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After the War

After the War, the camp began slowly to empty, and most residents of Compound D departed. Japanese families came to live in Compound A. We then moved into D, but spent a lot of time looking through the wire at the Japanese internees. I picked up from the adults around me that the Japanese did not value our civilised attitude to horticulture. I believed that when they came, the Japanese destroyed all our gardens. This was because I had not seen it was really the Germans who had done that, to deprive those who came to replace us of our produce. Whole families destroyed their gardens rather than let the Japanese have them.

My family and one other in Compound A had apparently left their vegetable patch undisturbed. Other vandals could not cope with this, so destroyed ours as well. My brother Peter told me how he watched through the wires an old Japanese man attempt to resuscitate a strawberry patch with a watering can.

Rules in the camp were relaxed at the end of the War. I presume the guards were as anxious as we were to get home to their families. After the armistice, we were permitted to leave the camp occasionally, under armed escort. We walked along dirt roads through the property of local farmers, opening and closing gates as we were commanded, and then along a public approach to the Waranga Basin. We explored the adjacent quarry for simple treasures and discovered rabbit holes, which we poked with sticks. When one emerged and shot off in fright, a wild chase ensued, accompanied by our shouts of delight, and always ending with our prey escaping.

Above the muddy bottom of the Waranga Basin, Peter and I made pathetic attempts to learn to swim. The water seemed to offer us no buoyancy. We sank like pieces of metal. The Basin presented a desolate scene, especially when the sky was overcast. The grey water lapped knee-deep against stands of dead eucalypts, a *pavane* on the death of trees.

Nevertheless, we loved these excursions, which included autumn mushrooming trips. We noticed the smallest things as the seasons changed. We caught the bitter fragrance of peppercorn tree fronds along the way, and noted colourful broken plates sticking out of rubbish piles under the dead oleander bushes deprived of water, in the ruins of someone's abandoned house.

Once as we returned home in the late afternoon, a soldier caught a silver snake as it slipped into a hole. Holding its tail, he pulled at it in a tug of war. He then whirled the body back through the air and cracked it like a whip. He broke its back. Then he dropped it unconcernedly on the ground.

The snake slithered into its hole as best it could. Our screams half froze in our mouths as we watched. A translator was on hand to report on the soldier's amused grunt: 'Of course she's poisonous, but don't fear. She'll only last until sundown. That'll finish her off.'

Peter and I and a couple of friends went on a yabbing expedition to a dam quite close to the camp. Arming ourselves with empty jam tins, a short piece of string and a bait of earthworms, we set our traps and sat like experienced anglers waiting for one of the denizens of the deep to enter and take the bait. We came home with one or two samples each. We waited hungrily as my mother quickly steamed them for us. Then while we turned our backs for a few minutes, waiting for the three tiny morsels to cool down inside their armoured shells, our little brother, swift as a waterbird, devoured the lot. This incident tickled mother's fancy.

My father told me years later that before the men were released from the camp each family was examined for its political status and therefore its fate. A Committee of Inquiry, presided over by Justice Simpson, a judge from Tasmania, was set up to examine possible deportations for Nazi die-hards, and what to do with those who wanted to be repatriated or to stay in Australia. People with contentious claims were released later, after investigation by another arbiter, Judge Hutchins.

Although our father was told that our family would make good migrants, he held out to have us repatriated to Iran. He knew that his own homeland was suffering after the War, and he had no professional connections there.

The official response was that no ships were going to the Persian Gulf. He did not know that the British government had pressured the Iranian authorities not to allow the former 'enemies of Britain' back into oil-rich Iran. When we missed out on repatriation to Europe, my father reluctantly sought release to Melbourne. We stayed behind in the camp until he had established himself. He was playing for time, hoping the Australian authorities would make future transport possible.

The suggestion of Melbourne as our future home was sensible, if daunting. My parents had left their homelands so long before that they had no assets there. My mother's family in Breslau had suffered terribly towards the end of the War, and had fled westwards to Zwickau.

People from the camp who wanted to stay in Australia could not leave it until their breadwinners had found work and accommodation for them. There were no migrant holding centres then, no English-language classes, no employment agencies designed to help immigrants or ex-prisoners find work.

So my father left the camp alone to look for work in Melbourne. At first he shovelled sugar at Melbourne's docks but was immediately told by unionists to 'Slow down, mate. What's the hurry?'

My mother had a terrible time after my father left us. We had by then moved into Compound D, to make room for the Japanese families awaiting deportation. She was in sole charge of three lively young children who were always getting under other people's feet. This was when she was hauled before the committee that supervised public order, and was strongly rebuked by it for her youngest son's habit of appearing in people's rooms uninvited. Herbert was not yet two years old. Without my father, my mother had no one to protect her from the bullies.

This text is taken from *At Home in Exile: A Memoir*, by Helga M. Griffin,
published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AHE.2021.12