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Stranded in Exile

The housing shortage in Melbourne after the War was critical, especially for families. Children were not usually made welcome, as if equated with cats and dogs. From the camp, my mother used to remonstrate with Rudolf by letter when he wrote to report yet another knockback. ‘Tell these people that our children are well brought up, that they do what we tell them, and that they have good manners and will not tear the walls apart!’

The weeks dragged on as my mother and we children remained behind barbed wire while Rudolf lined up in the middle of the night with other hopefuls outside the offices of the Melbourne *Age*. These other homeless and unemployed people all wanted a newspaper ‘hot off the press before the ink was dry’.

In search of a job or accommodation, my father caught the first available bus or train, anxious to be at the head of the queue. Usually, however, he found that others had beaten him. Then he had to wait, sometimes for a long time, for his turn to be interviewed. Although he spoke school English reasonably fluently, it was with a heavy accent, with gaps and awkward grammatical constructions. His imperfect language, after a bitter War when foreigners were not well accepted, was a problem for some landlords and employers. They wanted only those whose first language was English.

My father was caught in a vicious cycle: without a job, he had no means to pay for accommodation; with a job, there would be no time to look for it, except in the early mornings or late in the evenings.

Eventually, Rudolf was given a job as a draughtsman with Woodall Duckham, a construction company in the city which at the time was building gas storage cylinders in the Melbourne suburb of Highett. Their office was near Spencer Street Station, a blessing for someone who had constantly to travel by bus, tram or train seeking a home for his family.

Its director had no animosity towards ex-internees. His patience, however, did not stretch to my father's disappearances for a couple of hours through the day every week. He threatened him with dismissal if he did not put in his full time at work. Apart from the urgent need to find somewhere for us to live, Rudolf may also have been insensitive to such strict routine, never having experienced rigid timekeeping at work. In Iran he had worked on a grand scale and for very long hours. His five years in the camp, largely without paid work, and wearing whatever he pleased, also did not help him easily become an office cipher in a suit.

We were, however, enthusiastic that he had at last found paid work, and that we would soon be able to join him.

Suitable housing remained an obstacle. Finding space for a family of foreigners, three of whom were children, was much harder than finding a room to let for one single mature man, even one just out of prison. My father's letters became despondent again. He had not expected his wife to reproach him with such impatience. Her gloom became an affront to his exertions on our behalf.

Then at last came the telegram, urging her to 'pack up immediately'. She stored everything except some basic clothes in cardboard boxes ready for the signal to leave. Then another letter came, with a different message. In tears of rage she unpacked the stack of boxes containing virtually everything we possessed.

'That damned telegram!' she exclaimed. In a letter to him, she wrote: 'Don't you realise how much work was involved packing with three young children? And all for nothing! Why are you so impractical? So inconsiderate? I'll just resign myself to spending the rest of my life here in this camp while you have your freedom.'

She did not seem able to comprehend how difficult it was for him. Another adult from the camp later hinted to me that there were other problems between them, which had developed in the camp, and of which we knew nothing. Despite his short stature and glass eye, my father

charmed women. That admirable person, my mother, carried formidable grudges for suspected wrongs. Her deep emotions made her very human to us. We loved her wholeheartedly, but ducked away from her anger, her tongue, her sulking.

As a youth in Europe, my father had been an adventurer. But in domestic life he was not a practical man. Perhaps he had begun to rely too much on his wife's management skills. After internment he could not find work appropriate to his qualifications, because they were not recognised in Australia. The War had destroyed his career and deprived him of professional standing.

His confidence was affected. Despite the tight rein he kept on Peter and me, we respected him, with love and a tinge of fear. His pure love for his infant son, Herbert, reminded us of the man we had known in early childhood. That man had not completely disappeared. But because he never hugged us, we were much emotionally closer to our mother.

Our family was well aware that many people like us were much worse off during and after the War. We might have ended up in a Siberian labour camp, or have been killed by bombs. Grim news from the homelands of my parents trickled in by mail. My own family had been spared the sufferings of their relatives.

Whether they had been directly implicated or not, a sense of guilt must have hung over much of Germany-Austria for that woeful catastrophe which German militarism and arrogance had spawned from its so-called civilisation. Post-internment depression also gnawed away at both my father and my mother. I can't speak for my brother, but I caught some of that feeling myself. We felt ourselves locked in by fears about the future.

As our father tried to solve the problem of working his full week while looking for family accommodation, he found temporary lodgings for himself with an old couple near St Kilda beach. Eventually he found some living quarters for us all in a boarding house in Park Street, not far from where he had been living.

