

# BYCATCH OF WAR:

## THE GERMAN-AUSTRALIAN INTERNEES 1939-1945

DAVID HENDERSON, FRYER LIBRARY AWARD FELLOW IN 2006, PRESENTS THE RESULTS OF HIS EXAMINATION OF FRYER LIBRARY'S HOLDINGS ON GERMAN-AUSTRALIAN INTERNEES.



Above:  
Baldwin Goener at the time of his internment in Tatura, Baldwin Goener Manuscript Collection, UQFL63.  
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In 1939, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced the internment of aliens but promised that there would be 'as little interference with individual rights as is consistent with concerted national effort', he would not have imagined that more than 8000 Australian residents would have been interned by the time the war was over. The plan had been to avoid a repetition of the mistakes made during the Great War, when the 'rights and privileges of ordinary people' had too often been ignored. Of the 8000 residents interned, nearly 5000 were classified as Italian while another 1100

were classified as Japanese and more than 1700 were classified as German. Many of the last, however, were neither German nor of German origin. All together the 'Germans' included people who were born in a total of 36 different countries. The Australian authorities apparently preferred convenience to exactness in classifying their internees. For some time now, it has been the story of German-Australian wartime internment that I have been trying to tell.

The main internment camp in Victoria – which was hastily put together at the start of the war and would eventually hold most of the 'German' internees – lay just outside the town of Tatura in the Waranga Basin. The closest town of any significant size is Shepparton. It is usually hot and dry in summer and I imagine that it would have been difficult for internees from cities like Sydney and Melbourne to acclimatise to such unusual surroundings, but the hot weather would have been

the least of Baldwin Goener's concerns when he arrived in the Tatura internment camp towards the end of the summer of 1942. Goener was from Queensland and no doubt used to extreme weather conditions. What he needed was food. He had been on the train for two days and on the final leg of his journey from the Gaythorne internment camp in Brisbane he had missed a couple of meals. Once the camp authorities had searched his luggage and let him into the compound, Goener rushed off to the mess hall to eat. Then he went to take a look at what was to be his home for the next three and half years.

Goener had been assigned to Hut number 24, which he would be sharing with seventeen other men. He wrote in his diary that the huts were like artificial refrigerators: 'hot as hell' in summer and freezing in winter, but once he had overcome his initial concerns about the rudimentary living conditions, Goener settled down without too much trouble. He was an easygoing man and got along well with most of the men in his compound. He was not all that disheartened by the mundane routines of life behind barbed wire and particularly enjoyed the peace of the rest-hour after lunch, primarily because it was a prelude to what he described as the most 'longed for moment of the day.'

At about three o'clock each afternoon (apart from Sunday) a sergeant arrived with a bag full of mail for the internees. Goener tells us that the arrival of the mail prompted a dramatic rise in the energy within the camp, as each internee hoped to be one of those lucky enough to be on the mail list. 'Even the old aged' internees, he says, became animated with the arrival of the mail. Letter writing must have offered some consolation to the men who had been forced to leave their wives and children at home and though it was a practice that was strictly regulated

by the camp authorities and subject to censorship, some internees looked for ways to circumvent the censor. Until she was discovered, Lisolette Lewandowsky sent minute letters to her husband Ernst disguised and hidden in packets of PK chewing gum. In this way she was able to keep her husband informed about what was happening in the war. But it is the moments where she reflects on her own situation that are most striking because they capture the isolation that many wives on the 'outside' must have felt as the war dragged on. We get a sense of the frustrations she feels with having to do without her husband and we are reminded of the stress that internment could place on the family.

For a while Lisolette Lewandowsky looked forward to a time when she and her husband might again 'sit on the veranda in the evening, when it is so beautiful and bright', but by the time the war had entered a third year she was toying with the idea of returning to Germany. By this time her husband, Ernst Lewandowsky had also given up on his adopted country. Lewandowsky, who knew the risks associated with starting over again, told his wife that as soon as the war was over they would get out of the 'country without a day's delay.' This he told her, was now the 'only thing worth living for.'

Some of the other internees were more pragmatic about their internment. Grete Glockemann, who joined her husband at Tatura towards the end of 1941 told her mother in the middle of June the following year that she was 'not down hearted' and that she and the rest of her family were 'making the most of everything.' Others she said, were not doing so well and it might have done them some 'good if they could still laugh as much as we do.' For people like the Glockemanns, humour was an important way of dealing with the difficulties of internment. Many of the Glockemanns' stories retain an element of humour. Some stories that Grete's son tells are delivered as if they were jokes: a punch line followed by a silence that invites laughter.

