses in Hounslow with the jumbo-jets planes roaring overhead almost scraping the roofs off, gave a striking feeling of how many, even perhaps the majority of British people are really quite comfortable with the idea of being part of a culture that is now irreducibly mixed. Of course the happy ending of the film was shamelessly optimistic, but that optimism was also very much part of its reading of contemporary British culture. You could say that the very strength and widespread currency of critiques of racism and monoculturalism in Britain, among which Gilroy’s own work is pre-eminent, is itself a sign of how far the British themselves feel at home with the idea that they are not, or should not be, racist or monocultural. People like Gilroy have helped them to be much more self-critical of their own culture than most other Europeans have been—which is why revisionary postcolonial theory also emerged in Britain long before France or Germany. France today is only just beginning to confront the history of its violent response to the Algerian War of Independence. For its part, the liberal insistence on identity politics in the US not only conveniently works in tandem with the strategies of a corporate and commercial multiculturalism, but can also work as a coded way of keeping people separate and different from each other in a convenient economic hierarchy (multiculturalism may have been invented in Canada, but it was quickly appropriated by the South African government under apartheid). How much more dynamic than moribund multiculturalism—or nostalgic nationalism, for that matter—is Gilroy’s own model of the uncontrolled flow of a subterranean global web of black music that simultaneously created an antiphonal inter-cultural melodic whose boundaries were always open.

Some of the most striking articulated moments of intercultural dynamics in *Between Camps* involve accounts of ethnic heterogeneity in wartime: Léopold Senghor writing poetry, his *Hostiles noires*, in a German prison camp, his writings then smuggled out to his friend Georges Pompidou by a camp guard who had formerly been a professor of Chinese at the University of Vienna; black US troops being amongst those horrified US forces who liberated the death camps -- which were themselves more or less kept under wraps on account of Cold War necessities to rehabilitate the Germans fast, until 1961 when the

Eichmann trial first reconstructed the Holocaust in public memory. Gilroy's preoccupations with the experiences of black troops in the war bear a striking difference from those stories that we used to enjoy in the *War Picture Library*. Reading one recently, produced in 1962 and promisingly called *The Black Ace*, I was struck not just by the homosocial camaraderie of the men involved ('there was a bond between them even though they were bitter enemies'), but by the fact that although Canadians and others are represented as fighting on the British side in their remorseless battles with the Jerry, they are always depicted as white. Over a million Indian, African and Caribbean troops, even Jews from Palestine, fought as part of the British Army against the Germans and Japanese, and many US servicemen were also black. But in the 'war thrills ... action ... drama' provided by the War Picture Library, they were written out of history. In those that I have been reading whenever I can find one—despite their name, they are not, of course, to be found in any library—I have yet to find a single black character.

Gilroy's account is very different. The book is rich with evocative descriptions of the significant role of black personnel in the US and British armies and air forces, and what the war was like for them. The more I read the more they reminded me of the shadowy environment that I had lived imaginatively myself since childhood, hearing stories from my father of his army experiences, and, particularly, his time in a German prison camp. I used to stare fascinated at the small 'Kriegsgefangenenpost' cards and letters that he had been allowed to send home, his pencil messages sometimes half obliterated with the dark absolute density of the censor's ink.



Finding myself once more amongst these memories whilst reading *Between Camps* prompted me for the first time to try to find out about Moosburg, the German Prison Camp for Allied troops outside Munich, where my father spent the last nine months of the Second World War. My father had volunteered to join the army at the outbreak of the war. Under the influence of my grandfather who had himself fought and been wounded in the First World War, and of his own gentle non-violent nature, he was at that time a pacifist, and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. His Gandhian moment was not to last long: soon he was commissioned in the

regular army. By 1943, his regiment was stationed in Gibraltar, and soon my father was sent over to Les Andalouses, near Oran in Algeria, newly liberated by the Americans in Operation Torch, where he helped run a battle school in preparation for the assault on the so-called 'Gothic Line' across the northern Apennines, where the Germans would make what was effectively their last stand in Italy against the Allies. This part of the Italian campaign began in August 1944. On the third of September, as the leader of a recce patrol of three men sent to scout out hidden German positions just north of Fiesole, near Florence, my father was captured, together with his two men, Privates B.C. Hartwell and C.H. McFarlane. The weekly battalion news bulletin stated simply: 'He is believed wounded and a prisoner. Patrols which went out later were unable to find him'. The reality was more cheerful, in the short term at least: no one was wounded, and the first thing the Germans had done was to give the three of them a good meal. It was to be their last proper meal until Liberation. They were then sent north by train to a prison camp, at Moosburg in Southern Germany.

