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Das Lager

I cannot now remember how we were received by the Australian military authorities. I know that we had to leave the bus and were vetted by the reception committee of commandant and officers outside the military huts that housed the garrison supervising the prison camp. There were checklists of numbers of people per family and of the possessions that went into the camp with them in their suitcases and bundles of cloth. There were dockets for confiscated property such as radios and cameras. These were to be held in trust until the end of the War.

Somewhere on that journey to the camp, family documents and the money my father had confiscated from him at Kermanshah went missing. And Wartime confusion affected even Army discipline. My father's expensive Leica camera, his pride and joy, with which he had illustrated his travels as a young man, his courtship and his six years of marriage, was never returned. Despite repeated letters, he was never able to retrieve from Australian or British authorities the money, documents and camera that had been taken from him. But stacks of his photographs came with us into the camp.

The whole camp sat on six hectares of land, and was surrounded by two widely spaced high fences of spiked wire. Coils of barbed wire sprawled in the space between to discourage potential escapees. Whenever anyone wanted to enter, a large gate was opened by military guards. The person or vehicle would then move through a broad cage of wire to another secured gate, and from there into a wide fenced-off carriageway. Four gates in the carriageway gave entry to the four compounds.

Our family was assigned two rooms in a military-style barrack in Compound A. Only one other couple from Iran, with their son, came with us into this compound. The contingent from Iran was only twelve people in all. This included four children. We were a tiny minority among the huge number of Palestinian Germans who had arrived a few months earlier.

Once we were installed in our new quarters, my parents shooed Peter and me outside to play. Then they unpacked and started to settle into this strange variation on married life. No more privacy. From now on they were surrounded by inquisitive ears behind thin walls and multitudes of eyes at close quarters. There was to be no escape from communal living except into those two tiny rooms with their flimsy fibro walls. Our family did not know—no one did—that my father's confinement would last four-and-a-half years and my mother's and ours exactly five.

Every time I think of our arrival in the Tatura Camp, there is a particular place where my memory lands, like a glider. I see the same dusty, barren land. A number of huts are on the periphery of my vision. My eyes rest on a bare yard where soil and gravel are compacted. I hold my brother's hand. I am six-and-a-half. He is three years younger. His platinum blond hair and grey-blue eyes contrast with my brown hair, brown eyes and olive skin. Clinging to me as if I were his second mother, he accompanies me to the building site. 'Come on, Peterle,' I coax him, 'let's see what they are doing.'

I perceive a hazy afternoon with a faint suggestion of rain. But the place is so dusty.

Children are playing around the wooden skeleton of a hut under construction. They swing in the window frames like monkeys, strut like wading birds on boards above the ground, play chasey around the posts. Sawn-off bits of timber have become cars in the hands of young boys negotiating an obstacle course. Some hands are flying timber planes into the air, carrying imaginary pilots. The children have taken possession of the site.

Peter and I stand on the boundary of happiness. We wait to be invited inside. Although schooled to use formal manners on special occasions, we are awkward in company, having been brought up in virtual isolation from other children. We always wait to be invited in by strangers.

Eventually a pert girl of about my own age with fair plaits strolls up and looks us over. 'What are you doing here?' she asks. 'Your parents are spies.' Her accent is a broad German I have never before heard, and which I later learn is Swabian dialect.

'Excuse me,' I reply politely in my usual Hochdeutsch, my mother's preferred 'correct' style of speaking, 'can you please tell me what are spies?' 'Oh, I don't know,' she says with a trace of irritation, flicking her plaits. 'You better ask my parents.'

So ends this awkward exchange. I expect, by her tone, that my parents have been accused of something bad, something sinister. The playground is not to be shared with the likes of us. Then, without further ado, she takes my hand and drags me into the middle of the games. Bliss descends like a velvet glove stroking my skin.

Peter is permitted to follow me, but remains shy, because others are clearly in charge here. When my father comes looking for us, he is surprised to find us climbing on the scaffolding, surprised how quickly we have managed to make friends. It is for him a reassuring sign that his children will not suffer too much.

After that introduction, we explored more of the surroundings of our new home each day. We became increasingly familiar with them. We discovered that the camp was divided into four diamond-shaped compounds, named Compounds A, B, C and D, and that D was shut off from the others because that's where most of the Jewish people were housed. This was because other Germans were said to hate them.

