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## Shadows and Flames

Our future was frighteningly uncertain. Would all internees be repatriated? Was a watch kept on people in the camp by the authorities in Germany? What reprisals would there be if Germany won the War, or lost it? The degree of community ignorance may be demonstrated in that it took many years to convince my mother that the Holocaust had happened, even though she despised Nazi ideology, Nazi thugs, who claimed that 'the future belongs to us'. My parents were not deceived by this rhetoric of exclusion.

'I felt very troubled on my visit home with you in 1937,' my mother used to say, 'when "*Griiss Gott*" (God be with you) was replaced by that idiotic "*Heil Hitler*" greeting.' The old monarchical order in Germany, with Kaiser Wilhelm at the head, was a political order with which she could identify. She accepted the old-world militarism of Prussia for its defence of hearth and homeland. My father's family still clung emotionally to a monarchical political order 11 years after the War had ended. Father himself did not. He was a social democrat. My mother was to become one as well, though always a little more to the Left than he. Yet she always retained her admiration for Kaiser Wilhelm, acquired from her local community in childhood.

My parents realised, I suppose, that I would be ostracised if I opted out of the political youth union which all 10-year-olds in the camp were pressured to join. In those days the uniforms in which people dressed, the swastika, the many flags, emblems and other ceremonial paraphernalia just seemed to me a great novelty. It had no sinister associations for us. Many Germans admired the ceremonial occasions staged by British royalty. The military flavour of the German version of pomp and circumstance

in the late 1930s and early '40s did not leave the nasty taste in the mouth it did after 1945. It is amazing how innocent one can be in a familiar setting, then so disgusted by later awareness of it, or its stereotypes.

Perhaps my parents permitted me to belong to the youth league at that eleventh hour of German nationalism because it separated the sexes and afforded some protection from free-running male teenagers. Keeping us safe and obedient was a burden to them. I once got the most hideous thrashing from my father for running barefoot against his wishes in a game of skill and speed.

He may have had good reasons for insisting that my clogs stay on. Hookworm was no doubt prevalent and difficult to treat. Thirty lashes was what he threatened and that's what he stuck to, despite my mother's protests.

In my mind's eye is a second hut that was never there.

It stands at one end of the parade ground, and I am at the opposite end. I hear the screams of a girl across the empty space. I am the girl, but the observer too. The horror and the pain of this are muted now, but the experience has never left me. It has become a symbol of all the beatings of children in the camp.

When the birch broke, my father took his belt to complete the task. I could not sit down for three days. After that my blistered buttocks turned black. That was the worst beating he ever gave me. That was sadism, Nazi style. And yet, someone who found such treatment of us abhorrent, who had reason to think the worst of him, informed me that my father was never a Nazi. Internment brought out the worst in some parents.

This beating cast a long shadow over my relationship with my father.

At times the approval of my peers was more important than obeying my parents, despite such consequences. That's exactly what they feared. Once we left the camp, my father stopped beating me with his rod. Only an occasional whack across my head relieved his anger with me, although Peter continued to be beaten and humiliated. Sometimes I wondered if we would end up with brain damage or defective ears. My father's authority was at this time more often expressed by his letting fly heavy clubs of words, centred on my stupidity. I had no weapons against him. I became more stubborn and obstinate.

The Palestinian Germans who set the tone in the camp were not intrinsically bad. While my family had been used to a fairly nomadic lifestyle before the War, they had lived for generations in their settled communities in Palestine. Their communal culture was well formed. In the early 1940s, a homogeneous majority in a wretched situation, the Templers were ideally placed to protect their preferred manner of social organisation and ideology. As a group they redirected their festering frustrations against non-conformists and other vulnerable scapegoats, for instance by calling them 'spies'.

Their use of the patois of street Arabic and Swabian dialect demonstrates their need to communicate exclusively among themselves. It was a way of keeping unwelcome listeners out. That private language of course irritated 'outsiders'. We found out, for instance, that *Patie(a)ch* (German phonology) meant melon-head. Just as birds carry seeds that sprout elsewhere, their children carried their dialect across the frontier to evolve further.

Everyone was aware of tragedies in the camp. One Lutheran missionary family lost two out of four children in different accidents. One child died when a tip-truck emptied its load of wood where the little boy was playing. The other was burnt alive. I recall the day when my father foolishly put his head round the dining room door and yelled 'Fire! Fire!' People fell over each other in the rush to get out. Everyone thought: 'Is it my hut?' People used to make little ovens from large empty tins of preserves, with chimneys from smaller tins, to heat up the damp, cold huts in winter.

We saw the flames leap high and two brave men force their way into the burning building to save the two children who were sleeping inside. I overheard that the family had been drying napkins near the stove. We thronged around the burning hut and saw one child carried to safety. It was too late for the other.

One morning I heard some boys whispering about a shocking sight. They offered to take me into the men's showers which were out of bounds for girls. There, hanging naked from a wooden beam, a rope tied round his neck, was one of the camp's leaders. I wonder now whether this happened after the War had taken its fateful course against Nazi Germany's vain ambitions, and Hitler was known to be dead.

Once, earlier, I think and on a Good Friday, I saw Mr Zubeck parading naked in the camp carriageway, preaching atonement. He tied a crucifix high on a pole. A curious, baffled and mumbling crowd gathered.

Some jeered, while others took pity on Mr Zubeck. It was not the only 'madness' in the camp. Herr Rosenthal was seen one night trying to dig up the grave of the Biblical Abraham. Most of the rest of us were watching the amazing spectacle of the Aurora Australis sending up its flares of russet, orange and blue into the dark southern night sky.

We were forced early into close observation of bizarre adult behaviour. This tended to make us prematurely serious. Outsiders looking on may have found camp activities hilarious. The Australian garrison must have watched in a constant state of amazement. They were generally kindly men with a job to do, probably bored beyond endurance.

Some soldiers joined us for the films that were shown occasionally. Many of these were silent. A few, with a talking soundtrack, I remember well. There was *Heimat*, for instance, that evocation of the German homeland. Everybody cried nostalgically as a group of fair-haired children sang like angels the well-known German folk song *Weisst Du wie viel Sterne stehen an dem blauen Himmelsfeld?* (Do you know how many stars stand in the blue field of sky?). This goes on to speak of God's protective power. It is a simple song, often sung to reassure children.

I also recall a gripping epic of the American Wild West, with its ugly anti-Indian, pro-settler, pro-home-and-hearth message, rather like John Ford's *The Seekers*. I assume, sadly, that we sided with the settlers, but can't be sure. Then there was the film about girlish spite in a school, in which Deanna Durban acted the role of a whistling cyclist. This one was responsible for my terror at possibly becoming a victim at an Australian school after the War. Nasty English or Australian girls were one and the same. We knew no difference. How odd! How sensitive! It must have been a harmless enough film.

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