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His Majesty's Guests

The camp was still being built when we arrived and the building program went on for as long as two years. The huts were in the temporary military style, with fibro and masonite walls. They were built above the ground, with room underneath for ventilation, and to discourage vermin. Each was roofed with corrugated iron, on which we wished the infrequent rain would drum more often, in soothing, regenerating downpour. When it did rain and puddles lay about, we children could leap into them, splash one another—and then get into trouble for our mischief.

My mother had a talent for transforming any ordinary place into a charming home. During the course of the War we moved four times. In Hut 1, our second home, she turned two rooms into a suite of bed and living room, with a colourful woven curtain as the internal doorway. Our sleeping quarters consisted of two double bunks squeezed into one room. She disguised the ugly furniture in the sitting room with Iranian *kelims*, set up the brightly polished brass samovar on a stand, and decorated the bare walls with hanging cloths and pictures of Iran, as well as with German Fine Arts calendars. Our father, urged on by her, made frames for these from the strips of timber which could be found lying round the camp.

So comfortable and home-like did our mother make our living space that I once ordered Peter to wipe his shoes well before entering the *salon*. This so amused our parents that the sitting area was thereafter referred to as *unser Salon* (our *salon*).

Other people displayed pictures of Hitler in their huts, but not my family. The inspection teams must have been amazed when they saw the way my mother had transformed the ugly rooms into a charming home. There is

a word in German which describes an environment in which people feel really welcome. It is *gemütlich* and means cosy, relaxing, convivial all in one. My mother always managed to create a *gemütliche Stube* (room) wherever we lived.

Mother also transformed the bedroom, in a different way, with a game she played every week. Reclining on the top bunk on Sunday mornings, she would produce a jar of transparent boiled lollies, a jar of gems, their many colours flashing in the light of the window beside her. She told us she had collected the sweets from Arabia, where a magic carpet had taken her the night before. She then distributed the lollies as rewards for good behaviour during the week, or exacted promises from us to do better in future.

When I later reminded her of this game, she did not remember it. Our father had subsidised it from his small earnings. He worked in the camp vegetable garden beyond the wires, under armed guard. He quickly acquired gardening skills from the Templer vegetable-growing teams.

I half-wondered how my mother's stories of Arabia could be true, at the same time I began to question *der Weihnachtsman* (Father Christmas), whom my Austrian father insisted on calling *Sankt Nickolaus*. My mother helped our imaginations through periods of boredom by drawing a German cemetery with its church on the hill and sheep grazing among the tombstones, that simplified impression of her own birth village. But she always insisted that she could not draw. We copied her designs, which sometimes included incongruous rows of palms and camels.

In the camp, each compound ate communally, in its own designated hut. Each had its own shower blocks. We shared makeshift bucket toilets before something more permanent was provided. Would the sheets of toilet paper allowed each day last the distance? We were often scolded for our prodigality.

We were fascinated by the construction of four sets of pit latrines. The digging of two very deep trenches caused great excitement. When the trenches, like hugely oversized graves, were completed, carpenters mounted over them wooden seats with circular holes for average-sized adult bottoms. There were a few concessionally smaller ones for children. Each hole with its seat-lid was then given the privacy of a cubicle, entered through a door of planks on hinges.

The camp stood in fly-ridden pastoral country and personal hygiene was difficult to maintain among a community of over 800 prisoners, about 200 in each compound. Adults and children were fascinated and somewhat frightened by the pits and wondered how much of what they contained was alive. One heard the occasional threat: 'If you don't do X, I'll see that you get thrown into the pit!' Curious children lifted the lids to examine what lay below. Disinfectants were added to neutralise the stench.

The pit latrines came to be associated with what was foulest in the camp. Once someone scrawled the initials of Winston Churchill, WC (for water closet, although water was only for washing hands). They became synonymous with the arch-enemy. 'I'm going to the Churchill,' children called, to inform their parents.

Every day, the toilet blocks were hosed out. We knew this had been done thoroughly when a white residue of Dettol filmed the concrete floors and culverts. Adults turned a wary eye on what children might be getting up to in private cubicles. When I told my mother one day that a slightly older girl had told me to insert a knitting needle up my *Pinkel* (my father's word for urinary tract, although my mother knew I meant the vagina), she panicked. Thereafter she performed a series of intrusive inspections of my body in case I had been molested, but was too frightened to report it.

