

Destination Unknown

I stood on the quay, which was teeming with men of all types and ages being roughly herded into lines by brutish naval personnel. The desperate cries and angry shouts of human voices were all around me; everyone suffered the same merciless processing no matter what their status. In fact, I later realised that I was mixing in quite distinguished company – there were lawyers, doctors, academics, artists and even a rabbi and Catholic priest among us.

My first impression of the HMT *Dunera* was of a sombre grey and black vessel; designed for military use, it was utilitarian and uninviting. We walked in single file as we approached the narrow doorway leading to the landing stage and I could see a row of sergeants ahead holding bayonets fixed to their rifles. There was a separate line of Italian and Nazi POWs also waiting to board under very heavy guard. I had seen Nazi soldiers on the train from Nuremberg to the Dutch border but they had appeared relatively harmless compared to these soldiers who, although disciplined, seemed hardly able to contain their vindictiveness towards us. There was the same look of hatred on their faces as I had seen on the storm-troopers, those armed hoodlums that had raged through our home on Kristallnacht. Their purpose was apparently to search us before embarking up the gangway. Most of us were carrying only one piece of luggage. All I owned was the small case which, I was assured by the policeman who took me into custody, was all I needed. I heard shouting at the front of

the line and noticed that internees were being brutally searched at bayonet point before they proceeded up the gangway. Scuffles broke out as luggage was wrenched from their grasp and precious items snatched away from them – wallets, watches, vital documents, address books, toiletry articles, jewellery, even a musical instrument was seized from a man begging to keep the means of his livelihood, and another man lost a manuscript of the book he was writing. Identities ripped away and torn to shreds. Anything of value was put to one side or pocketed by the officer in charge. Suitcases containing mainly clothing were immediately tossed into a pile but some were thrown overboard bursting open on contact with the sea. I could see clothing and documents floating in the water, bobbing up and down in the swell.

I was feeling very apprehensive as I approached the gangway. Some internees were complaining and insisting that they at least keep their most treasured possessions; they were dealt with swiftly, being forcibly handled, punched and kicked – a few men, reluctant to cooperate, were thrown down the steps. I noticed that some men had bloody noses or black eyes and I saw several pairs of smashed eyeglasses on the pier. In my effort to avoid ill treatment I resignedly prepared myself to undertake their severe scrutiny and allowed them to grab my bag, empty out some of my clothing and then silently watched them throw the rest overboard. Fortunately I didn't possess anything of much monetary value but during the body search one of the sergeants frisked me of my silver fountain pen and propelling pencil. These items were of more sentimental value as my father had given them to me for my bar mitzvah. All that remained were the clothes that I stood up in – trousers, shirt and an overcoat; I was not to have the opportunity to change my clothing again for more than eight weeks. I had previously hidden a ten-shilling note in the cuff of my trousers that the searching officers didn't find; nor would they find this money in future searches on board due to my ingenious hiding place.

All this brutal searching was being witnessed and condoned by

those in charge, whom I discovered were the Commander of the ship, Lieutenant Colonel Scott, and his First Lieutenant, O'Neill, neither of whom made any effort to restrain their men from outright thuggery and theft.

Once on board, we were herded and pushed down deeper and deeper into the gloomy No. 2 lower troop deck; it felt like we were entering the bowels of the earth, with the stale air and muffled engine sounds, and at a quick glance at our surroundings, only very basic facilities. We were told to sit down on long benches and mess tables while a sergeant with a stick in hand told us to empty our pockets and looked on greedily, ready to grab anything valuable which might have slipped the searchers; fortunately for him a lot did! We later nicknamed this sergeant the 'Lion Hunter'. He was a burly man and a real brute, and always carried a loaded revolver levelled horizontally in front of him as if ready to fire; perhaps he was preparing to defend himself from the defenceless beasts in his charge. Soon the lower deck became very crowded and I wondered how we were going to cope living in such close proximity with each other in such claustrophobic conditions, and for how long. Every exit except the one to the latrines was blocked with walls of barbed wire.

