

Bern Brent

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Dear David Blank,

I have just returned from five days in Melbourne - 400 miles away - and collected my week's mail from the P.O. this morning. Your letter happens to be the first on the heap so here goes:

I forget now whether you were on the Dunera. ^{what} No matter. I am writing off the cuff and will jot down ~~as~~ I remember ~~him~~. Indeed, despite the great age difference - he was a young WW1 volunteer of 17 or 18, so he would have been around 40 when I knew him between Sep. '40 and Jan. '42 when I left camp to go fruit picking and, later, join up. .. What I meant to say before I got involved in the syntax, was that I was then 17 (Sep '40) and yet I remember him well. He was an outstanding leader. I once described him in an interview at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Dunera landing, to someone from the Melbourne Jewish Museum who interviewed me, as a 'born leader'. He told me, he was very proud of it, 'im Feld befördert', i.e. 'commissioned in the field'. He was not backward saying that he had been 'Offizier', Frontsoldat. He was a 'Hamburger', I would have thought born and bred. He told me once how he had been the first Scout leader to carry the German flag at some Boy Scout international jamboree into the arena ahead of his troop. This was perhaps ten years after WW1... the first time German Boy Scouts had been admitted to an international meet.

Yes, he was a Christian, probably Lutheran, as most people are in the German north. But I am convinced he did not convert himself but that either his parents or his grandparents did. Germany is not Austria (or Poland) and there was little, if any, anti-semitism in that part of Germany. I remember him saying once to a group of people something like: 'ich bin genau wie ihr nur meine Vorfahren assimilierten sich früher' .. or some such. My German isn't what it used to be. In Tatura 2,3, and 4 (we were never in Hay), perhaps only half were of the Jewish faith... if that many. We had a lot of 'politicals' who had seen the inside of KZs well before November '38.

Eichenberg was an A-case who was interned at the beginning of the war. I think I heard the story of his tribunal hearing though whether from him or someone else, I don't remember. He was German through and through, as indeed my own father was, and he would not have disguised this from the tribunal members at the beginning of the war. He was a lawyer, he was obviously very intelligent, he would have talked about his WW1 experiences. And the tribunal chairman said to him (as I recall someone telling me... but I cannot guarantee that this is factual) ' I am sorry, Dr E., we will need to intern you. You will understand this is not a Court. We cannot give you the benefit of doubt.' And you can see their point. I belong to those who believe that the internment of the likes of us in June and July '40 was perfectly understandable. I have said elsewhere that had I been the British P.M. at the time, I would have done it.

Melbourne Dunera
wheelchair after
love different
but that's life!

see below
I bumped into Frankel at the
reunion. He was wheeled in in a
wheelchair. He does not seem very well. He will
love different
but that's life!

see below
Eichenberg, I
perhaps about
perhaps about
perhaps about

P.N.
21/11/95

I hope this has been of some assistance.
I would have to (I mean) either, though
I visited Europe perhaps half a dozen times, but have
May - June this year. Cheers, Bern Brent. - who
can read this.

nists. To-day we know it was not so. But who was to be certain then? The only cockup was the transportation but, again, the senior people in government at the time, in the public service, had more important things to do in those dark days when Britain was in real danger of invasion.

F.E. was interested in mathematics - as I was - and he ventured on the soccer field a few times to show that he was still 'with it'. He was camp leader for a while, as you will know.

When we disembarked at Port Melbourne - the bulk of the guys consisted of Arandora Star survivors - and, with the Italians in a separate compound, we divided into 'Nazis' and 'anti-Nazis'. We ate and messed separately. Eichenberg was elected 'our' leader, or, rather, 'spokesman' and 'they' elected one Rörs (or Röhrs) as their spokesman. He was a merchant marine First Mate and no 'nazi' in the formal sense of the word. We wanted to be separated from 'them' and vice versa. Our main concern was that the Swiss Consul, representing the Third Reich in Australia, would pass on the names of the anti-nazis to Berlin and many a file gathering dust in some Gestapo Office would become active again. Many of these guys had their families still in Germany. Nothing we wrote would convince the army colonel at H.Q. to separate us and Eichenberg and Röhrs, Hamburgers both who spoke the same language and had rapport with each other, paced along the barbed wire to discuss the situation. We then had some sham fights, set a hut alight if I recall correctly, Eichenberg and Röhrs rushed to the gate and told the sentry there they could not guarantee the safety of the inhabitants, etc. Within 24 hours a convoy of three-ton lorries drew up and transported us to Tatura Camp 3.

I heard later that a few weeks later Röhrs had been 'gestürzt' and some real Nazi had been elected as camp leader who kept them up at night singing party songs.

Well, that's about it. I had a letter from Eichenberg decades after the war from the U.S. I think I wrote to him. Don't know why. I think Dunera News gave his address and I wondered what had happened to him. He retired as professor of Germanic languages or some such. He had married. He had been unmarried in Tatura. I think he mentioned to me once that there had been a Greek woman in his life. I do not think he was a professor in one of the great Ivy League unis of the U.S. but they have, as you know, trillions of tertiary institutions that call themselves Colleges which award 'degrees'. As I said, he was a lawyer, but he was an 'educated' lawyer in the old German mould. Indeed, having had some contact with German academia and German university students of to-day, it seems to me that German graduates who who finish their studies years after they do in the U.K. or Australia, are much better versed in their professions than our bachelor degree graduates who graduate at 22 or 23 or, in the case of the U.K. in the fifties, much earlier still.

Eichenberg was released much later than I was, years later. But I recall seeing him in uniform. But I didn't have much to do with him at the time. He was a different generation altogether and I had other interests. I don't think he had any children and it seems to me that his folks had been in or around Hamburg for generations. I would be very surprised if they were religious Jews by the end of the 19th century, i.e. 'practising Jews'.