This was an embarrassing exercise for both of us. She was doing what she thought a responsible parent ought.

We had been taught never to directly question the authority of our parents.

Fear of seduction, molestation or rape of their children added yet another burden on parents in the camp. Because the subject of sex was taboo, problems could flourish in secret. I had never told my mother about Ibrahim's attempt, but I never forgot it.

Parents' fears left impressions on sensitive children. Girls were of course more at risk. Sometimes we badly wanted a wall of privacy to rise around us, rendering us invisible to all but ourselves.

There were probably some pregnancies in the camp. Attempts to disguise them must have been futile. We children heard whispers on the grapevine. I heard my parents comment many years later how one adolescent girl was seduced by a married man, but her morning sickness was described by

her parents as amoebic dysentery. After she gave birth, her child—which I think must have been adopted out—was referred to as *das Amobenkind* (the amoeba child), one of the cruel camp jokes.

Long after it had taken place, we heard that some of the young women in the camp from the Templer group had somehow arranged to meet up with their boyfriends by planning a rendezvous with them out of sight of the guards' surveillance posts. Apparently both men and women escaped through the wires of their respective camps. This was one of the camp rumours, later substantiated, but I never heard any of the details. How was this arranged and what was the outcome? Could letters pass between compounds? Surely families that had been separated on arrival were at least allowed to correspond with each other by letter?

Despite the mixed and just plain wrong messages our parents so often transmitted to us, I never held my body in contempt. I relished its strength and flexibility in sport, and the 'Oh joy!' feeling of being truly alive. And yet I took such long showers—as if to wash away pollution—that adults got impatient waiting in the queue for their turn.

Over 40 years later, a family friend mentioned my long camp showers. One cannot jump to the conclusion that cleaning away imaginary stains was my obsession. As a teenager, my father was to scold me for not washing enough. In the camp, we showered in the wooden clogs that were our summer footwear. Clogs were turned out in great numbers to fit all sizes of feet. My mother no doubt warned against the dirt of the shower floors. She loathed clogs. My father thought they were sluttish.

Other children were permitted to run wild, to play outside until well past our bedtime, which my parents observed for years as seven o'clock. We could hear the alluring sounds of laughter, shouts and taunts, but Peter and I never attempted to escape into the inviting night. The beatings of our strong father put paid to those fantasies.

We soon learned to read the messages of the playground, to note the gangs that were formed, and who played with whom when. Often we were excluded, but when a gang did adopt us briefly, we wallowed in happiness, hoping fervently that our luck would continue. Certain children were invariably the centre of such gangs. How could they know what it felt like to be excluded? It was obvious to me that not letting someone in made them suffer. Peter and I learned early in life to loathe the tyranny of gangs.

We often experienced the playground as mean and threatening. Boys, especially, would roll in the dust punching each other, sometimes playfully but often in earnest. A crowd of onlookers would gather to barrack until older relatives came to extricate the antagonists.

'No, we are not playing with you today,' was a rejection Peter and I feared daily. Most children's play was in groups, 'we' against individuals. The atmosphere was generally very competitive. Hitler's ideology reinforced it. Loving one's neighbour as oneself was not a precept I learned until several years later, although most of the internees claimed to be Christians.

It was lucky that we could attend school, because there relationships were more equitably structured. In the classroom we were secure from those alliances which got their momentum from excluding others. In two of the official photos taken in the camp, I see a once-charming child becoming increasingly rat-faced from the competitive ethos, and seeming to grow ever-longer legs. To win was the goal set.

Physical illnesses in the camp were dealt with in the Medical Clinic in Compound C, presided over by a doctor and his nurse. The married doctor and single nurse formed what was commonly thought to be more than a professional alliance so that, according to gossip, a terrible incident had occurred. She had poured boiling water over her feet out of jealousy, and so she would have to live at the clinic.