We received our first meal at 9 p.m. and I was starving, as we hadn't had anything to eat since our early lunch at Huyton camp. The food lacked variety and flavour but at least there seemed to be enough of it. Directly after the meal we were allowed to go to the latrine under escort. Apart from the obvious relief, these trips also gave us our only opportunity to see the outside world through a porthole window (which was no bigger than would allow a small man to squeeze through); positions here became much prized and everyone was pressured to complete their ablutions in the shortest possible time. I looked out the porthole on my first visit; it was situated at the ocean side of the ship. I noticed it had become dark and I could only see the rippling reflection of the ship's lights in the water of Liverpool Bay.

Later there was nothing else to do except find a suitable place to sleep in reasonable comfort, which was easier said than done as every inch of available floor space was taken, even the stairs. There were relatively few hammocks and some blankets, which were quickly commandeered by the older internees. The rest of us found what space we could on benches, mess tables or the floor, sleeping beneath each other in four layers; we were packed like sardines.

I found a place beneath a mess table on the floor next to another young man about the same age as I and we soon became acquainted, exchanging experiences of our embarkation treatment. Werner Lowenstein told me that he was originally from Berlin, and it turned out that he was only a few months older than I. This was the beginning of a very special relationship. Werner had a wry sense of humour and didn't seem stuck-up like some of the other young intellectuals; there was a sense of calm and optimism about him, which somehow reflected my own experience of life. Our new solidarity held firm in our dingy fortress which, although far from comfortable (neither of us was lucky enough to receive a blanket), would become our home for the next eight weeks. We tried to settle down for our first night in captivity on HMT *Dunera* but it was impossible to stretch out our limbs without coming into contact with another squirming body; feet and elbows were constantly jostling for room. The few bulkhead lights remained dimly burning all night and as there were no open portholes in our quarters, we could only tell it was night by the en-masse snoring. Those that couldn't sleep chatted in small groups in hushed tones and I heard others talk about the brutality of our embarkation treatment and appalling conditions on board. The suggestion was put forward by someone that these British troops may well have just returned from the retreat at Dunkirk and assumed that we were German prisoners, not realising our true status as refugees. This may have explained our unreasonable and unjust treatment so far.

In the small hours of the morning I was woken by one or two short blasts of the ship's horn and after a slight jolt, felt the ship's just discernible motion through the water; our voyage to a destination unknown had begun. After a short while the ship's course shifted, and I later learnt that we were moving in a zig-zag course through the ocean, flanked by another steamer which was rumoured to be evacuating women and children to Canada. A destroyer also escorted us and I could hear aeroplanes droning overhead. I was sure that the escort was not for our benefit and I guessed that the unpredictable course was to deflect the possibility of enemy submarine attack; we were sailing in dangerous seas. Or, maybe the British Government couldn't afford to lose another ship of 'friendly' enemy aliens. As some of the survivors from the *Arandora Star* were on this ship, I could only imagine their fear and dread until we were safely out of enemy occupied waters – it must have been torture for them to embark from the self-same wharf hoping with their whole being that history didn't repeat itself.

It was impossible to get to sleep again as with the increasingly uneven and choppy motion of the boat many people were seasick, moaning and groaning in their wretchedness. It would have been a source of amusement if the circumstances weren't so appalling. However, in spite of our misgivings, Werner and I were entertained by the desperate scenes enacted around us in this human cauldron of misery and despair. People were rushing for the latrines and throwing up in any container they could get their hands on; desperate looks on their spent and washed-out faces. We were both fortunate to remain well, considering that more than three-quarters of passengers were at some point affected by seasickness or diarrhoea. With everyone else concerned with their own distress it was a good time for me to find a hiding place for my ten-shilling note. I had noticed that there was a small niche in the underside of our mess table that held the ceiling hook when it was lowered for use. The hole was about half a finger's length and I secreted the note at the end of the hole, leaving just enough space for the hook.