One story about the everyday routine of roll-call in the camp turns what was for some internees a particularly degrading experience into a humorous anecdote. Every morning and evening the internees were required to line up outside their huts

and wait for their names to be read out. The camp commandant and two guards with fixed bayonets were responsible for the roll-call during the early months of the war. Then, as the war dragged on and security became more lax, an army nurse, accompanied by the compound leader replaced the more conspicuously militaristic ritual. 'They would read out our names and we would respond "Here Sir"'. Occasionally someone would be absent at the loo and they would be said to be at the WC.' It had become a common enough practice in the camp to refer to the toilet as the Winston Churchill, just as many Australians had taken to referring to their own toilets as the Hitler. 'We really thought that WC stood for Winston Churchill' says Leo Glockemann:

*Once someone at roll call said 'Winston Churchill' instead of WC, to the great annoyance of the authorities. We all laughed, but that person was said to have spent the rest of the day in the 'little red house', as we called the brig.*

Another story that he has inherited from his mother assumes but never really explores a tension between captor and prisoner. It is a story with a punch line that subtly subverts the authority in the internee-captor relationship.

*My mother used to love telling the story of how she was interned in Long Bay Gaol... My mother was a keen gardener as well you know, and she did gardening for the warden and trimming the roses and I remember my mother talking about how she's in the garden there trimming the roses and she had to do some lifting or something, and there is this guard standing there of course, you know, and my mother said to this guard look, I'm not in the habit of doing this heavy stuff like that with a man standing there doing nothing, so apparently she held his rifle while he did the heavy lifting.*

Below:  
The November 1941 issue of the 'Chronik des Internierungslagers Tatura' strikes a defiantly pro-Nazi note.



Generally there was not a lot of trouble between the internees and the camp authorities, particularly towards the end of the war. In fact, a lot of the internees got on quite well with the camp authorities. Baldwin Goener tells us that the Sergeant who brought the mail in each day was 'good man' who was well liked by most inside the camp. Leo Glockemann also spoke on a few occasions about friendships he had with one of two guards, but there had been a time at the beginning of the war when the relationship between some internees and their captors was more strained. The two issues of the internment camp newspaper, which were put together by a few of the more ardent Nazis in the camp, highlight some of the tensions that existed in the camp at the beginning of the war at least. The first issue of the 'Chronik des Internierungslagers Tatura' spans the first nine months of the war when the internees were getting used to the idea that they might be behind barbed wire for sometime. It lists a litany of complaints about conditions in the camp and how things might be improved. The rudimentary huts were draughty and for a while there were shortages of almost everything. But as the camp administration began to take shape and the internees

got more used to their surroundings the authors' attentions turned to other things.

By the time that a second issue of the chronicle was put together the war was going well for Germany. The German army had invaded Denmark, Norway and the Low Countries in quick succession. Then German troops entered Paris and within a few months Britain had come to be seen as the last bulwark against the advance of National Socialism. Inside some quarters of the Tatura internment camp, each German victory was met with approval and the chronicle states that: 'we marched in celebration of the German victories, despite the camp authorities' orders.' It is hard to imagine how the camp authorities would have felt, watching on as their captives goose-stepped along the camp's perimeter in celebration of Hitler's success on the battlefield. It would be a while before the war turned in the Allies' favour, and the chronicle captures a moment in the past when things might conceivably have gone another way; when a German victory – hard for us to imagine now – was at least a possibility.

While there is a light-hearted tone to some of the stories I have told here, it is important to remember that internment could, and did ruin lives. It tore some families apart and destroyed many businesses. It could also be, as Goener pointed out, a humiliating experience. 'We are herded like sheep' he wrote, but whereas sheep have their woollen coats taken from them, we are forced to 'rely on our "owners" for a coat' to keep out the cold. And though no internee was ever convicted of espionage or sabotage the stigma of disloyalty was not easy to remove. There were, of course, some internees who were ardent Nazis and others who still retained a strong sense of loyalty to the Fatherland. However, there were many more who considered themselves to be, and were in fact, Australian. Though Menzies promised to preserve individual liberties where possible, it was a promise neither he nor his successor, John Curtin, could easily keep.

DAVID HENDERSON is a PhD candidate at Victoria University, Melbourne. He researched in the Fryer as a 2006 Fryer Library Award Fellow.

Below:

This theatre program for a performance in German of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is more indicative of the taste of the majority of internees. Baldwin Goener Manuscript Collection, UQFL63.