At last we were able to join him. It was not long before Christmas 1946. I was then 11 years old. Peter was eight, and Herbert was almost two.

That Christmas of 1946 has been wiped from my mind. It has lost its importance in the queue of remembered experiences. The greatest of these was seeing our father again in early December. He blessed the ceremony of reunion by buying us our first ice-cream of freedom, a neat little sandwich of frozen vanilla cream with the label Sennitts on the packet. It was the most delicious food I had ever tasted. Not only was this truly exquisite vanilla cream melting on my tongue in the heat, but in my head it tasted of freedom and of a future near the sea.

Everything was new. So much space now, and so many noisy vehicles moving about! I felt the sea breeze on my bare arms and heard gulls calling to one another. We ate our ice-creams on a lawn under a date palm, one of a stately row. I looked at these symmetrical trees and found them strangely out of place after the landscape of scattered, twisted eucalypts at Tatura. ‘How out of place they seem here!’ I remarked to father. ‘How they must miss their desert homeland. Why did people bring them here? They don’t look as if they really belong.’

Then, without giving this another thought, I took off down the park, leaping over every seat. *Oh Freude! Und Freiheit!* (Oh joy! And freedom!).

My parents swiftly drew my attention to this now unseemly behaviour. ‘Young girls do not behave like this in cities!’ my father cautioned. I began to sense in myself the beginnings of a new kind of psychological unease that was to last for years. It partnered my sense of dislocation. We lacked the confidence of tourists. At the time we had an uneasy feeling that we were not supposed to be in Australia. I have heard other migrants and prisoners speak of this. The problem is particularly acute for those separated from loved ones—which of course we were not—but also when accompanied by the onset of puberty. We were now in a place where, apart from family talk, we children and our mother could not understand anything anyone was saying a lot of the time.

While mother sorted out our possessions, my father took us to see where he had been living on his own. It was only a few blocks away. Entering a single-fronted terrace house we walked down a dark passage into an equally dark sitting room at the back. All the blinds were drawn.

I later learned that this was the custom. Heat was kept out in summer and furnishings were protected from sunlight, producing what I always thought of as an atmosphere as depressing as funeral parlours which, of course, I had never entered.

The radio was blaring. Often later on while passing someone's open window, I would hear the energetic voice of a racing or football commentator, slurring his words and shouting. I also caught a lingering whiff of gas, as if the stove was leaking. This was my introduction to domestic Australia.

The old couple were happy to meet Rudi's children. They took Peter and me to see their pets in their tiny backyard. There were two elegant greyhounds with wire cages over their dribbling mouths. Father explained that, apart from renting out his room, the couple raced the dogs for money.

St Kilda, that suburb with its large amusement park and pavilion by the sea, was then a sleazy haunt. Later I was to hear that numbers of foreign professionals and some quacks, without a licence to practise, found work there. Nor did I know that a network, by word of mouth, brought customers to prostitutes, patients to doctors and dentists, and anyone who needed them to backyard abortionists. Black market services were cheaper. All manner of trading was done via back stairs leading to unregistered businesses.

Perhaps that was how my mother was given a job sewing men's suits for a factory owner. She worked in the bedroom of the lodgings Rudolf had found for us. We were poor. We could not afford to buy the mouth-watering Continental cakes of Acland Street.

Our lodgings in Park Street were in a shared Federation house with gargoyle-like ornaments on the corners of a pitched roof. The front entrance was from a small angled verandah. A corridor ran down the middle of the house between rooms each side, ending in a kitchen at the back. The house belonged to a Communist who rented out several of its rooms. Mrs Hall was the landlady.

My parents took two adjoining bedrooms. They shared theirs with Herbert, and turned the other into a lounge. We shared the toilet, bathroom and kitchen with another couple, on a roster system. Peter and I shared a sleep-out in the small backyard under a well-grown tree with pendulous branches.

We lived like strangers on the margins of somebody else's life. The lounge and sleep-out were temporary retreats.

When Mrs Hall was in a benevolent mood, she would invite us into her lounge to listen to the pianola. It was a kind of magic. While someone pumped the pedal near the ground, the keys of the piano played themselves, without hands, while a thick beige paper with patterns of holes, the musical code, emerged at the back of the machine.

The Teddy Bears' Picnic and *My Canary Has Circles Under Its Eyes* were the names of two tunes we often heard clink-clonking across the keyboard. Without English, the strange names left an impression on us. And yes, that's where I heard Schubert's *Marche Militaire*, for four hands, for the first time.