Understandably, the next morning there were very few people wanting breakfast which meant that there was more food for those who were not ill. However, even the sufferers were soon to be shocked out of their miserable state, as just after 9 o'clock, our ship was attacked by a German submarine. At the time we were ploughing through heavy seas when I felt a terrific bump and we were warned by officers not to take any notice if we heard shooting. There was a mad panic and some men made a grab for the few available life-jackets, some people were praying and the stairs to the upper deck were jammed. We all thought that our worst fears were about to be confirmed and that this was the end. Miraculously nothing eventuated. Some time later the 'All Clear' was sounded and life at sea continued that day without further incident. We later learnt that a German U-boat had fired two torpedoes against us, which either missed or ricocheted off the hull; either way they did not explode. However, the shock of preparing ourselves for almost certain death took a long time to abate for many, some of whom became increasingly withdrawn throughout the voyage.

Later there was talk about German letters being thrown overboard by the Nazi POWs and that this persuaded the German submarines to halt their attack, or maybe they came across items, previously tossed into the sea, identifying us as German passengers. If that were so, then there would be at least one advantage to having lost some of our possessions. In fact, we were incredibly lucky as, trapped in this lower hold, we would have had no chance of survival had the bomb(s) exploded. However, I soon learnt that in the ensuing panic, our convoy had deserted us at the first signs of trouble, steaming away at full speed.

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[...]

The days got hotter as we moved from spring into summer. Fortunately, most of us were at last provided with hats, but not before many of us had faces burnt the colour of bronzed earth. It became unbearable to stay in the huts during the day as the corrugated iron walls became too hot to touch. However, activity was also undesirable as (with no significant amount of rain in a while) it had become so hot that there was a water shortage and water use was being restricted. Many men slept after lunch before the second roll call whistle went at 3.45; others joined the swimming parties, which ventured out two or three times weekly in these baking conditions. One of my hut mates went on one of the first expeditions and vowed never to be tempted again as he arrived back at camp more exhausted than before he left. Those men that persevered talked about an almost surrealistic experience after the drabness and regimentation of the camp, sitting lazily on the exposed sandy river bank, gazing up at the spangled light filtering through the rustling branches of the stately red river gums – ‘widow makers’, the locals called them as large branches would suddenly break off without warning. The only other trees around were the more stumpy black box with their characteristically dark trunks.

The atmosphere, which during and after the frequent dust storms became saturated with red dust, became so dry that we gasped for each breath and could hardly see a yard in front of us. The watchtower guards would put the searchlights on although this only had the effect of things looking more ghostly, which reminded me of a London fog. During the day we were also constantly pestered by mobs of large black flies, which seemed particularly attracted to our faces, caked with a layer of dust and sweat. Nor was there any relief at night when we were tormented by the high-pitched droning of mosquitoes, which was an ever-present warning of impending itchy bites.

The landscape seemed to accentuate our exhaustion – flat scenery disappearing over the horizon with barely any vegetation, it looked like a moonscape – overcome with drought, dust,

sandstorms. There were long periods without even a cloud in sight then sudden short but torrential downpours. Our lukewarm trickle of shower water gave us little relief. With little respite from 120 degrees dry heat, some men slept outside as the hut interior was hotter than the night air.

We visited the medical hut again for our second inoculation against typhoid – this time many of us felt sick afterwards and our arms were sore, which added to our miseries.

On 26 November Justice Davidson visited us again, presumably to assess whether conditions had improved for us; they hadn't. We managed to rise out of our heat-induced lethargy by the next day and there was much excitement as eleven internees had received news that they were to be released and repatriated to England, although they were not sure of their actual day of departure. This gave me some hope that the bureaucratic wheels were turning somewhere, albeit slowly.

In early December I read in *Boomerang* a statement put out by Mr Herbert Morrison, the new British Home Secretary, the gist of which was that the British Government had adopted a more friendly approach to us 'friendly enemy aliens' (supposedly now that we were off British soil and they could see us more objectively) and that our active help could be considered for the war effort. In fact, it went on to say that Herbert Morrison had appointed Major J. D. Layton to be his representative in Australia with the primary purpose of securing the return to England of those internees wishing to be repatriated, to facilitate the emigration of other internees to countries for which they held valid visas and to make arrangements for suitable internees to enlist with the British Pioneer Corps (AMPC). I anticipated Major Layton's arrival with enthusiasm and hope, particularly after reading another article in *Boomerang* from an internee who was aware of Layton's previous devoted work with refugees at Bloomsbury House in London.

