

**Handout**

# Thomas Doeppner / American Friends Service Committee Packet

## DOCUMENT 1 (Overview)

Tom Doeppner was born in Berlin in 1920. Tom's mother, Ella, was Jewish, but his father, August, was not, and Tom did not consider himself Jewish either. He attended Quaker summer camps and clubs in Berlin. In 1935, Nazi Germany instituted the Nuremberg Laws, and Tom was officially classified as a "Mischling"—someone who was of "mixed race." When he was 18, he illegally escaped from Germany to the Netherlands. There he asked the Quakers to help him immigrate to the United States. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) worked to get Doeppner a scholarship offer from a college, as Tom was a gifted student who wanted to pursue a career in electrical engineering.

The AFSC had been created in 1917 to address the tremendous humanitarian needs during World War I. At its peak between 1920 and 1924, the AFSC provided meals for around a million European children a day. Funding for some of this work came from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which continued to support the AFSC's work throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

After the violent anti-Jewish Kristallnacht pogroms of November 9–10, 1938, the AFSC expanded its work and established a Refugee Division to assist individuals and families in need. While Quaker relief efforts continued, the AFSC also began helping people flee Nazi Europe, communicate with loved ones, and adjust to life in the United States.

The AFSC formed the center of a network of refugee aid agencies in Europe and fielded hundreds of requests every month from individuals seeking to escape Nazism. In practice, the AFSC primarily worked with "non-Aryan Christians" (those considered "racially Jewish" by the Nuremberg Laws but who did not consider themselves Jewish by religion) and those in mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews. One of those refugees was Doeppner.

With the AFSC's help, Doeppner was able to secure the backing of influential people: Professor Albert Einstein (himself a refugee from Nazi Germany) even wrote a letter of recommendation on his behalf. Oberlin College was interested in Tom but was only able to offer a scholarship that covered tuition. Eventually, Tom was admitted to McPherson College, a small Christian college in Kansas.

McPherson was one of more than 200 colleges that actively recruited refugees, with students raising funds to pay for full scholarships. Doeppner struggled to obtain a US visa as a student, since he technically did not have a country to return to after graduation. AFSC helped him secure a visitor visa and paid for his passage to the United States.

While at McPherson, Doeppner did very well academically, but immigration troubles still followed him. After completing his first year, he was ordered to report for duty in the German Army. He replied, "I really don't care whether you list me in your files as a deserter or otherwise. I no longer claim German citizenship but look forward to becoming a citizen of the United States." After college, Doeppner enlisted in the US Army in 1944.

## DOCUMENT 2

*Tom Doeppner first wrote to the United States in 1938, when he contacted an American Quaker named Albert Martin. Tom had gotten to know Albert in Berlin when Albert and his wife, Anne, volunteered in the Quaker Center there. By 1939, Albert was back in the United States working at a refugee hostel in the Midwest.*

*Translated letter, December 13, 1938:*

Thomas Döppner

Amstelveen N.A.

Emmakade 8.

Holland

13.12.38.

Dear Mr Martin,

I am writing to you today with a question, the answer to which may be of crucial importance to me. I know that I am one of a great many asking this question, but I believe that in my case there are various circumstances that will make assistance easier.

During the international crisis in September, in fact just a few days before the Munich Conference, I crossed the border illegally and without a passport, and am now living with my father, who is the manager of the United Press of America for Holland and Belgium. As a result of a petition to the Dutch justice minister, I am allowed to remain here under the condition that I seek to obtain a residence permit in another country. When this is accomplished, I will receive a Dutch certificate of identity, in which the visa for the relevant country can be entered.

You remember perhaps that I always wanted to study engineering in the United States?

Is there a possibility of me entering the States, at least as a student? Although my father has significant commitments to other members of the family—he supports among others my mother in Berlin and is maintaining my sister, who is studying languages in Paris in order to become an interpreter—he would agree to ensure that I do not become a burden on the American state. In practice it would admittedly not be possible for him to pay for my accommodation and studies in their entirety, but he would support me to the extent that, with the aid of some part-time work, I would get by. In addition, the United Press would also be willing to help him and me with advice and practical assistance.

I know that a study visa does not equal a permanent residence permit and work permit. I imagine, however, that at the end of my studies I could manage to obtain the permit, if not in the States, then in another American country. Besides, no one knows today what the world will look like in three or four years.

I am aware that the path will not be easy, but I want to pursue it if there is any way to do so.

My question and request to you, dear Mr Martin, is this: that you tell me what steps I must undertake to enter America, and that you, if possible, help me in doing so.

I got your address from Manfred and Lili Pollatz here in Haarlem. I have told them a lot about you and what you gave me and the other Young Friends.

When you send me your reply, would you also include a line or two to let me know how you, your wife, Haines and Dicki are getting on?