Some women gave birth outside the camp at Waranga Military Hospital. My mother was one of them. My brother Herbert Friedrich was born not long before the end of the War, when my mother was 37 years old. Why did she not give birth in the camp? The Australian doctor who attended the ambulance that came to fetch her injected her with morphine, a highly irresponsible action, she later claimed, because it could have killed her. I did not hear her say that this may have contributed to Herbert's later heart problem which, when it was diagnosed, meant predictions that he would live for only 25 years unless there was surgical intervention. In 1960 Herbert had the 100th heart bypass operation in Melbourne's Alfred Hospital.

I was once taken from the camp to the Mooroopna Hospital with suspected scarlet fever and kept under quarantine there until it was discovered that I did not have the disease after all. Among the beautiful Australian nurses in their white dresses with their Queen of Hearts—red capes, was

a Sister Anne. I remember her leaning over me tenderly and making me comfortable in a language I could not understand, her copper-coloured hair peeping from its starched veil. Other young patients also spoke only German and the nurses made an effort to communicate with all of them. My brother Peter was next door, recovering from surgery. He had both his tonsils and appendix out at different times.

Although I was well treated, I feared being away from my parents. It felt peculiar being out of the camp.

As children of foreign parents who had lived in the Middle East our teeth were not like those of indigenous children in Iran. But Peter had developed something akin to trench-mouth disease there. In the camp I needed dental attention and acquired a number of Dr Xilo's durable metal fillings. An obstetrician who had qualified in Yugoslavia, and who was assisted by her husband as dental nurse, Dr Xilo had turned to dentistry after finding that working as a female doctor in the snows of winter in the rural areas of her homeland was far too dangerous. While drilling my teeth she entertained me with stories of wolves prowling the forests through which she had to pass in a horse-drawn sleigh to attend births. She was a perfectionist, so her fillings outlived some of the newer substances introduced by dentists after the War.

Those of us who had arrived at the camp in late 1941 were permitted to leave it only to go to hospital, to gaol or, for men only, to work in the vegetable garden. Military guards accompanied us on each occasion. I heard years later that the original policy was not to have families imprisoned so completely. The Templers had apparently been taken for an excursion to the Waranga Basin some time after their arrival in August 1941. Instructions were given that no one was to swim to the other side of the lake—and there was more than discipline at stake. The lake was full of dead trees and broken stumps hidden under the water.

A few older girls, apparently, had kept on swimming until they reached the opposite shore, despite repeated calls from the guards for them to stop. Were they setting out to reach the single men's camps? Is this the same story as the one about the lovers' rendezvous? Stories do get confused. According to this version, a regulation was then introduced that because the internees could not be trusted to do as they were told, outings from the camp were from then on forbidden.

After the War with Hitler was over, we were in fact taken on monthly outings to the Waranga Basin.

The camp gaol was near the garrison's administration offices. Although it was occasionally inhabited, I do not recall what the offences were. Joy Hammond, in her book *Walls of Wire* (1990), refers to a Court of Honour inside the camp organised by the internees themselves. The academic Christine Winter has confirmed that there was an internal law-enforcement mechanism. She suggests rather sinister implications, and that this could have threatened individuals beyond official scrutiny.

Alternative mechanisms of law enforcement are not necessarily bad or evil. Of course, in the wrong hands, they can have terrible effects. Our camp was operating in Wartime. In peacetime, secret societies with the ability to punish should never be permitted to function. Public scrutiny is necessary. During War, however, they may have a de facto role in doing work a government is unable to perform but might forbid if it knew what was going on.

In our camp, where not everyone favoured Nazi-style internal administration, if a kangaroo court was being run by a group of bullies with secret police-like support (aping what was happening in Hitler's Germany), then it was obviously remiss of the Australian garrison to allow it to function. The Australians may or may not have known of its existence. There were certainly inmates who would have complained to the authorities if they had known of such a thing.

If they knew, why didn't the Australian authorities intervene? They may have been relieved at being saved the bother of punishing people themselves. And they had to be careful of how they treated German inmates so as to avoid retaliation against Australian prisoners in Germany.

One small incident illustrates my suspicions. My mother was taken to task late in 1946, after my father had left the camp, scolded because her infant son constantly entered other families' rooms uninvited. Hauled before a committee, she was told to keep her children under better control. But she never made much of that incident, then or later. Should she have? Did she think of it as being called before a Court of Honour? There were things she refused to discuss about our time in the camp, or felt that it was pointless to raise.