Father went by train to work, and our mother cleaned up then spent the day on her Singer machine battling with the intricately tailored designs of men's suits in worsted woollen cloth. It was difficult to keep us occupied, since we had no toys. To entertain ourselves between meals, we had to wander the parks and streets.

Twice I had the disturbing experience of being shadowed by men. One loiterer followed me into the sea where I was wading and tried to fondle me. The other appeared several times in the park. From the swings on which I liked to go very high, I could see him positioned below, waiting.

I was oblivious to such dangers. I only realised that something was wrong when he tried to follow me into the public toilets. I outsmarted him by changing my mind at the last moment. I quickly hustled my brothers home, relieved I had them with me. I was too shy to tell my parents, even though I had to make excuses for staying home afterwards for days at a time. The man seemed not to have followed us home.

Our enforced walks, playing in the park or paddling along the beach were not always happy occasions. Once I was wading perhaps too deep when a sudden wave took me out of my depth. Not being a swimmer, I began to thrash about anxiously, struggling. I gulped down mouthfuls of salt water and thought that I must surely drown. Then, suddenly, a pair of strong hands pulled me out of the waves, and carried me back to the beach.

This episode must have lasted a mere few minutes although it seemed a long time. I don't know how I got home. Presumably we sat on the sand until I recovered. Mother was beside herself with anxiety when I reported

the incident and forbade me from going into the water unless an adult was there. I did not venture into deep water again without remembering my fear.

One day, in late December 1946 or early January 1947, father read on the front page of his newspaper that two men and a woman had been caught robbing one of Melbourne's largest banks. He noted with amazement that two of the three were the couple renting the room next to ours. It was clearly time to move somewhere else.

By now my mother had lost her job as a seamstress. Her work was too slow for the factory, and too perfect, she was told, for proper payment. They didn't want a tailor. The agent could no longer use her.

The plight of our family touched the heart of an acquaintance who had been interned in Tatura in the single men's camp. He had also worked as an engineer in Iran. There was some solidarity among the internees from Iran. We used to meet them in city cafes or walk with them in the parks. Wilhelm Zapf, a fellow Austrian from Graz, had been associated with my father's work but, as an ex-officer of the Austrian Imperial Army in World War I and with university credentials as an engineer, he had held a higher position than my father. He became something of a patron to my parents. He offered them a lifeline.

Mr Zapf now lived in Williamstown, a Melbourne port suburb, where he rented a room in what had been a small private hospital. The building's owner, Sister Flower, had been the hospital's Matron. With a few simple alterations she had turned it into a boarding-house at this time when rented accommodation was scarce. A single woman all her life, she had little patience with children and refused to rent rooms to families.

She became very fond of the elegantly mannered Mr Zapf, and gave in to his strong recommendation that the Girschik family were reliable and of good character. Sister Flower thus took in my parents as tenants on condition that Peter and I were boarded out and only came 'home' for school holidays. Then we had to keep very quiet or make ourselves scarce.

Oddly enough, she fell in love with my brother Herbert at first sight. He was so cute and angelic as a two-year-old. But we were to negotiate our short time in Williamstown with considerable discretion. Appalled by her attitudes, Mr Zapf and my parents were to refer to her as the Dragon Flower Lady, or just Dragon Flower—always behind her back of course.

The school year was approaching fast. Father had already set in train a solution to the problem of our education. He did not wish us to attend state schools, he said, despite mother's argument that a public education was what we needed. She was much more of a socialist than he would ever be, although she retained a touch of snobbery.

Father argued that, as ex-enemy aliens, we would be more kindly treated by members of a religious order. Besides, state schools did not take boarders. My mother argued back, and they compromised over the Quakers. But the Quakers could not help us in any way, either with accommodation or with schooling.

Every educational institution seemed to have been impoverished by the War. My father tried to secure us separate boarding facilities in institutions run by people he could trust. He felt awkward about begging for charity, but saw this as the only way out.

His view had been that he did not deserve support from the Catholic Church he had abandoned years before. But now he felt he had no choice. Approaching the Catholic Education Office, he asked for a list of the addresses of all Catholic boarding schools. Someone might take pity on and take in his children for next to nothing, with the promise of remuneration when he could pay them back. He wrote to secondary schools on my behalf, and to those who took in boarders at primary level for Peter.

He received many letters back from schools which told him they were too poor to dispense charity. Four schools did offer a place, three of them run by Mercy nuns. Peter was booked into Padua, or Star of the Sea Convent, with the Sisters of Mercy, on Mornington Peninsula. I was intended for the Mercy nuns in East Ballarat.

