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## The Redemptive Qualities of Gottfried von Cramm

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*We're posting something really special today, something we've never done before, and before you begin reading, we'd like to extend our thanks to the author, Dr. Reinhard Andress for using his passion for tennis and the cultural history of Germany to expose a level of human decency during Germany's Third Reich era that was so powerful, not even Hitler himself could exterminate it. It is something that today, we all can—and should—learn from and embrace. And it belonged to German tennis champion, Gottfried von Cramm.*

*— Tennis Life Magazine*

# Gottfried von Cramm's Redemptive Qualities

The American writer David Foster Wallace (1962-2008), whose *Infinite Jest* (1996) made *Time* magazine as one of the 100 best English-language novels published between 1923 and 2005, was also well known for writing about tennis. As a junior player at the age of 17, he himself had been ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the USTA's Western Section. His *String Theory* (2016) posthumously unites a number of his essays on the sport, including one on "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart." In it, Wallace expresses his disappointment about the former number one woman tennis player's autobiography, *Beyond Center Court* (1992), offering a critique of the work for employing the worn clichés of sports autobiographies to glean over the compelling and tragic story of Austin's career cut short by injuries and a serious automobile accident. He comes to the following conclusion:

It may well be that we spectators, who are not divinely gifted as athletes, are the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift we are denied. And that those who receive and act out the gift of athletic genius must, perforce, be blind and dumb about it – and not because blindness and dumbness are the price of the gift, but because they are its essence (39).

The statement is, of course, over the top, and there are plenty of examples of highly ranked tennis players who were or are far from "blind" and "dumb" about their athletic gift or their lives in general. To give just one example, Andre Agassi's *Open* (2009) is a *Bildungsroman* of sorts that traces the author's struggle to find himself amidst the pressures of tennis that threatened to engulf him.

Although he never wrote his autobiography for reasons that will become clear, one such player was also the German, Gottfried von Cramm. In another essay, Wallace writes in a footnote that professional athletes

[...] are in many ways our culture's holy men: they give themselves over to a pursuit, endure great privation and pain to actualize themselves at it, and enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward [...] and love to watch even though we have no inclination to walk that road ourselves. In other words they do it "for" us, sacrifice themselves for our (we imagine) redemption (Wallace, "Michael Joyce" 67).

In this case, Wallace may very well have a point, redemption here certainly not meant biblically (e.g. Christ saving humankind from sins and evil), but rather in the more pedestrian sense of compensating for the lack of athletic prowess many desire. Von Cramm's exceedingly graceful, sportsman-like tennis game would certainly seem to offer such redemption. However, there is a second kind of redemption beyond the one Wallace mentions that is contained in the fact that von Cramm's life played out in Nazi Germany. It is a kind of moral redemption that lies in non-heroic resistance to National Socialism in smaller ways, a willingness to help others, and to take risks for personal freedom. Here, von Cramm's life presents a compensatory, redemptive counterexample to the many Germans who willingly participated in the horrors and crimes of the Third Reich. And it's a moral stance that remains relevant in today's political climate as well.



Nazi leader Adolf Hitler in Nuremberg, September 1935 | PHOTO SOURCE: Getty Images

Before I explore the athletic and moral qualities of redemption in von Cramm's life further, let me first offer a brief biography. He was born in 1909 into German royalty as one of seven sons to Dr. Burghard von Cramm and Jutta von Steinberg. Largely isolated from the turbulent events of World War I and homeschooled, he spent a carefree childhood and youth at the family's ancestral home of the Castle of Brüggen near Hanover. It was also there where he began to play tennis at the age of 11 and on the courts of the nearby Castle of Burgdorf owned by Baron Robert von Dobeneck, whose daughter Elizabeth von Cramm was to marry in 1930 (divorced in 1937). By the age of 20, Gottfried began to make a name for himself with his aggressive, risky, yet elegant brand of tennis that, after working himself up to one of the best players in Germany, led to his first international singles title in Greece in 1931. The six years from 1932 onward were his most successful as he became a world-class player. Von Cramm is best known for winning the French Open twice in 1934 and 1936, and

subsequently being ranked number two in the world in those same years, number one in 1937. His gallant effort in trying to defeat Don Budge (1915-2000) in the 1937 Interzone Davis Cup Final at Wimbledon has often been cited as one of the greatest matches ever played. Next to the boxer Max Schmeling (1905-2005), he became the most popular German athlete at the time.