Later, some Lutheran missionaries from New Guinea also came into Compound D.

For a while (or was it always?), the gates that were closed between the other three compounds were locked in the evening. Was there a curfew? I do not recall. Between A and B and between C and D ran a wire-edged strip of land which was soon named No Man's Land.

We discovered over time that Tatura was a dusty, hot place in summer and that winters were unpleasantly cold. In spring the countryside was ordered by its own hidden impulse to turn a green seldom seen in Iran. We only saw this transformation in a restricted way, because the camp lay in a hollow.

Every late afternoon in the warmer months, residents took the air outside the huts, walking along the wire fencing. It was a way of meeting others once it became a habit. Some women also had designated washdays and gathered in the laundry as the coppers were fuelled and a concrete trough was cleared for use. During this meeting of women at the wells, there was much talk, and confidences were exchanged. I loved to get together with the mothers and daughters and very young sons in the warm steamy washhouse. Once I saw my mother cry into her washing while Mrs Wennagel tried to comfort her.

Other, more formal ways of meeting were ordained. The self-appointed administration of the community through the commanding voice of the *Lagerleiter* (camp leader), organised everyone into duty rosters. I recall the word *Ordnungsdienst* (work roster). I did not know then that it could be a cover for other kinds of service beyond the monthly lists for cooking in the kitchen, setting tables, distributing food, loading wood, stacking furnaces, cleaning shower blocks and removing rubbish. This camp ran like clockwork, with good German precision and attention to detail. Nevertheless, there was a lot of squabbling among the adults.

I do not know what constitution the internees in Camp 3 adopted, except that it was in sympathy with Nazi politics. I was too young to understand government and politics. My impression is that there were rather loosely constituted committees that made major decisions, each with a leader at the head. I think most of their members and the overall camp leader were drawn from the dominant majority of prisoners who had been brought to the camp from Palestine. That they had come on the enormous ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth* says something about their numbers.

Most of them had been interned in Palestine from where they had arrived some months before us. I heard the word 'Haifa' mentioned a lot as a kind of lost paradise, and the people who came from there described as *die Palestinanser* or *die Templer*, an abbreviation of members of the Temple Society.

The Templers had left Germany's Swabia region some generations back, but still spoke the Swabian dialect. They had settled in Palestine as a commune, attempting to live a purer form of basic Christianity as outlined by Jesus in the New Testament. They longed to live close to the places where Jesus had lived. They established orchards with exemplary irrigation systems which, some say, became a model for the Israeli

kibbutzim. The Templers in Palestine had insulated their communes so as to avoid the corrupting influences of modern liberal secular thought on the one hand, and the worldly bureaucratic structures of established Christianity on the other. They were Christian fundamentalists.

It was the compulsions of fundamentalist Templer beliefs, rather than the pluralism which would have worked better among so large a collection of different people, that became a good match for the Nazi ideology of some of the other inmates. Under the pressures of internment, the authoritarian, compulsive nature of both came to the fore. Templer Christianity became entangled with national pride, so that Templer and Nazi ideology together waged war on toleration and rational liberal thought. This may account for the apparent contradiction of Templer Christianity adding fuel to racial intolerance.

As far as I could tell, the youth leaders in the camp had no critical decision-making powers. They stood over those younger than themselves but were quite subordinate to the adult administration. Some of them expressed fanatical enthusiasm for Nazi ideology.

The Australian authorities had their own roster of duties in relation to the inmates. The camp was under surveillance twenty-four hours a day by guards who worked shifts on the observation towers. We called out to tease them now and again, but often they did not seem to be there at all. Perhaps they had nodded off in the noonday sun. At night their watchful eyes and companion rifles were helped by fiercely bright searchlights that could move over the four compounds to cover every exposed area.

The Australian guards were not, however, ogres. Some young children crept through the barbed wire to prove that they could tunnel their way out. My brother did so with some mates and I did the same at another time, with my own accomplices. With the guard sleeping, or more likely turning a blind eye, each group of children daring to challenge the instructions of their parents leapt briefly around like little rabbits in the long grass, then decided to make their way back through the dangerous wires. It had seemed easy enough to get out, but the one time I tried this adventure, on return I found it most troublesome to avoid the barbed coils of wire between the two tall fences. I feared my scratches would show how I had disobeyed my father.

