

FROM MARPLE TO HAY AND BACK

The year was 1939 and the Second World War had just begun. I was a young boy of six living in Strines, a small village between Marple and New Mills, on the border between Cheshire and Derbyshire.

My father, Robert Parkinson, was too old for the armed services, and had no wish to join Dad's Army – the Home Guard. Instead, he and another man from Strines, Harry Lomas, joined the police force as part-time policemen – special constables. On arriving home from his business in Manchester, Dad would change into his police uniform and go 'on duty'.

One of his duties was to make regular checks on a group of German refugees housed in a large house called *Brentwood* (now known as McNair Court) in Marple. I remember going to *Brentwood* and seeing the group of men and women who had to report to the police several times a week. Some could speak faltering English; others could not speak any of the language. Because of my father's constant contact with this group, he and my mother became quite friendly with some of the refugees. My mother borrowed text books from our local primary school at Hague Bar to help those who could not speak English to learn the language.



I can remember a few of the names such as Paul Wolfe, Walter Zion, somebody called Frank, and another called Willie, but one in particular became a family friend. His name was Josef Thiele, but for some reason which I never knew, we called him Walter.

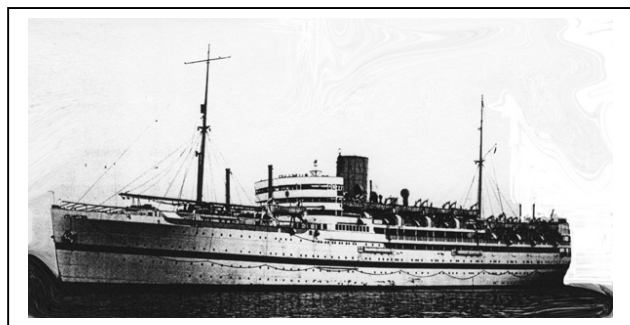
A few months later, Walter left and we heard he had gone to Australia. He became one of those later to be known as the *Dunera* Boys. At the time, we knew nothing about the *Dunera* – we only knew that Walter had gone to Australia. I don't know what happened to the other men and women who lived in *Brentwood*. As far as I can make out, none of them were sent to Australia. My sister, who still lives in Romiley, told me that Paul Wolfe was a bone specialist who went to work in a hospital in Liverpool, and was killed during an air raid on that city.

The *Dunera* story is a shameful episode of which most people in England would have no knowledge. It really came about through xenophobic pressure from newspapers and some writers who insisted that all internees should be deported. The selection of men to be shipped out was indiscriminate. For example, a young Austrian boy was deported while his father was employed in England making parachutes for the RAF. Another was deported even though his father was fighting in the British Army.

Whatever, on 10 July 1940, 2,542 German and Austrian detainees were crowded onto *HMT Dunera* at Liverpool. They included doctors, lawyers, business men, actors, musicians, entertainers, errand boys and labourers, farmers, clerks and many other trades and professions. Some had already been on one sea voyage en route for Canada, but their ship was torpedoed. In addition to the passengers were seven officers and 309 other ranks as

guards, the ship's crew, 200 Italian fascists, and 251 German prisoners. All aboard a ship which, as a troop carrier, had a maximum capacity of 1,600 including the crew. Many of the prisoners were Nazi sympathizers. It was an unholy mix, made worse by the massive overcrowding. The guards were a motley mix of soldiers recruited from the Pioneer Corps and reservists from various regiments.

The *Dunera* was to have been the first of three ships to transport detainees to Australia and New Zealand. In the event, it was the only ship to leave – the other two never left England.



As passengers embarked on the *Dunera*, their possessions were taken and thrown into a heap on the dockside. Pilfering by the soldiers was rife even before the journey started. One soldier tried to pocket a small box of jewels taken from one of the men. An officer was called, and he said he would look after them – they were never seen again. The ‘guards’ were nothing better than looters and this went on in front of officers, even with participation by the officers.

The ship was an overcrowded Hell-hole. Hammocks almost touched, many men had to sleep on the floor or on tables. There was only one piece of soap for twenty men, and one towel for ten men, water was rationed, and luggage was stowed away so there was no change of clothing. As a consequence, skin diseases were common. There was a hospital on board but no operating theatre. Toilet facilities were far from adequate, even with makeshift latrines erected on the deck and sewage flooded the decks. Dysentery ran through the ship. Blows with rifle butts and beatings from the soldiers were daily occurrences. One refugee tried to go to the latrines on deck during the night – which was out-of-bounds. He was bayoneted in the stomach by one of the guards and spent the rest of the voyage in the hospital.

Food was bad, maggots in the bread and the butter and margarine was rancid. The guards however were well enough fed and even threw some of their food overboard in front of the refugees.

The passengers were not told where they were going until they had been at sea for a week, and then they were told their destination was Australia. The ship docked at Melbourne where some of the men were disembarked and the remainder sailed to Sydney, arriving there on 6 September 1940. The pale, emaciated refugees were then crowded onto four steam trains and transported through the night to Hay in the centre of New South Wales, 750 km west of Sydney.