Yet, his downfall in the Third Reich was quick when, after a world tour, he was arrested and prosecuted in 1938 on charges of homosexuality and the illegal transfer of money abroad. Although released from prison after roughly six months for “good conduct” for a sentence that was to last a year, he was subsequently banned from representing Nazi Germany in tennis. Instead, he was drafted into the *Wehrmacht* in May 1940, becoming an officer, his troop first serving in Holland, then in Russia. From near Moscow he was evacuated in January 1942 with severe frostbite on his legs. Although he received the Iron Cross for bravery, von Cramm’s conviction caught up with him and he was dishonorably discharged when Hitler went about cleansing the German army of “undesirable” elements. He spent the rest of the war traveling between Germany and Sweden, coaching the Swedish national team and enjoying the protection of the Swedish King, Gustav V, himself an avid tennis player. As will be discussed later, von Cramm became peripherally involved with the July 20 plot to assassinate Hitler.



King Gustav of Sweden (in hat) was one of the world's greatest tennis fans. Here he plays a friendly doubles game with Gottfried von Cramm, Heinrich Kleinschroth, and Henner Henkel, 1935 | PHOTO SOURCE: Granger NYC

After the war, von Cramm was instrumental in re-establishing German tennis both internally in the ruins of Germany by rebuilding clubs and organizing tennis tournaments, as well as slowly connecting it internationally. Much of his success in this regard was by force of his charming and diplomatic personality. He also founded a tennis school in Duisburg and restarted his own tennis game with further Davis Cup successes. In 1948 he was named "Bester Sportler des Jahres" (Best Athlete of the Year) by German sports journalists. When he played his final Davis Cup match in June 1953 in Paris, his career results made him into the most successful Davis Cup player of all times by having won 80% of all his matches. At the age of 50, he played his last tournament in his favorite Rot-Weiss Club in Berlin. In 1951, von Cramm had

received the first “Silbernes Lorbeerblatt” (Silver Laurel Leaf) from Federal President Theodor Heuss, which to this day has remained the highest state award for achievements in sports in Germany.

His post-war years were also marked on the one hand by a failed second marriage to the Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton in 1955, divorced in 1960. On the other hand, however, he established a successful business career as an importer of wool from Egypt and the Sudan, as an exporter of goods as the German economy began to pick up again, and as a contractor for building sports facilities. He was constantly on the move, and so it was when he was tragically killed in a car accident on November 9, 1976 at the age of 67 while on a business trip to Egypt.





To the end of his life, as a socialite, a businessman, and an ambassador of German tennis, Cramm mesmerized with his elegance, his charm, his joie de vivre.

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Returning now to the redemption theme, it was a clear joy to observe von Cramm play tennis. His German biographer, Egon Steinkamp, describes his game as follows:

It was impressive to watch how light-footedly he chased after even those balls that were so difficult to reach and how his racket hit the ball seemingly without effort. His movements never had the effect of being cramped or jerky. It was an image of unusual buoyancy, of playful, almost frisky lightness, and you had to look exactly to also perceive the exerted energy and the focused concentration with which von Cramm lent appropriate seriousness to the athletic duel. That was von Cramm's style, elegant and beautiful, which became an esthetic enjoyment for the many who later watched him admiringly (50, translation from the German original by Reinhard Andress).

In *A Terrible Splendor* (2009), Marshal Jon Fischer's thrilling account of the Budge-von Cramm match, compellingly embedded in the well-researched history of the time, the author describes von Cramm's play in equally effusive terms:

"Chamber music with white balls" was how a German music critic put it in the 1940s. With his back straight, knees bent, he swept his long, luxurious strokes through a tennis ball with perfect timing, dispatching it so deep into the court. Even in later years, playing socially, the tennis baron showed this "mark of aristocracy in the tennis stroke." "His shots came just a few centimeters above the net," recalled one player, "and with such length, like magic" (248).

It was an elegance that transcended von Cramm's actual play, and it immediately captivated all who saw him even before he hit the first ball. A few weeks after his match against Budge, von Cramm made his only trip to the US and ended up playing in a tournament in the Los Angeles Tennis Club. There, prominent Jews had plans to walk out of von Cramm's first match in protest against the anti-Semitism raging in Germany. Yet, when von Cramm entered the arena, the plans were forgotten.

Apparently it was very difficult to associate anything Nazi with his elegant demeanor. Later, Groucho Marx, one of the prominent Jews who was to walk out, told Budge: “I just felt instant shame at what I was supposed to do” (qtd. in Fischer 228).