After some leave, Lieutenant Bass returned to camp, having been promoted to Captain. He was a stickler for punctuality and

was annoyed about the leniency of roll calls that had taken place in his absence. One of his first announcements in his new post was to inform us of the imminent visit of Rabbi Captain Falk, the Chief Rabbi in the Australian Army. A few days later on 10 December we were excited to receive the Rabbi who gave a disappointingly bombastic speech and seemed mainly concerned with the needs of the orthodox Jewish population. That evening a concert was presented, seemingly in Rabbi Falk's honour. Unfortunately, it was in rather bad taste as the compere related a number of dirty jokes; I didn't care that Rabbi Falk would have gained a poor impression.

The next day we were made aware of the British Home Office's new regulations to allow transmigrants with valid visas to proceed directly to their country of destination instead of first returning to England. There was talk among these lucky internees whether they would be 'home' by Hanukkah or for Christmas. There were in fact two distinct religious groups in our camp, one being the orthodox Jews who had made every effort to adhere to all the rituals of their faith, and the rest of us who, although Jewish by birth and upbringing, had taken a more liberal approach to the Christian calendar year in our efforts to assimilate into our potential new homeland. Many of us were happy to celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah. Each hut formed a committee to make arrangements for their own celebrations. Werner and his friend Hans Meyer decorated our hut very festively with silver paper, candles and eucalyptus branches. Just before our celebrations we were inoculated for the third and final time, with less severe effects than before.

We read with enthusiasm an article in *Boomerang* informing us that we could register to join the AMPC (British Pioneer Corps) if we wished. There were conditions attached and it would be contingent on authorised release from internment. However, for those accepted, it would mean release from detention and recognition of their true status and worth. Meanwhile, Eppenstein had been re-elected our camp leader and Epstein elected as his deputy; one

of their first tasks was to mediate between officers and internees during a demonstration against our compulsory use of official writing paper, which was intended for use by prisoners of war. It didn't help that, with this being a festive time of the year, there were loving greetings being sent overseas, their impact somewhat diminished by the words 'prisoner of war' blazoned across the front page. We further showed our disgust by boldly writing what we thought of this order on the distributed pages and decorated the huts with them before inspection the next day. Needless to say, this did not go down well with Captain Bass and after a big row between him and our leaders we reached a stalemate, refusing to write letters for a week in protest.

By Christmas Eve we were in a more celebratory mood and spent the evening in our huts eating and drinking (some internees had managed to produce a camp-made wine), sharing jokes and giving out presents, hand-made from scrap materials or small food items purchased from the canteen. There was plenty of fruit salad, biscuits and cigarettes, and the hut soon resembled what I imagined as a rowdy saloon bar. We were serenaded by the choir from the neighbouring compound singing the midnight mass; the heavenly sounds came wafting towards us in the still night and we went to bed that night at 1 a.m. lulled by good cheer, food and song.

The next day was our first Christmas celebrated in internment and we rose to a beautiful clear day, the sun making its scorching transit across a cloudless sky, which towards lunchtime smothered us with an intense dry heat, bleaching everything in its sight. The limited shade was much darker in contrast, cool comfort for us unfortunate human beings living here, blown by the winds of war to what seemed to me like the farthest corner of the earth. Here the land barely undulated allowing us to see an uninterrupted heat haze shimmering on the distant horizon. I had never known anything in my life so far to compare with this climate. We shared our festivities that day with a few raucous black crows and a small

flock of galahs bravely battling the searing heat. The food was just the usual but we had a special treat in store for us that evening. The Stadlen choir gave a concert and Peter Stadlen was much applauded for his magnificent piano playing, despite the dilapidated instrument's shortcomings. A large crowd gathered outside the recreation hall as it became so cramped inside.

We saw the New Year in by merrymaking and indulging ourselves with a variety show in the evening and there was much gaiety and laughter as we optimistically looked forward to a better and more fulfilling life in 1941; our mood was no doubt assisted by drinking some more 'home-made' wine, and I was eventually persuaded to have a taste and enjoyed the unfamiliar effect. The committee responsible for organising celebrations had arranged for a large campfire to be lit on the parade ground at midnight, but at the last minute it was forbidden because of the risk to the surrounding land from bushfire. On New Year's Day there was no roll call or inspection so I went over to see Freddie (as those close to him had begun to call Fred), who was very concerned about Heinz Kulenthal, one of the younger inmates of his hut, who had developed joint pains and a very high fever. Heinz was soon transferred to the medical hut for treatment and observation.