Every morning, and later in the day before dinner while it was still light, all the men had to line up for a rollcall to check that no one had escaped. During the early period of our internment, every morning every resident of every hut had to assemble outside their doors to be ticked off a list by two men and one woman from the Australian Army. They wore khaki uniforms.

Sick people were also noted, and the interiors of huts checked for hygiene and safety, and to ensure that nothing forbidden was being kept. The hygiene inspections were important under such crowded conditions. Bed-bugs were to become an occasional irritant. When the plague of bugs became too bad, all beds had to be carried outside to be fumigated with DDT, then scrubbed down. In time the vermin grew fat and resistant. I can still see my mother ringing her hands: 'For God's sake, what is one to do?'

Communal gifts such as books, sheet music, toys, sporting equipment and musical instruments arrived from abroad, courtesy of the German Red Cross. Handcrafted items were lovingly made for us children in the officers' camp, sited nearby in the Tatura district. We soon learned that Camp 3 was only one of several camps in the region. Tatura, Rushworth, Murchison, Moroopna and Waranga became familiar names. We heard that one camp was for military officers and one for lower-rank military men. Officers always got special treatment under international military agreements. We also heard that single civilian men lived separately. When a young man turned seventeen in the family camp, the authorities removed him to the single men's camp. I can imagine (but not remember) the wailing complaints of a mother and her family at the prospect of losing a son to an all-male camp that was out of bounds to Camp 3.

It took some time before we familiarised ourselves with our everyday circumstances, assessing what was significant (or not) in our interaction with others, and how we might manage to establish a decent existence. I remember almost nothing of our first two unlined rooms in Hut 7, under metal sheets of corrugated iron. My parents found, when a stinking hot Christmas was suddenly upon us, that our quarters were too hot as well as full of fungus left over from winter.

What disappointment that Christmas brought! Since people had only fairly recently arrived, no one had organised it properly. 'It's all wrong. It shouldn't be like this. It doesn't feel right!' I heard grumbled around me.

A pine tree was brought in, a tree of open structure with thin needles which seemed to be suffering from the mange. ‘This is not a real Christmas *Tannenbaum* (spruce, or fir tree)!’ they complained. But there were a number of humorists in the camp who lifted our spirits. They provided catharsis when too much gossip and verbal muck washed around. They dissolved glumness with laughter.

Depression hit the most sensitive adults. That Christmas of 1941, carols were sung half-heartedly, since nostalgia for home weighed heavily. Those who attended church, which my parents usually did not, were able to give thanks to God and pray for deliverance, in the hall near the kitchen. This served also as *Kindergarten* and meeting room.

On subsequent Christmases the German Red Cross sent real decorations: coloured glass baubles, candles in holders and silver *Lametta*, plus appropriate Advent calendars with windows to open. It also sent sheet music for choral singing.

I do not know why and when we moved into Hut 1 in Compound A. It was not long after our arrival, and we stayed there for three years. My brother and I thus acquired a new neighbourhood, with its barrage of do’s and don’t’s from the new set of adults around us.

On one side of our *Baracke* (Army hut) lived a family with two daughters of roughly our ages, the Schnerrings from Palestine. Mrs Schnerring was Tabitha, a marvellous Biblical name (in German the stress is on the ‘i’), while two of her three children had truly German names: Heidi and Ingrid. Behind us lived one of the many Wagner families. A ten-year-old girl, Leni, used to report on her precocious observations of private adult activities. Pastor Schneller, a gracious elder of the Lutheran Church who lived on the corner, encouraged my love of music. And there was also a certain Frau Kroening, a ‘coloured woman’ I heard it said, from the South Sea Islands, a niece of the legendary Queen Emma of Samoa and New Britain. She was interned with her doctor husband.

Diagonally opposite us lived the Streckers, whose plump daughter, affectionately nicknamed Pampel, offered us lessons on a descant recorder. A couple of huts from ours were the Wennagel family, whom my brother treated like a second family. Behind the latticed arbour they had built and under their hut he pretended to be deaf to my calls for him to come home.