Gottfried von Cramm (left) and Donald Budge as they walk onto Wimbledon's centre court for the men's singles final, July 1937 | PHOTO SOURCE: Getty Images

What made von Cramm's elegant play and demeanor all the more palatable was that it was accompanied by a high degree of sportsmanship. Von Cramm threw no tantrums on court, broke no rackets in anger, never questioned line calls against him. Steinkamp describes just one example of his fair play in a 1936 match against the Australian Adrian Quist (1913-1991):

In attempting to hit a difficult backhand volley, Quist had so unfortunately twisted his foot that he fell and remained lying helplessly on the grass. Immediately von Cramm rushed over to help, observed worried as the paramedics applied a support bandage to the injured player, and was happy when, after a five-minute break, his opponent again stood across from him. The break for an injury as permitted by the rules had long been exceeded. Gottfried could have already been the victor (92, translated by Address).

Von Cramm was simply the “Gentleman of Wimbledon” and a “gracious loser” (Steinkamp 67 and 92). In the preface to his von Cramm biography, Steinkamp writes: “This has then become the life description of an unusual human being whose basic characteristic, fairness in the broadest sense, determined the path of this life (7, translated by Address). In his book on *100 Years of Wimbledon* (1977), Lance Tingay summarizes both the elegance and fairness of von Cramm’s play: “But every time von Cramm played, he added to his reputation as the world’s most immaculate player. Every stroke was copy-book. ‘Correct’ in style, his court behavior was even more so. The only line decisions ever queried by von Cram were in favour of his opponent” (61). In short, to watch his elegant play and sportsmanship is to want to be like him – a nearly impossible task. In that sense and in the spirit of Wallace, he redeems us for what we can be only with much more effort, if at all.



Germany-US Davis Cup match with Gottfried von Cramm defeated by Don Budge, 1937 | VIDEO SOURCE: Getty Images

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Yet, that poster-boy quality of von Cramm's handsome elegance and sportsman-like fairness, aside from his excellent play, also made him an ideal representative of Nazi Germany as a model of the Aryan race. However, von Cramm did not let himself be used in that way to any great length. In *A Terrible Splendor*, we read the following in that regard:

But in private, and more recently in public, he had been far from a spokesman for the Nazis. Time and again, in his travels around the world, he had ignored their requests to speak in praise and defense of Hitler. In Australia recently he'd complained to one reporter about the Davis Cup team "losing the services" of the great Jewish player Daniel Prenn. (Fisher 39-40)

Daniel Prenn was born in 1904 in Vilna and grew up in St. Petersburg before the family emigrated to Berlin in 1920 to escape anti-Semitism. He became Germany's number one tennis player between 1928-1932, immediately preceding von Cramm's ranking in that regard, and was also one of the top ten players in the world at the time. He frequently played doubles with von Cramm in Davis Cup competition. When

the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they barred him from playing because he was Jewish. He emigrated again, this time to England and later became a successful businessman. He died there in 1991.



Gottfried von Cramm plays doubles with Daniel Prenn in the Davis Cup, 1932 | PHOTOS SOURCE: Granger NYC

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Although Prenn's exile made von Cramm the undisputed number one player in Germany, it did not stop him from criticizing that particular discrimination and from continuing his critique of the regime. To return to the quote from above:

To another [reporter] he'd lamented that Hitler's new mandatory military service was robbing young athletes of the most crucial years of athletic development. And despite Göring's repeated personal requests, he had refused to join the Nazi Party. He could not help, with his natural elegance, well-bred sophistication, and unsurpassed sportsmanship, but reflect well on the German people. But he would not directly defend a government he loathed (Fisher 39-40).

The latter point can be seen very clearly in a speech he gave in November 1937 at opening of the German-Japanese tennis games in Osaka, roughly a year after the Axis Powers had concluded their Anti-Comintern Pact in the fight against Bolshevism. Rather than talk about the *Führer*, the National Socialist movement or the role of sports in pre-military training, he emphasized how sports bring different peoples together: "May the youth of both countries measure each other often in noble, chivalrous competition with the goal of getting to know each other and of respect for the blessing and well-being of our two peoples" (qtd. In Steinkamp 109, translated by Andress).





Gottfried von Cramm shaking hands with Fred Perry after losing the Wimbledon men's singles final, 1936 | PHOTO SOURCE: Manasse Herbst

Von Cramm's resistance to the Nazi regime had a lot to do with an aristocratic upbringing that viewed right and tolerance as concepts applicable to all of humanity. His world travels no doubt contributed to reinforcing that attitude. Steinkamp comes to the following conclusion:

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That von Cramm first stood in reserved distance to the Nazis, not much later in increasing rejection of them, was, I believe, not so much a consequence of political thinking. His inner attitude was much more determined by an infallible feeling for how cultured people interact with one another (71, translated by Andress).

It needs to be said, of course, that von Cramm was not a resistance hero who gave his life. Ultimately, he was too passionate of a tennis player to want to give up his career prospects. The fact that he had married the Jewess Elizabeth von Dobeneck, whom he no doubt wanted to protect, also played a role in what was ultimately a more muted resistance. What we have here are examples of non-heroic resistance to the anti-Semitic, militaristic and coercive aspects of the Nazi regime, a resistance that became possible by virtue of von Cramm's stature as the best and most popular German tennis player at the time.