Alcohol was forbidden to internees, although I thought I remembered my father assisting his Italian friend to distil *grappa* from dried fruit like raisins. A cellar had been lined with bricks under a pergola this man built, and the distillery and bottles hidden there. Years later father told me he had not been involved. Perhaps he was only an innocent bystander. I can certainly vouch for the hiding place's existence, because I was there when it was discovered by a military inspection. I saw the bricks being kicked away by an angry officer's leather boots.

People brought their own clothes into the camp and these can be seen in the few surviving official photographs. They have a German look about them. People now laugh about the military-style woollen clothes, dyed burgundy. 'His Majesty's Clothes', they joke.

Some of these garments would have been made by hand, stitched laboriously without a machine. Clothes were rationed during the War. Blankets were not supposed to be cut into pieces, but perhaps the regulations were relaxed after a while, because my mother tailored some smart outfits for us: trousers, skirts and vests. She was one of the few people in the camp with a sewing machine. And because she was a hoarder, a result of her World War I experiences, she had no doubt brought some lengths of cloth into the camp.

She made me a sky-blue linen frock with exquisitely embroidered motifs of ladybirds and sprigs of flowers. Peter, who sought always to copy me, pestered her for a similar dress. She made him a tie with the same embroidered design. Although I took for granted much of what mother did for us, my little hand smoothing the embroidery, over and over again, was an instinctively loving gesture of gratitude. I was appreciative of the beauty she brought into our lives. Years later I gave the embroidered section of the dress to the museum at Tatura.

Our mother's sewing machine, the table model Singer, she operated by hand, with great technical finesse. She also produced magnificent outfits for us from doctor's flannel and striped mattress covers that were slightly damaged. She sewed little bags with shoulder straps from linen, and from cut-down hessian bags, embroidered in cross-stitch with different motifs for each of us: a rocking horse with rider for my brother, and a couple holding hands for me.

My mother often courted trouble by refusing to follow the styles of fashion prescribed in the camp. She did not like the preferred use of either Bavarian or Swabian regional costumes on festive occasions, and despised the Nazi uniforms which were worn during the many remembrance feasts. Who made these? Were they sent in or handmade in the camp? My mother often wore a Dirndl, a basic dress in modern folkloric style, without exclusive ethnic signature.

For better occasions she used to dress us in smart tailored clothes. But we objected. We wanted to be dressed like everyone else. Children used to throw stones at those who were different. I never liked to see stones being thrown at anyone. Throwing stones, I gathered, is a common practice in the Middle East. I cannot swear, however, that I did not occasionally join others in the practice. Peter and I no doubt got carried away with children's games, surrendering to what was expected of us.

By no means model children, we certainly joined others in raiding the communal cucumber patch. We climbed the castor oil trees to pelt each other with their spiky poisonous fruits. We probably joined other children in jeering at some unfortunate individual. I do not recall doing so, since we were very carefully nurtured to have respect for others.

Nevertheless, my brother and I were often disobedient, leading to terrible thrashings from our father. This was usually out of all proportion to the offence. Beatings, however, did not make us tough. They made us frightened. But they were part of the way many parents behaved in those days.

At the age of 10, German girls were pressured to join the *Jungmädll* (young maiden) association, a younger version of the BDM, the union of older German girls which was an adjunct of the *Hitlerjugend*. This gave access to marvellous sports programs and a variety of social and political activities. In June 1945 I had a tearful argument with my mother, who did not want me to join. My father must have told her to let me be. 'What harm is there in it now?' he would have asked, adding, 'The War with Germany is over.'

Only Japan fought on. On reflection now, it is odd that all this political activity went on in the camp for a few more months. So I was permitted to participate.

Every morning at seven o'clock we were primed with a run around the camp. Sports uniforms were obligatory. Mother, who thought them ugly, tailored me a smart pair of black shorts. When I turned up in my different outfit, I was pelted with a shower of stones, and ran home crying. Mother then modified my shorts into bloomers so I could avoid further pain.

As well as these black bloomers for sport, girls were expected to wear a white shirt and a Berchtesgaden cardigan with a knotted leather ornament, rather like a serviette holder. My mother refused to knit me the traditional cardigan Hitler had adopted as a youth costume or get me a leather tie-holder. I suffered intensely for this. I begged her to let me wear one of those pretty black Berchtesgaden cardigans with red and green borders. '*Nein!*' She was adamant.