With Friendly greetings,

Thomas Döppner<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Albert Martin from Thomas Doeppner, December 13, 1938, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum collection, translated by United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

## DOCUMENT 3

Professor Martin contacted the AFSC, who then wrote to Doeppner, letting him know that it was "not impossible" to assist him with his study plans. They asked for more detailed information. Meanwhile, there were internal communications that concerned the practical matters of securing a visa and financial support and finding an institution that would accept Tom.

REFUGEE SECTION *of the*  
AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE  
20 SOUTH TWELFTH STREET • PHILADELPHIA, PENNA.

Chairman, D. ROBERT YARNALL

Director, C. REED CARY  
Associate Director, MARY M. ROGERS

Consultant, HERTHA KRAUS



April 20, 1939

*American Friends Service Committee*

Chairman . . . . . RUFUS M. JONES

Vice Chairmen { HANNAH CLOTHIER HULL  
HAROLD EVANS

Treasurer . . . . . WILLIAM R. FOGG

Executive Secretary, CLARENCE E. PICKETT

Telephone . . . Rittenhouse 8552

Miss Helen Dukas  
112 Mercer Street  
Princeton, New Jersey

Dear Miss Dukas:

Thank you very much for your cordial note about Thomas Doeppner. It would, of course, be very valuable for him to have an endorsement by Professor Einstein. So far we have not been able to get a scholarship for him, and it is not certain that he would be able to get a student visa even if he had a scholarship. However, we shall continue to try for a scholarship and we will be very grateful for your help.

Sincerely yours,

*Charlotte S. Salmon*

Charlotte S. Salmon  
Placement Worker  
Refugee Service

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



## DOCUMENT 4

Albert Einstein wrote a letter of recommendation for Doeppner, based on what he had heard about Tom's character and academic ability. Several colleges were interested in him, including Oberlin College. Ultimately, Doeppner did not receive enough financial support from Oberlin, but another college offered him an opportunity to attend with a full scholarship.

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Chairman, D. ROBERT YARNALL

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Associate Director, MARY M. ROGERS

Consultant, HERTHA KRAUS



June 22, 1939

Thomas Doeppner  
Amstelveen N. A.  
Emmakade 8, Holland

Dear Thomas Doeppner:

A letter has just come from Oberlin College stating that you have been chosen as first alternate for a scholarship at that college. I wish that one of the scholarships might be awarded to you, but at present there seems to be some difficulty in securing an affidavit for one of the winners. I don't understand just what the complications regarding this immigration problem are, but in case the recipient of the scholarship can't come to this country you would be next in line for it.

I am writing to Oberlin to urge them to let us know as soon as possible if an opportunity does come for you. It might take some time for you to get your visa, but I think that it would be possible for you to get a student visa to the United States. I'll continue to do what I can here, and in the meantime, please see that you have all the necessary papers that you will need for getting a visa in case such an opportunity arises.