There was a lot of activity in the first two weeks of the New Year in preparing applications for men wanting to join the British Pioneer Corps (AMPC), including being photographed for Home Office records. There was much discussion among us as to whether to return to England or remain in Australia. The general feeling was that the British were taking advantage of our helpless situation by offering us release (if application acceptable) only on the condition of volunteering for the British Army. Although angry, many men volunteered because they could no longer bear the indignity and deprivations of living behind barbed wire. Meanwhile I focused my efforts, in spite of it being midsummer, on a massive spring-clean. We had had more rain, which made the interior of the huts muddy, and the compound itself resembled a series of

large puddles covered with a rusty-red film from the 'bricklayer' dust storms. The lack of designated walkways and non-existent drainage had resulted in pedestrian traffic areas becoming boggy and pit-holed which greatly impeded mobility around the camp.

Money arrived a few days later and was given out to those soon to be repatriated to England. Walter Hofstater, who preferred to be called Tommy, a young internee who had befriended Werner and me, was one of the recipients. I was in two minds about my friend Hofstater leaving for England as of late, Werner, he and I had been inseparable during our spare time. We made plans to get together when the war was over but sadly Hofstater would never reply to any of our letters after he returned to England.

It seemed as if our numbers were starting to break up as a list of 62 men was posted up, indicating that they were to be transferred to Camp Orange for a period of recuperation. Some men refused to go as they did not want to be separated from their friends who had become all the more important to them, due to the at least temporary (if not permanent) loss of their family and loved ones. The next day, on 12 January, another list was posted indicating the men allocated to a new camp in Tatura in rural Victoria. The reason given was that this offered a better climate with improved facilities. These men left camp the next day and there was a show in their honour the night before. Fortunately, for the time being at least, Werner, Tommy and I remained together at Hay.

We heard that we would have a new Camp Commander by the end of the week, and on 15 January we were all assembled on the parade ground to welcome the arrival of Major Grace. I was not the only one to take an instant dislike to this burly, bossy, opinionated man who from the start referred to our camp as a pigsty. He took every opportunity to bark orders at us, seemingly just to hear the sound of his own voice. As a result we became over-regulated. It was not long before Major Grace earned himself the undesirable nickname 'Disgrace'. Most of the rules were without validity, and even ridiculous. For example, we were no longer allowed to

wear khaki shorts (apparent confusion with the Garrison uniform), and parcels could only be opened in the orderly's hut (previously packages could be taken directly to one's hut to be opened in private). No vehicles were allowed to enter the compound with the exception of the ambulance and the latrine lorry. This meant that we had to unload stores from vehicles outside the compound and carry them over to the orderly's hut. Butchers' knives could no longer remain in the camp after 4.30 p.m. (previously knives had to be out of the camp by 8 p.m.). Major 'Dis'-Grace certainly ran our camp in regimental style, using a military model. He was not receptive to our requests, which he often deemed unnecessary, and several orders (for camp supplies considered desirable by our elected leaders) had already been cancelled. However the Major obviously soon saw the idiocy behind some of these illogical decisions and eventually compromised in allowing store and salvage wagons to enter the compound and butchers' knives to remain in camp until 7 p.m. when all meal preparation had ceased for the day.

A couple of days later, Major Grace cancelled all activities for the day in the effort to clean up our 'pigsty', and we began by carrying out all of our furniture, allowing our bedding to air while we scrubbed the hut floors. In the process we flushed out all sorts of creepy crawlies including spiders, pincer-wielding scorpions and small lizards. I even heard of a brown snake found basking close to the side of a hut. I noticed on my way to the mess hut that the newspaper posted up that day had the headlines 'Dunera Internee Ship Probe Sought'. The short column indicated that conditions aboard HMT *Dunera* would be discussed in the House of Commons.

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