I eventually inherited a hand-me-down cardigan and mother changed the 'uniform' with Iranian buttons of silver. Frequently there were tensions between what my parents insisted on and the unwritten rules of camp society or the playground. Such differences of opinion are, of course, a universal feature of childhood, but within an institution they are magnified into conflict.

I also suffered stoning for my religious beliefs.

My parents had not instructed us in any particular religion, although in Iran when we were very small, my mother had prayed with us every night before we went to sleep. We used a rhyme from her childhood: *Lieber Gott, mach mich fromm, dass ich in den Himmel komm* (Dear God, make me pious, that I may enter Heaven). For that reason, perhaps, I did have some notion of God. When a group of children who had absorbed a good measure of anti-Christian Nazi mythology once asked me: 'Do you believe in God?' I hesitated, then said 'Yes'. A shower of stones—some quite large—descended on me. Beware the honest truth! Such incidents taught me to be more circumspect—and that was a pity.

Looking back, I am now extremely pleased that my mother taught us that it isn't necessary to please other people simply by following their views or actions. She helped us acquire some backbone and prepared us to be intellectually independent of conformity for its own sake, including unquestioning ideological conformity. But it took many years for that message to filter down into my actions.

We children nevertheless became acquiescent in day-to-day relationships because of the pressure of family life and the severity of our father's rod. As for belief in God, I later learned that it must be tested with occasional challenges. This helps to focus on what is valuable in one's relationship with an unknown deity. It also provides insights into secular moral realities, and supports relationships with non-believers.

Although the various groups in the camp held their own religious services once a week, my family did not attend the Catholic Masses. There may have been a tension between my father's agnostic version of his Catholicism and my mother's acculturation into the Lutheran faith which she had given up in order to marry her Catholic husband. When the Catholic Relief Agency brought comfort parcels for interned Catholics, my father stood proudly on his principles. 'I have not practised the Catholic religion. I have no right to accept favours from them now that I am in distress,' he said.

He may have taken a different position when small amounts of money appeared from the German government. After all, his country owed him something for depriving him of his professional earnings and of the future he had planned for his family. Germany had taken over Austria, and had prepared the way politically for the *Anschluss*. I'm sure he would have thought that the German government, which had taken over his official papers from Austrian embassies, and whose War had landed him in this mess, owed him quite a lot. He may have registered himself as loyal to his own government rather than voice criticism of it, to be branded a traitor. The official policy of the Third Reich was that Austrian nationalists, his preferred position, were secessionists, a treasonable offence.

There was a Capuchin monk in Compound A who lived in one of two or three large white tents near the boundary. My parents thought that we children ought to get some religious instruction from him in order to offset the secular and immoral influences that were affecting us. We went there for instruction a few times, but then the man was moved from Camp 3. So my parents' religious plan for us came to nothing.

How did that mixture of people in the camp, with its various religious affiliations, function as a community? Long periods of truce between people were interrupted with squabbles of various kinds. Children could find themselves scapegoated if they proved immoderate or disobedient, sometimes thrashed by someone else's parent for no good reason.

Even adults were observed to punch one another for insulting someone else's children. Nevertheless, there was a set of rules which were made clear to adults, about which we knew little. In them, religion was mixed up with German politics and the aspirations of the Third Reich.

Perhaps I have overstated the differences of behaviour between those who were fundamentalists and others. I was a simple child who saw things in black and white. I viewed my parents as nuisances as far as my need to belong was concerned. Our parents weren't the only ones in the minority who were not from Palestine. There were also the Italians from Singapore and others from Malaya who had worked on the rubber plantations, as well as the Lutheran missionaries from New Guinea. Our parents seemed to associate more with people who had not come from Palestine. But every group must have had members who were political fellow-travellers with Germany's and Italy's governments, as well as those who clung on sceptically as citizens, hoping for a change. There were also those who refused to be associated with Fascist regimes.

My parents did not take a conspicuous, public anti-Fascist stance. Would I as an adult have had the courage under such cramped conditions with belligerent people to do so? I somehow doubt it—with regret. But who knows?

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