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Integration

This book is about my life before I married. Some early readers of this story of my youth have asked me: 'And what happened next? How many children did you have? Did you retain your religious faith? Did you ever complete your University degree?'

The landscape of my long-ago memories is of course larger than the slice of life I have presented in detail here. In this book I have taken the effects of War and the displacement of my family as the crucial features of the life I was offered, out of which I had to find my own way. I have offered only my voice telling about the camp, that period of my life on which those with no personal experience have been so eager to comment. Most older inmates could not discuss it for many years. Some still cannot.

My brother Peter says he had a happy time in the camp. And I reply: 'But you were a boy!' Other younger boys also remember happy games. Girls were more vulnerable. We are sad about different things.

My story is only one of those telling what happened to displaced children, often much more terribly, and all over the world. My experience of trying to forge an identity was something all children have to do. They are obliged one day to join the world of the adults who control the rules. It is a complex business for most. The demands of their parents and culture have to be set against personal temperament and vision. There are always episodes of wanting to escape from it all.

Beyond what I have described in this book lie important issues and a totally different set of circumstances: my adult life. My marriage produced seven children in ten years. Both my brothers made careers in Australia, married

and also had children. Three of my sons and three daughters survived their Australian births and were raised by Jim and me in a number of locations, including Melbourne, Port Moresby, Townsville and Canberra.

Looking at her contemporaries and comparing, one of my daughters has remarked that our marriage, now in its fiftieth year, has outlasted the proverbial bottle of Tabasco sauce. The dynamics of traditional family life used to place less emphasis on the social and intellectual needs of the mother. Indeed, the practical necessities and basic work demanded by a large family obliterated the egocentric search for meaning and purpose of my younger days.

By working as an adult for others, without expectations and through exchanging love, I did manage to achieve personal integration. In a situation such as mine, one does not have to search for a role, or for identity. As some mystics say, by losing yourself you find yourself. The self is validated by becoming less important but also, paradoxically, stronger. Parents and others who serve people for no obvious reward will understand what I am saying.

The modern emphasis on personal fulfilment, worth and recognition tends to obscure such a reality. I, too, have been affected by contemporary demands that I balance my role as donor of my love and service with my personal needs. Over time, this has meant completing my tertiary education in altogether different subjects, mainly History, Anthropology and Archaeology, plus a Diploma in Education. These have helped me earn money for my family.

My father was eventually able to practise in Australia the engineering for which he had been trained. He laid the second railway line between Kalgoorlie and Perth, and oversaw the construction of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He reluctantly abandoned other engineering projects when illness interfered with his energetic personality. This was not until his late seventies. My mother outlived him by four years.

‘What about your religious life?’ people ask me. I remain a Catholic by orientation, because of my love of the Church’s great intellectual, artistic and liturgical traditions, and because of its international character. At the core of Catholicism is its Christian foundation, and the belief that at birth all people are of equal worth in the eyes of their Creator. Despite serious blots on its history, and despite the hypocrisy of many of its clergy, who

have abused their power and trust, for me its worth is maintained by those courageous Catholics who have committed their lives to work for justice and the alleviation of the lot of poor and suffering humanity.

But as I grow older, dogma, formalities and the need to be certain have been replaced by an emphasis on humane values, on spirituality and ecumenism. I feel personally responsible for my actions without having to be told by an exclusive club of single men, our institutionalised, unmarried clergy, how to behave. The Christian Church is mine and ours as much as it belongs to those who make the rules about who is worthy, and who may fully belong.

I attended Mass and daily Communion for years in my maturity, and also stayed away from the Church for long periods. This was in reaction to the rules which the celibate clergy have designed and the laity are obliged to observe. I am amazed by the widespread accommodation of Catholics who do not speak out about their quiet rebellions, but pretend to be conformists. Like a dolphin I have moved in and out of the depths, absorbing the intensity of two separate, but overlapping domains, the religious and the secular life.

I receive much comfort in my heart as I contemplate the Australian countryside, with its durable, stoic character. It underpins my sense of what is sacred. But what matters is also anchored in the compassion that people bring to each other. I have little empathy with the second-rate quasi-pop music of our modern parish churches, an attempt at being up-to-date. When I am at Mass I pray for people who are victims of political regimes or religious persecution, the kind of cause for which Jesus died on the Cross. Religion should not be a numbers game, suggesting that popularity equals greatest relevance.

I have attended the churches and sacred places of other religions. I disown the traditional Catholic claim that only we have 'the truth' or that we can know exclusively 'the mind of God'. Nor have I ever understood the mystery of evil: how a well-educated nation like Germany could give overwhelming support to a criminal government and its lunatic leader.

Aside from the frame one places around personal experience in the telling of it, history has an odd way of presenting its own patterns and connecting currents in the landscape of memory. Reviewing and assessing my life, I can see four obvious themes in my life.

First, was it so odd that my family was brought here as prisoners against our will? After all, this continent was developed by prisoners who were dumped here from another part of the world. They then performed the basic labour that supported colonial life. Was our enforced transportation so different?