Sincerely yours,

*Charlotte S. Salmon*

Charlotte S. Salmon  
Placement Worker

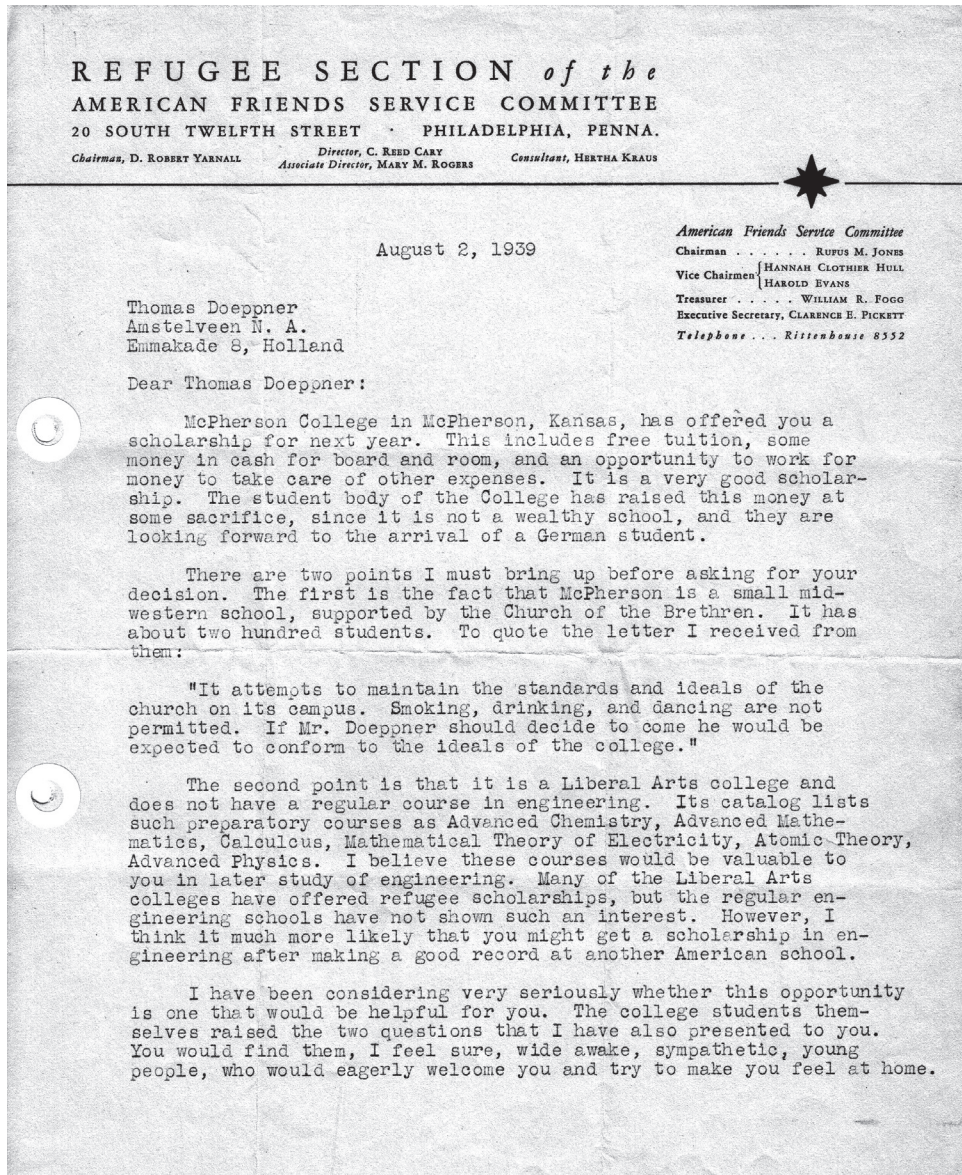
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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

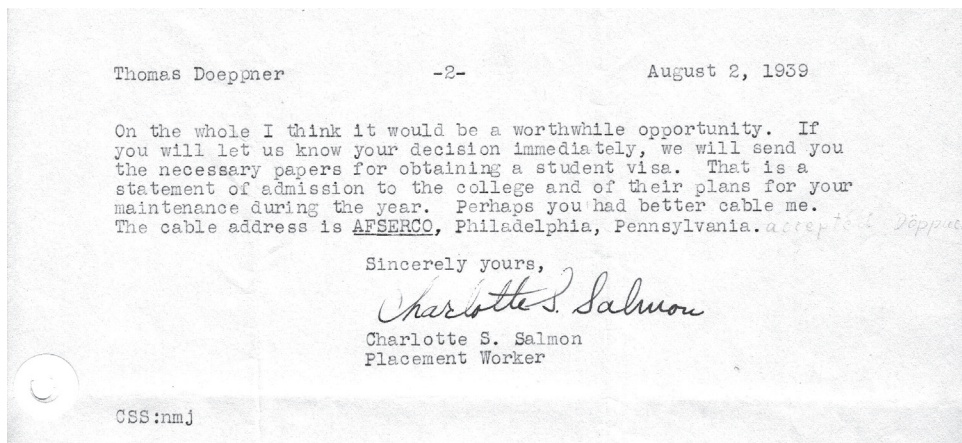


## DOCUMENT 5

Letter from McPherson College to Thomas Doeppner outlining its offer and expectations:



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



## DOCUMENT 6

*Letter from Thomas Doeppner to McPherson College:*

Thomas Döppner  
Amstelveen N.A., August 15th, 1939  
Emmakade 8  
Holland

Dear Miss Salmon,

I need not tell you how I felt when I received your letter of August 2nd. Many thanks for all you do for me.

My cable advised you that I accept the kind offer of McPherson College. I accept wholeheartedly, with warmest thanks to the students of your college.

I don't smoke and drink, and I don't want to dance but to be in USA and study there. As for the second point, that there is no regular course in engineering, you are certainly right to state that those basic courses you mention will be valuable to me in later study of engineering. They will even be necessary for me. Furthermore, I am confident that I find my way after having experienced this first year.

As soon as I have received the college papers, I shall apply for the visa. I assume that these papers will tell me at what time the next college year begins. I only have one fear now: that there might be difficulties by the consul. But I trust that everything will run smoothly.