We were going through the list of items boarders were obliged to bring to this school, including a sports uniform, tennis racquet and hockey stick, when a letter arrived from the Mother Superior of the Convent of Mercy in Fitzroy in inner Melbourne. The school was the Academy of Mary Immaculate.

The requirements for a boarder there were far less demanding. Even the tennis racquet was optional. Having prepared myself for a school in the country with large playing fields, I was persuaded by father that it would be cheaper to send me to Fitzroy. He would also save the monthly train fare each way.

My mother brought some enthusiasm to purchasing two summer school uniforms with a loan she had procured. She would also save money by making the winter uniforms herself, using the summer ones as a model. Every item was marked with my name which she embroidered on tapes in case the indelible ink washed out. An inventory of my belongings was glued into the lid of my case.

The Academy's uniform was a dark blue pleated dress in light-weight material with a sewn-on tie and a detachable white collar that could be starched. 'That navy blazer is fine doctors' flannel,' my mother remarked. 'That's expensive quality cloth.' The breast pocket carried the school emblem. A shiny metal brooch with the same emblem had to be pinned onto the tie. A hat band with embroidery of the emblem ran around the cream panama summer hat and its dark velour winter twin.

This formal outfit made the school seem a very special kind of place. The emblem was a shield-like mirror flanked by fleurs-de-lis, above a scroll with the Latin motto *Speculum Sine Macula*. Father translated this for me as 'mirror without stain'. A sprig of wattle below the shield was obviously a reference to Australia. My parents were right in thinking that the shield-mirror stood for chivalry and refinement, although only my father would have known that the school motto had a specific moral and religious reference to the Virgin Mary of Catholic belief.

I wondered whether Mary Immaculate was the headmistress. 'No,' my father laughed, 'the school was named for Mary.' He did not go on to explain the theology of Mary, the virginal Mother of God whom Catholics believe was born without sin almost 2,000 years ago.

My mother was enthusiastic about my school. She herself had only had the simplest, shortest educational opportunities. She hoped for better for me. Apart from being somewhat possessive of my love, she never begrudged me anything.

There was now little time to lose. In a fit of panic, my mother suggested to my father that they drill me in the basics of the Catholic religion in which she was no expert and which my father had not practised for years. They did it together, so that my abysmal ignorance would not be too obvious to the nuns.

Had my father concealed my pagan state from them? Had he merely stated that I was a baptised Catholic, and that Iran had no churches to attend? 'For goodness sake, don't make it obvious how little you know,' advised my mother. 'They do realise you could not make your first Communion in Iran or in the camp.'

They fell over each other's sentences in their attempts to give me an intensive course on the basic teachings of the Catholic religion. 'Don't forget that God is a Trinity.' 'That means that he consists of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.' 'Each with a separate personality, but actually united into one. It is said to be the great mystery of faith, that the Three are One!' 'And you must know something about the Last Supper: when Jesus, the Lord of our religion, met up with some of his Apostles for his last meal with them.' 'Before he was killed ... ' '... by being nailed to a cross soon after.' 'And that he rose from the dead!' 'You better learn the names of the twelve apostles who followed Jesus around.' 'They were his helpers.' 'And don't forget that Judas was the bad one who betrayed Jesus,' said my father. '... and that young John was the one he loved best,' my mother added.

'Now repeat to us what we have just told you.'

There was one last word of advice: 'Don't show your ignorance. Just keep quiet. Don't ask questions. Learn by listening carefully!' 'And, above all, Be Grateful.' 'Be grateful to them at all times.' 'We are in their debt.'

Peter was packed off to the convent school at Mornington at the end of a long train and bus journey. He was only eight and my heart bled for him as we said goodbye. Mother's sorrow at losing her little darling was deep and lasting. Father hid his feelings. 'It will make a man of him,' he used to say whenever Peter had to face situations that were overwhelming for a sensitive child.

The following day, I was to be dispatched to the Convent of Mercy boarding house in the grounds of the Academy of Mary Immaculate.

It was for my brother and me a radical change to be removed from our parents so soon after the prison camp. It was particularly devastating for eight-year-old Peter who, I believe, was traumatised by the experience for many years after he left school. He did not complain, but it was obvious to me. It never occurred to me that I might have suffered some aspects of trauma as well. This concept had not become commonly understood.

Some years later, when I was 18, a friend was to describe me as 'like a shy doe that had suddenly reached the end of a dark forest and was worried about the open field'. Nowadays in crowds I see the occasional young girl from south-east Asia who has that all-too-sensitive shy look about her. It reminds me of what we once were.

My brother Herbert was also to absorb some trauma from his parents. As a child he never quite fitted in as an Australian. He, too, was lonely.

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