Hay is a typical country town where people still have time to say g'day to strangers. The town is situated on the Murrumbidgee River in the middle of the vast Hay Plain - almost 44,000 km² of some of the flattest terrain on earth where mirages abound and huge semi-trailers thunder along the Sturt Highway. The banks of the Murrumbidgee provide



beautiful picnic spots, but they could not be enjoyed by the internees. Today, Hay has a population of only 3,000. The influx of refugees and prisoners of war more than doubled that in 1940.



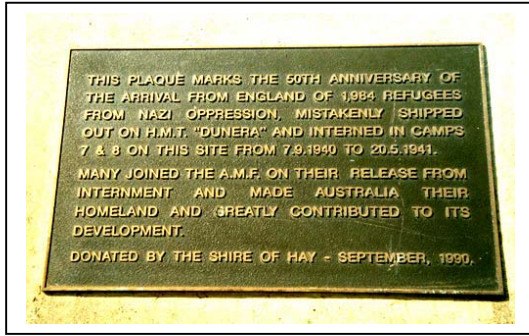
The railway station still exists, but there is now no train service. However it retains an outward appearance of its railway days while providing office accommodation and an interpretive centre for the internment camps.

Walter was one of those who disembarked at Sydney to be bundled onto the train for Hay. The treatment on the train was in stark contrast to the horrors of the *Dunera* – the men were given packages of food and fruit, and Australian soldiers offered them cigarettes. There was even one story of a soldier asking one of the internees to hold his rifle while he lit his cigarette.

The first train pulled into Hay at dawn the next day. What a shock it must have been to alight at Hay Railway Station to be greeted by the customary dust storm and then to be marched to the nearby camps. Camp 8, which is where Walter was to be housed, was not ready for occupation on their arrival – there was no kitchen.



There is now nothing left of the camps, but the road alongside is named *Dunera Way* and a memorial stone has been erected close to the site.



This plaque marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival from England of 1,984 refugees from Nazi oppression, mistakenly shipped out on HMT “Dunera” and interned in Camps 7 & 8 on this site from 7. 9. 1940 to 20. 5. 1941.

Many joined the AMF on their release from internment and made Australia their homeland and greatly contributed to its development.

Donated by the Shire of Hay – September 1990



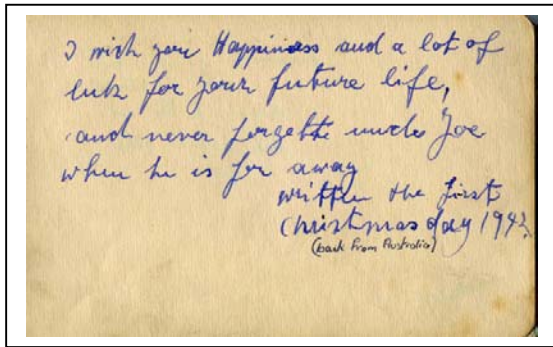
Throughout his time in Australia, Walter sent us letters and cards – I remember a Christmas card which depicted hands shaking through barbed wire. Unfortunately, those letters and cards have been lost. The camps had their own ‘banknotes’ and coins. I have a vague recollection that Walter showed us some of the currency notes used in the camps, but I cannot be sure.

Many months later, Dad received a very pleasant surprise when he took a telephone call at his place of work. It was Walter. He told Dad that he was in Manchester and had gone to where my father’s business used to be in Swan Street but had found only a pile of rubble – a casualty of German bombing. When Dad asked him where he was, he described the place and was told to step out of the telephone box and look up at the buildings behind him and there was Dad waving to him.

So the friendship was renewed. Walter worked in a munitions factory in Manchester for the duration of the war, but spent many week-ends at our home in Strines. He showed Dad his suitcase which had been cut open with a bayonet and that was typical of the lack of respect shown by those ‘guards’.

Walter gave my dad a small cigarette case he had made while in the camp at Hay. It was beautifully carved from two different colours of eucalypt wood and had a lovely polish. I don’t know what happened to the case. But one thing survived and that was a small blue knitted handbag that he gave to my sister. She obviously treasured the gift so I was able to photograph it when I visited her in 2003.





Another thing that my sister treasured was an entry in her autograph book, a present to her from our parents for Christmas 1942. The inscription reads “I wish you Happiness and a lot of luck for your future life, and never forget Uncle Joe when he is far away. Written the first Christmas Day 1942.” To which my sister added “Back from Australia.”

I wish I had more of these mementoes. For instance, Walter made a small cannon for me which could fire small soft pellets. He also showed us how to make whistles from Ash twigs.

I remember Walter accompanying us on our Sunday walks across the face of Cobden Edge, calling in at the Fox Inn at Brookbottom. I also remember one occasion when we went into Barlow Wood on the road to Marple to seek a particular kind of mushroom. Walter was to give a talk about edible fungi, and we found several specimens, one of which was a large red headed mushroom which Walter kept to show at his talk. The others were sautéed and eaten.