Neighbourhood groups banded together because that was how to get along. People were categorised, however, both by the places from which they had come, and by their region of birth in Germany. We were classified with *die Iranier* (the Iranians), while those Germans who had come from Palestine were *die Palestinanser* (the Palestinians), and people interned from Australia were often grouped as *die Australier* (the Australians), even though they had German citizenship. Italians tended to be *die Italiener* (the Italians) even when they were interned from the Straits Settlements of Singapore, while people of Jewish ethnicity were always *die Juden* (the Jews), even if their sense of being German was a strongly held part of their personal identity and history.

Neighbourhood solidarity did not dissuade people from quarrelling. I remember my father having a terrible falling out with Mr Schnerring because my brother was squabbling with his younger daughter. This was in spite of the fact that at the age of four he was enamoured of her. The quarrels were short-lived, however. This one did not stop Mr Schnerring from allowing me to join his daughter Heidi for violin lessons in one of his rooms, once I had turned ten. Mr Tietz provided the lessons. I think he was a relative of Mrs Schnerring.

Once I saw my father rolling in the dirt in a punch-up with someone who had insulted him. I was horrified and deeply ashamed, hoping only that my father would win and both men stop their quarrel unharmed. It was so passionate an engagement that the assailants had to be separated before serious injury was inflicted, for Rudolf was strong as an ox. He had not, however, been a labourer like many of the internees.

This is just one example of how people became degraded by the atmosphere in the camp. Mother did not find out about this until I told her forty years later. Or so she said. Had she deliberately closed her mind to it, like so much else? It is more likely that she had forgotten it.

Our neighbourhood with its too-close living quarters had serious drawbacks. At night I used to hear moaning and groaning sounds and the thumping rhythm of movements in the room behind mine. 'What is going on in your room at night?' I asked Leni, the daughter of that family. 'Oh that,' she said airily, 'is dad peeing into mum.' She said it nonchalantly, as if the activity was no different from watering a plant. When I was told that she was slightly retarded and took an interest in things that were none of her business, I tried to dismiss the matter from

my mind and to avoid her company, as my mother had told me. But that was impossible. And I remained curious. Since my mother never corrected my mistaken notion that at birth puppies came ‘out of a bitch’s bottom’—and was proud that I had seen this for myself—I think she was negligent in my sexual education. But parents behaved differently then.

Beyond our immediate neighbourhood lived the Beinssens, who had been interned from Australia, and who came with a nanny of noble background, a certain Fräulein von Koch. She often volunteered to sing solo at concerts, but her high-toned performances were not to everyone’s taste.

My parents got on well with the Zachens, their original neighbours from Hut 1. They had also been interned from Australia. They were a straight-talking husband and wife team from Berlin who had married in Australia, and had no children. They livened up the place with their *Berliner* humour and, although they had become acculturated to Australian ways, remained German citizens. Although Lydia suffered from the heat, I never heard the couple complain about being interned, except as a joke. They could see that it was politically reasonable.

We all got on well with the keeper of the washhouse and our compound’s shower furnaces, Mr Wiedt, one of many families of Wiedts. He had a wife with the charming name of Nellie and a daughter my age.

For a short while my parents were friendly with a part-Jewish German couple. I loved to play with their only son who was older than me, because he owned a marvellous fleet of individually named miniature steamships with pointed hulls, pennants and flags. He and I played harbour masters, making a large port on the floor and moving the vessels out from their wharves and beyond the harbour’s breakwater, to the lighthouse and the buoys. I did not know for many years why contact between our families suddenly ceased.

The truth is that my father soon noted vicious anti-Jewish feelings and prejudices in the camp community. Abuse was directed at the mother and her son. He was jeered at and treated so badly that he was sent off to school in Melbourne. His mother was referred to as ‘that Jewish bitch’ who had given birth to a ‘Jew bastard’.

In secret my father apparently excused himself to the couple, with whom he had been on the friendliest terms. He had to tell them that he could no longer be seen in public with them. Upsetting as this was to me when I heard of it years later, I know that he did it for our sake. From then on in public he ignored the couple completely.