Typing in just the word 'stalag', that I remembered from those letters, almost absent-mindedly into a search engine, I was completely taken aback when the screen threw up pictures of the camp within seconds: suddenly to be there, yesterday but now, as it were, with him at that time, was to be parachuted into the intimacy of his past in a way I had never anticipated I would be able to share. The Nazi officers standing around in their grey or white great coats, boots and crisp helmets, looked as if they were in a film. It was chilling to think of how real they must have been for my father, how he had seen them like that as their prisoner. Most of the details that you can read in the grim personal accounts posted on the websites, he was silent about, but one very evident visual aspect reminded me of something of which he had spoken. Moosburg, or more accurately, Kriegsgefangenen-Mannschafts-Stammlager (Stalag) VII A, a concentration camp of 85 acres built for 10,000 prisoners that eventually held 130,000, contained by April 1945 men of 72 different nationalities. According to the official plan, the prisoners were divided among small stockades for different national groups: Russian, Greek, Serb, Poles, French, Italian, and in one stockade, American, British, and 'Farbige' ('coloured men'). Indians were in a group by themselves next to the British. The photographs and drawings show blacks and whites mixing freely within these enclaves, together with groups of white American and African-American airmen, scarified Africans brought over to Germany from the African campaign, Hindus praying, and Sikhs at work in their turbans. This extraordinary camp contained an unparalleled mixture of different ethnicities, prisoners together in the same place because they were all common enemies of the Nazis. In Moosburg, men of the former imperial powers were now living in the same or adjacent compounds as colonial troops, suffering together the shared depravity of bitter cold without adequate clothing, of hunger, dysentery, fleas and lice. Already, the cultural and ethnic mixture of the camp has an uncanny resemblance to streets in London today, where different peoples mix and intermingle in the unconscious casualness of shared every day life. I wondered whether my father's own extraordinary tolerance towards others, his tendency to take people as they came whatever their accent or skin colour, a man of true universal humanism in Gilroy's terms, had been crystallised by the experience of those long months in the desperately overcrowded concentration camp where the only barriers between the inmates were the double barbed wire fence and gaunt control towers that surrounded them all.

A few weeks after staring at the bleak pictures of the smokey, overcrowded camp during the last winter of the war, I found myself giving a lecture in Munich. While I was giving the lecture, it occurred to me that at that moment I too was now literally between camps: during the war, Dachau was just outside the city to the northwest, Moosburg was to the northeast, near the modern airport. On the last morning of my visit, one of the graduate students in the programme kindly drove me out to Moosburg. Apprehensively, I wanted to go, but simultaneously did not want to go at all. The warm summer sunshine over the flat fertile plain that lies below the Alps made the whole area look calm and too benign. I reminded myself that in the cycle of the year, my father, who was incarcerated from September to April, would have been home by now, his thin body propped in a deckchair set out between the typical suburban long brown wooden fences of his parent's garden in Finchley, where in houses all around survivors of the Holocaust were also arriving to re-establish their lives in quiet dignity. We turned off the motorway and came to a small attractive little town; the buildings around the main square had crenellated roofs stepping up into the sky like a village in Disneyland. It was early Sunday morning, and only the baker's shop was open. People were casually collecting their bread for breakfast. We walked round to the church, painted white with a red roof and with two distinctive separate towers, their spires echoing each other confidently as they rose into the sky. Some old people were walking to church, and greeted us in a friendly and sociable way. To the right, concealed behind an old lime tree, was the town museum. To my surprise, the door was ajar. The first thing we saw as we entered the room was a huge model of the camp, the size of two ping-pong tables, stretched out before us. There in miniature were the barracks organised around the grid of roads and paths, with the road from the main gate stretching down the centre, and all around at the edge the double fence of barbed wire punctuated by watchtowers. Someone had constructed it as lovingly as the landscaped model railway set that I had always wanted as a child. Beyond it to the side, was the original map of the camp, and a few implements such as aluminium jugs that had been used there. Beside that was a display cabinet, filled with a photo album, a prison-grey commemorative beer mug with a picture of the Main Gate and the legend 'Stalag VIIA, MOOSBURG' written beneath it