It was many years later when I read an article in a Sydney newspaper about the *Dunera* and I decided to find out a bit more about the episode. An obvious starting point was the library at Hay, but it was when I contacted the National Archives of Australia that I received the biggest surprise - copies of some forms which bore my father's name.

Those forms told me that Walter had only a watch and a suitcase, that he had a wife called Hertha and two daughters, and that he had been born in Lügde – which is about 60 km south-west of Hanover. He was transported on the *Dunera* arriving in Australia on 6 September 1940 and was interned at Hay. He was transferred to Tatura, a country town in Victoria, in May 1941, and was released to return to England on 22 July 1942.

So I drove to Tatura to find the same story as at Hay. There is nothing left of the camps as the sites have reverted to prime agricultural land. There is however a small but superb museum with many relics of the war days.



Walter's journey back to England was very different from life on the *Dunera*. I remember how he told us of being on submarine watch and the only time there was an alert, the 'submarine' turned out to be a whale.

After the war, Walter returned to Germany to contact his wife, whom he had not seen since well before the war started. I don't know the details, but my dad told me that Walter, who was a Catholic, had been held in a concentration camp by the Nazis and had been beaten. Dad said he had seen Walter's back and it was 'like a ploughed field'. His wife thought Walter had perished at the hands of the Nazis and had remarried. One of his daughters was at university studying medicine. Walter had no option but to have his marriage annulled and he returned to England.

He then married an English woman called Jose and they went to Rhodesia as it was then known, and took up farming. He died in Rhodesia.

My research also threw up another surprise. I was reading Cyril Pearl's book *The Dunera Scandal* and came across the name Hans Kronberger. I read how Hans had fled from the Nazis and was a student at Newcastle University when he too was rounded up and transported to Australia. I read that Hans was also allowed to return to England in 1942 on an ammunition ship – I wonder if he was on the same ship as Walter.

I also read in *The Dunera Affair* by Paul Bartrop about how Hans, who was then nineteen, had his hands tied behind his back and was thrown into the ship's bunker, which contained three cells, for several hours. On being allowed out of the bunker he was punched in the face by the hated Lt O'Neil VC of the British Army.

On his return to England, Hans went back to his studies but switched from his engineering course to physics, a subject he had been studying in the camps. After graduation, he was recruited by a company called *Tube Alloys* which was the code name for Britain's wartime atomic bomb project. He later became chief physicist at the UK Atomic Energy Authority Industrial Group at Risley near Warrington. And that is where I met him without knowing he was a *Dunera* Boy.

I was employed at the UKAEA Risley from 1957 until 1964. I emigrated to Australia in December 1965 having been recruited by the Australian Atomic Energy Commission.



In April 1967, I was one of a party of about twenty-five engineers and scientists seconded to the UK Atomic Energy Authority. Most of us were stationed at Risley and some of our team worked alongside Hans. (See photograph - I am the second from the right on the front row.)

Hans received many honours in England, including an OBE, CBE and Fellowship of the Royal Society. In spite of such accolades, he had a sad life. Apart from the trauma of the *Dunera*, he experienced other tragedies. At the end of the war, he learned that his mother and sister had perished in the Auschwitz gas ovens. Then, within a year of his marriage in 1951

his wife developed a brain tumour and died in 1962. Hans died prematurely by his own hand. The Times newspaper for 30 September 1970 reported:

Dr Hans Kronberger, aged 50, one of the country's outstanding scientists, was found hanged in the garage of his home in Wilmslow, Cheshire, yesterday.

I checked with the Australian National Archives and obtained the same forms I had received for Walter. I learned that Walter and Hans had been in the same groups transported to Hay and both were sent to Tatura before being released to return to England on the same day.

The first time I went to the site of the Hay camps, I experienced an eerie feeling. I am neither religious nor superstitious, but I felt that Walter was with me. Perhaps some part of his spirit really was still in Hay.

The scandal of the *Dunera* and transportation of the refugees to Australia was questioned in the House of Commons. Winston Churchill admitted the deportation was "a deplorable and regrettable mistake." Major Cazalet, a Conservative MP said, on 22 August 1940 "Frankly I shall not feel happy, either as an Englishman or as a supporter of this government, until this bespattered page of our history has been cleaned up and rewritten." But it never has been.

Those supposedly in charge on the *Dunera* faced court martial for allowing the atrocities on board. The Manchester Guardian of 1 October 1940 records that "The total value of the property stolen or destroyed was about £35,000 and the property recovered was something like £100." The findings of the enquiry were never published – it was a cover-up. Lt Col Scott, the senior officer was "severely reprimanded" as was Sgt Helliwell. RSM Bowles was reduced to the ranks and given a twelve months prison sentence and then discharged from the Army.

Belatedly, the British government paid £35,000 in compensation to the *Dunera* victims, but how could that compensate for the wrongful treatment meted out to those helpless men?

Post Script

I took a copy of the above to Hay and met the woman who ran the interpretative centre, her father and a previous mayor of Hay. The father was a small boy at the time of the *Dunera* scandal and he told me of how he stood on the railway platform as the trains rolled in and saw the men as they stepped down from the carriages.

Alan Parkinson