I cannot recall if he instructed us to keep away from the family. Nor did I find out why the man had been thrown at the camp's barbed wire fence by German fanatics. Why had he not taken his Jewish wife and child into the safety of Compound D? I subsequently heard through gossip that he did not want to be locked up with a lot of Jews! He was known as a German nationalist.

My father must have known the delicacy of the situation. He had neither the wisdom nor the courage to handle the pressure, and so caved in. When I asked my mother once why contact between our families had ceased, she was evasive. 'The wife was clever and a true lady,' she said, 'but he—he was an arrogant pig.' And then, shaking her head, added almost as an afterthought: 'You wouldn't believe that she lent those dreadful people her sewing machine, after the disgraceful way they treated her!' Sewing machines were rare in the camp.

I wanted to know more, but my mother's lips were sealed. There is so much sadness and pain in these anecdotes, and so much we will never entirely know about the dynamics between the groups. This is just an example. Later, people did not want to talk about such shameful goings-on.

There were stories about informers in the Camp 3 community. My own family had come under suspicion as British spies the moment we arrived. My mother told me late in life, some months before she died, about one allegation, not one directed at her. Apparently precise information about German shipping traffic in the Persian Gulf had been leaked to enemy intelligence by someone in the camp. As a consequence, three German merchant vessels were sunk, with huge loss of life.

Under the uncertain conditions of War, and knowing of the terrible Nazi reprisals in Germany for national disloyalty, those in the Tatura camp behaved in circumspect ways which may have been uncharacteristic.

Although my childhood memories are rather hazy as to dates, I now know that it was in February 1942—shortly after we had arrived in the camp—that excited rumours suggested the Japanese were attacking north

Australia. This was regarded as a mixed blessing. People were desperate for liberation, but were also afraid of a Japanese rescue. There was desire to be freed by an ally together with real fear of the Japanese. I sensed at the time that many adults thought they would be worse off under Japanese control.

I don't know how such news came through from outside. Mail was censored. My brother tells me that at some stage forbidden newspapers were smuggled in. It is not unusual for outside threats to bring warring factions of a community together. While there were distinct ideological divisions in people's minds, the confusions of War led to collusion between them.

A precise ideological divide would have been hard for an outsider, looking in, to discern. And it is difficult to fathom human complexity by studying an interrupted set of documents and exploring memories which often have huge gaps. Interactions in a prison are subtle. There is the waxing and waning of opinions, strong values on the one hand, temporary or lasting compromises on the other. Expedient behaviour alternates with altruistic non-conformism.

When the hut that was being built on our arrival was completed, the Drude family moved there with their daughter, my sometime friend Gabriele. She was a well-grown, fairly stable girl. Like myself, she was on the outer from time to time and dependent on the kindness of others for admission to other children's gangs.

Her brother Michael practised childish deceptions in the face of strict controls to such a degree that their father was forever chasing us for misdemeanours we had not committed. Dr Drude, a physicist, was much respected as a great intellectual achiever, something important to Germans. Maria Dannenberg, who lived in the same hut, was a sweet-tempered and rather fragile child. I took a great liking to her, so much so that when it came time to be photographed in our neighbourhood, I once placed myself with Peter in a photo of the Drude and Dannenberg families, then with our own.

My mother also became friendly with one of the Lutheran missionary wives from that hut, Frau Zimmerman. She was not bothered about people's religious or political affiliations when they did not put pressure on a friendship. That's why she later corresponded with a Lutheran pastor, a Nazi sympathiser, who shared her love of Silesian literature.

My father, who had travelled so much as a youth, was singularly lacking in ill-feeling towards people different from himself and his family. He had previously shown not the slightest trace of anti-Jewish feeling. Peter and I inherited that attitude from him more so than from our mother. However, she so rarely expressed the residual prejudices of her background that I was shocked when, many years later, she asked me to name one of my favourite famous men. Unhesitatingly, I said 'Yehudi Menuhin, because he is a marvellous musical ambassador and humanitarian.' She looked at me with surprise and blurted out, instinctively, it seems: 'But he is a Jew!' I was shocked and said: 'So what?' She immediately withdrew.

She never entirely shed some of the stock prejudices of the time and place in which she had grown up. I remember this incident because it contradicted my comfortable view of the person I thought she was. But it is hard to generalise. Some years after our release, my mother placed no obstacle in the way of her younger sister when she wanted to marry into a part-Jewish family.