some straw shoes made by the Russian troops who had had no shoes (nor, thanks to Stalin, the lifeline of Red Cross food parcels), and then, above them, alongside some African wooden carvings, a large sculptured African head. Here, at least, the war was not just white.



We drove out of the village to the new town a mile or so away, which is built on the site of the camp. The camp was never actually demolished, but neither has it been preserved. After the Americans liberated the camp they turned it into a prison camp for Nazis charged with war crimes, but abandoned it soon after Nuremberg in 1948. At that point, the barracks were taken over by refugees from the East who made them into their homes. Gradually they turned them into houses, or knocked them down altogether and built new, but always keeping as a result to the street plan of the original camp. We found it by following the railway line, which still curved round close to the road to the station outside. Every German camp had a station beside it from which the prisoners were herded from their cattle trucks into whatever future, however short, that lay in front of them. This was a route as terrible as the Middle Passage: the vast network of railway lines, stretched like latticework all over Europe, along which millions of people were transported to incarceration or death. I walked over and stared down the line as it stretched westwards to the lost lives that they had left behind.



We had realised we were near the camp when we saw our first barrack, a low building about thirty metres long, with small square-paned windows set at regular intervals. The door was in the middle. Behind it, I knew, had been the water tap, which served the whole building. We drove on and came to the main street where the main gate and rough wooden observation tower had confronted you as you walked towards it. The leafy trees rustling softly in the warm summer wind were so different from the bleak photographs, but the camp was still recognizable in its layout. We walked down the main street, past people washing their cars,

fixing their houses, weeding their gardens, and came to an old abandoned, overgrown barrack that had remained unchanged.



At the side, the door is open. The roof is falling in, it is damp and dark, yet with signs of efforts having been made to make it a home—tiles, wood cladding, a kitchen. The refugees are also gone, leaving behind them cushions, mattresses on the floor. I keep expecting to step on a rat. It feels almost as if it has been bombed. There is debris everywhere. The ceiling is falling in, even the walls, made simply out of wood shavings between two layers of chicken wire, then roughly plastered over, are falling apart. It is cold, dark and damp inside. We step back into the fresh air.

As I thought of the men who had suffered there, it felt so odd to walk amongst the quiet peace of it all past the prosperous houses, the large BMW garage on the corner where the camp canteen had been, serving its frugal food only edible to the starving, next door to the barracks for Indian troops. I walked on my own further down to the right where my father's barrack had been. It was so troubling to think of him there numbed with hunger, staring through those rattling square-paned windows at the cold featureless Bavarian winter, or, on his way to the open latrines, pausing for a moment and standing on this same, strange earth, fifty-seven years ago, gazing at the same twin church towers in the distance, thinking of home. Did he ever imagine that he would have a son who would come back to visit him and refind him there after his death? Was there anything in this earth around me here, I suddenly wondered, that he had left behind? I imagined him tearing off his hated dog tag, crimped with his POW number, as he ran with thousands of others to welcome the first American tank that crashed straight through the main gate and roared down the main street to announce their liberation. At that point, I remembered how the last time that I saw him I had asked him as he lay on his bed about his experiences in the camp.

‘Oh—it was marvellous!’ he said quickly, as if he was describing the best experience of his life. I was completely taken aback—nothing he had ever said before had led me to expect such a response.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, incredulously.

‘We had water’, he said, and then paused a little. ‘In Italy, when we were fighting, we were always so thirsty. In the camp there was a dripping tap in the middle of the barracks that you could hear as you lay in your bunk. We were always afraid that the Germans would come and turn it off. But they never did.’



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Photographs of Moosburg © Robert J.C. Young

**Reference:**

<http://www.moosburg.org/info/stalag/indeng.html>

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