Second, a senior academic psychiatrist at a Sydney-based university has come up with the theory that people (especially foreigners) who have been placed in long-term 'detention' develop an obsessive preoccupation, not so much with the past as with the future. That certainly fits my profile after my release.

Third, most days of the week, I drive my car to the city of Canberra where I now live, along an arterial road that connects a major road and a highway. This road is called William Slim Drive. How did it come about that Slim, my father and I came into such strange alignment with one another? As acting Major-General commanding the 10th Indian Division of the British Army, Slim imprisoned my father in that Kurdish village in Iran in 1941 to try and find out what he knew. Information on Iranian politics and German nationalism was required, with the reward of becoming a British spy, an honour Rudolf declined. In 1953 Sir William Slim became Governor-General of Australia, the country which by chance had also become ours.

Fourth, the Australian community at Tatura has now forged links with people who were once imprisoned out of sight. They have funded a museum in their township which lovingly collects local memorabilia as well as relics from the internment camps. It has always surprised me how little is generally known of even the existence of these camps in Australia during World War II. The museum helps to keep memories and history alive.

In 1991, with my mother and Aunt Else, I attended a fiftieth reunion of Camp 3 prisoners at Tatura. We rejoiced in the tolerant and generous welcome of the Tatura local community as we made contact with a large number of ex-prisoners we had not seen since 1946. I met again my esteemed teacher, Lieselotte Wagner, a Templer who married an engineer from Iran and lived in Germany. But by the end of our day at the campsite, I was suffering distress remembering the bad things I had once known

there. My aunt had to take me away. My mother, who had been much more deeply affected by her imprisonment, took the whole day in her stride, with aplomb.

Now there are reunions most years organised by descendants of the Templar community. The Palestinian Templers have become loyal Australian citizens. The previous German Consul-General in Australia, Hans Michael Schwandt, also used to attend camp reunions. My brother Peter and his son Lachlan reported to me his strong, positive speeches referring to the assembled group as once sincerely German but now sincerely Australian. He seemed fascinated by this chapter of Australian-German history.

A few months ago I received a notice from a researcher at the Tatura Museum, Lurline Knee, telling me that four letters from the camp had been sent to her from Vancouver in Canada. A POW had written two of them to his beloved wife in Germany and, amazingly, two were from my own father to his family in Vienna. One was from 1943, and the other 1945. Now based in Vancouver, Hans Michael Schwandt had rescued them for the Tatura museum at a philatelic auction. Collectors of stamps and letter covers were eager to buy them. Lurline Knee asked me if I would translate them for the Tatura museum. And this I did. But how did they get there? The only conclusion I have reached to date is that my Uncle Oswald Dittrich, an ardent stamp collector, traded them with Allied soldiers who occupied Vienna at the end of the War.

Fascinated by the mystery, my son Gerald, his wife and son drove me to Tatura to deliver my translation to Lurline Knee in person, at an open day at the museum. Other records were shown to us there, and we were promised a conducted tour of Camp 1, possibly the last of its kind, since the now eroded site has been privately purchased.

We were joined by my two cousins from Melbourne, Christine and Peter, whose father, Alfred Erlanger, had in 1941 been interned from Iran at Loveday in South Australia. In 1945 he was moved to Tatura, and to Camp 1. His children had never visited the campsite before.

Ironically, Alfred had left Berlin in the 1930s to work in Iran to avoid Nazi persecution of Jewish families, although he was raised a Christian. Unknown to my father in Iran, Erlanger was the paymaster of the workers on the Trans-Iranian Railway which he was building. Then in 1951 in Australia, Alfred and Rudolf had become brothers-in-law.

After a tearful encounter in the museum with written documents and images, my cousins and my own family strolled over to the abandoned site of Camp 1. I again experienced Tatura with its bleached, tinder-dry grass, prickly pear and eucalyptus trees. The barest remaining contours of camp life lay among a few piles of stones. All corrugated iron and building timber had long since been dismantled and sold during times of need. The barest remnants of Camp 1, mere indicators of garden paths, lily ponds, the theatre, bowling alley and meeting place *Kafe Wellblech* reminded us of what Alfred and his kind had endured. But we also remembered that he and other prisoners had created lives out of barren desolation, hope out of oppression.

Both my 2003 visit to the land of our mothers and to the Tatura campsite with my cousins the following year stirred new currents in our memories. Alfred and Else's daughter, Christine Robertson, sought out for the first time a stack of genealogical documents about members of our mothers' family in Steinkirche. Peter Erlanger dug up a memoir he had encouraged his father to write a long time ago about his imprisonment in Australia. As a man labelled 'Jew' both in Loveday and Tatura, he had faced malice of which he could never speak.

As for the next generation, my twelve-year-old grandson, Patrick Griffin, during that privileged outing in late October 2004, picked up some rusty barbed wire. He took it to school to show his classmates. It was evidence of his visit to the Tatura museum and to the disappearing campsite. This was where members of his family had been locked up for five years, playing their part in Australian history and in their own. He was able to speak openly about what until now has been concealed by *Schweigen*, the long silence.

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