The camp did have a demoralising effect on many of the inmates. There were ambiguities in inter-relationships which a child observer is not in a position to describe accurately. The same may be said of modern researchers who never set foot in the place. Most of the adults who were interned have died. They took their silence to the grave. Those still alive were not mature enough at the time to understand some of the deeper personal histories and relationships of older people.

Our once-loving father became excessively strict with us in the camp, and often extremely threatening. He no longer hugged us, and avoided physical affection of any kind. This meant we shrank from embracing him.

When he was angry, he sometimes roared until he turned red in the face, and he whacked us across our heads with alarming strength. 'Like a frog, blowing himself up,' someone commented. 'You can see his rage coming.' I was furious that anyone should so malign my father. The engineer from Iran whom I had loved had, however, become rather remote. I feared him. I also thought his blows would damage my head.

Camp life was so petty, so boring, that his energies were dammed up. They were only released in an occasional furious rage.

His marriage also suffered from his confinement. Our parents discovered, and transmitted to us, that to be locked up in such close confinement with some people they found extremely disagreeable added insult to injury.

My first encounter with adult suspicions occurred on my very first day in the camp. The 'in' group struck at 'outsiders' in our little community, warning even children to be wary. We could see that cliques of Nazis had already engineered favourable conditions for themselves, choosing the best available living quarters. They built on an ideology of paranoia which rejected Jews and all others not of the 'correct' blood lines. Those who had come from Palestine spoke a hybrid German-Arabic language which excluded all others.

I myself did not fit the stereotype of the blonde, blue-eyed Aryan, but I somehow merged with the crowd. We children sometimes formed the impression that things were going wrong for our parents. They did not participate in Nazi activities. Having come from Iran further isolated them. Mostly they said very little. My parents never included us in their discussions about adult problems in their world. They had far too much discretion to invite further trouble by possible inadvertent revelations in the playground.

Some of their discomforts were of course shared by others. No one knew exactly how the War was going, when it was likely to end, or what was to happen to them when it did.

People had relatives in War zones, but no one knew then the horrors of the Holocaust for Jewish people. The camp was just nasty, lonely and unpleasant for our parents.

It was also a hotbed of discontent. There was too little structured work and too much talk, including gossip, whispering campaigns behind cupped hands, and eyes over-engaged by the movements of others, often from a strategic position behind a window. Here were the ingredients of an explosion spawned of boredom.

I gathered that my parents loathed much of what went on, as obviously did many others. We caught the flavour of our parents' reactions, as if wearing their cast-off clothes. In this insecure life, gossip was probably a safety valve, preventing many more fisticuffs than the sordid few we witnessed.

With few really well-educated people in Camp 3, there was little opportunity of transforming our unfortunate imprisonment into fruitful intellectual and morally purposeful activity. Rather, the opportunity was seized to impose Nazi-style political organisation. The first and largest group of internees to arrive in the camp further commandeered resources and saw themselves as the rightful rulers, elected by so-called democratic processes, by virtue of their early arrival, strength of numbers and 'correct' ideological allegiance. They set up the make-shift internal administration. The Australian authorities left much of the control of the camp in the hands of these self-appointed leaders and their stooges. Their administration took a laissez-faire approach. They did not interfere too much in our day-to-day lives.

'A crop of little Hitlers sprang up over the years,' my mother commented later, with disdain. She explained that a man without much education or experience, perhaps a grocer in ordinary life, suddenly had responsibilities of leadership heaped on his shoulders out of all proportion to his abilities.

His megalomania prevented him seeing that his zealous ineptitude had damaging consequences. Those in the minority who disapproved became targets of malice.

These self-appointed leaders, and the group from which they were drawn, quickly entrenched a 'national socialist democracy' without much real opposition. It gave individuals little breathing space.

Amongst its interned community, Camp 3 at Tatura was usually referred to as *Das Lager*. The description has an old lineage. It is essentially a nomadic term. In English it means a camp, a resting or staging place. Tatura camp, however, was just a prison without any particular purpose except to keep us locked up out of harm's way, and out of the reach of Australians.

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