Nonetheless, von Cramm ended up paying a price for his tightrope walk between self-respect by refusing to join the NSDAP and criticizing the regime, and still representing it at official tennis functions. The contradictions ultimately became too much for the regime to tolerate, and on March 5, 1938, as mentioned above, von Cramm was arrested on trumped up charges of homosexuality (the infamous "Paragraph 175") for having an illicit relationship with the Jew Manesse Herbst und for having illegally transferred funds to him abroad. The extent of von Cramm's homosexuality remains unclear. Whereas Fisher makes it a significant narrative element in *A Terrible Splendor*, Steinkamp downplays it as less important in *Der Tennisbaron* (The Tennis Baron). Whatever the case may ultimately be, it was clear that the court proceedings against von Cramm were politically motivated.



Alleged German homosexuals wearing the “pink triangle” awaiting horrific torture at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, December 1938 | PHOTO SOURCE: The Granger Collection.

Ultimately, however, it did not stop von Cramm’s continued resistance to the Third Reich. As mentioned above, after having served in the German Army and his dishonorable discharge, he began training the Swedish national tennis team. During that time, he carried messages from the growing resistance in Berlin to the outside world via neutral Sweden. When in Berlin, he lived in the home of family friends, the Gersdorffs, which was a prominent meeting place of the Resistance, and he pledged to do what he could to help to undermine the Nazi machine. When traveling from Sweden to Berlin, he was repeatedly interrogated by the Gestapo, but they could find no evidence of his subversive activities. In connection with the failed plot of July 20, 1944 to assassinate Hitler, von Cramm told his friend, Marie Vassiltchikow, a displaced Russian princess and intimate friend of many of the resistance fighters who suffered horrible execution: “I don’t want to know what is happening to them. I only want to know who has survived and will be out free again, who is still free and

when they want to try again the next time. They can then depend on me!" (qtd. in Steinkamp 142, translated by Andress). Regarding the 20<sup>th</sup> of July and von Cramm's involvement in it, Steinkamp writes in conclusion:

Thus, the few available sources prove that v. Cramm didn't belong to the core of the resistance which planned and carried out the assassination attempt, and prepared the overthrow of the regime. But as a confidant, someone in the know and even accessory, he belonged to the sphere of the conspirators who were dependent on the support of like-minded persons like v. Cramm (142, translated by Andress).



Gottfried von Cramm forced to grin and bear meeting Hitler at the Deutsches Stadion in Grunewald, Berlin, May 1933 | PHOTO SOURCE: Getty Images

Von Cramm's willingness to help and sense of decency ultimately ended up transcending the Third Reich. For example, after the war von Cramm's family estate in Bodenbug became a home for refugees. He set up three of his former machine-gun-group comrades, who fled the GDR, in business and hired the other one as his chauffeur. Later he helped East German tennis players to seek asylum in the West,

paying many expenses himself. In the short biography above, I had already elaborated on how von Cramm restarted his tennis career with some success and how he gave of his time to reestablish tennis in post-war Germany, including internationally. In tough times for a Germany that was looking for new role models after their abuse by National Socialism, von Cramm became, in the eyes of Paula Stuck von Reznicek in her biography of 1949, *Gottfried von Cramm. Der Gentleman von Wimbledon*, “a unique example [...] of what ‘sport’, based on its origin and essence, actually is or at least could be. Like a rock in the surf he stands as a living symbol of the pure expression of sport’s true spirit in the barbarization of sports in our time” (3, translated by Andress). As hagiographic as the statement is, von Cramm’s spirit of sportsmanship and generosity are undeniable. In this light, his early death was all the more tragic.

In conclusion, on the one hand there is von Cramm’s elegant tennis and sportsmanship as redemption in the form of compensation for the high athleticism and fair competition many desire, but few can achieve. As Wallace stated, he plays in our stead and “for” us. On the other hand, and more importantly perhaps, there is the redemptive quality of von Cramm’s moral character, especially during the perils of the Third Reich. Although his resistance was non-heroic, he nonetheless provides a counterexample to the many Germans who let themselves be much more implicated in the regime. He was an example of a “good German” during those times, and in that sense his life offers modest redemption for Germany’s atrocities and guilt during National Socialism. As we move through troubled times again politically, von Cramm can even serve as an example to us today of how to speak up without the necessity of being a hero.



Gottfried von Cramm at the Deutsches Stadion in Grunewald, Berlin, May 1933 | PHOTO SOURCE: Getty Images

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