I remain, dear Miss Salmon,

very sincerely yours,  
Thomas Döppner<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Thomas Doeppner to McPherson College, August 15, 1939, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



## DOCUMENT 7

*Receiving a scholarship was only part of the process. There were several other logistical pieces that had to be addressed before Doeppner could get to the United States. American consular officers in Holland were so overwhelmed, they told him it might still take months to secure his student visa. McPherson was understanding, but they could only hold his spot for so long.*

Thomas Döppner

Amstelveen, September 26, 1939  
Emmakade 8  
Holland

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Dear President Schwalm,

Thank you very much for your kind letter of August 17, in which you tell me that I have been admitted to your college. I appreciate all the help you have given me in this connection, and the personal interest you have taken. I should have liked to reply sooner, but thought it would be better to wait until I had my papers arranged and I could tell you what time I could be expected. There have been some difficulties in obtaining the visa; it was refused the first time I tried to obtain it, although only by word of mouth, then there were the difficulties in obtaining the Dutch identification card, which I had to secure instead of a passport. Now everything seems ready, and I intend to sail on the seventh of October from Antwerp on the "Volendam" of the Holland-America-line. I am very happy that I shall be able to study again, and I am looking forward to the year in your college very much. I know, it will be a stimulating experience.

Please give my thanks and sincere greetings to Mr. Phil Myers, who wrote me such a kind letter of welcome.

With kindest regards, I am

faithfully yours



## DOCUMENT 8

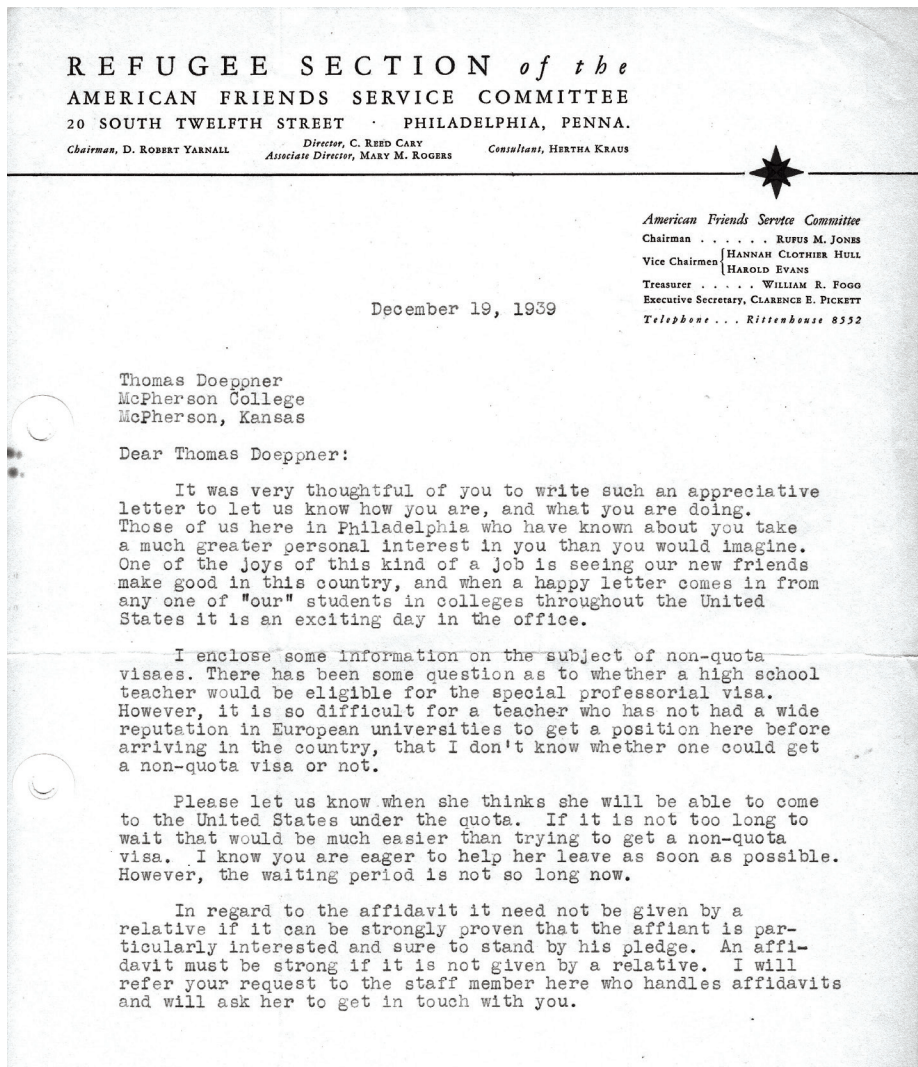
*Photograph of Tom Doeppner in McPherson, Kansas:*



Courtesy of Ron Doeppner and Sarah Doeppner Snow

## DOCUMENT 9

Tom Doeppner was still gathering his visa paperwork in September 1939 when World War II began in Europe, and he had great difficulty getting a Dutch passport and securing passage to New York. Although the war meant that fewer passenger ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean, Doeppner finally obtained a ticket for the SS Pennland. He made it to Kansas before the spring 1940 semester began.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

