

Dunera boys in Orange, the images and music of anti-Nazi refugees persecuted by British and Australian authorities

Richard Phillips
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Late last month the city of Orange, about 250 kilometres west of Sydney, hosted a performance of Max-Peter Meyer's *Dunera Mass* and another of his choral works at its regional museum. It was the second of two musical events this year at the venue, which concurrently hosted *Enemy Aliens: The Dunera boys in Orange, 1941*, an exhibition of associated paintings, drawings, woodcuts and other visual works.

Orange was one of three Australian locations used to incarcerate some of the roughly 2,500 men deported from Britain on the *HMT Dunera* during the early years of World War II. Many were Jewish refugees from Hitler's Nazi regime, others were long-time residents of Britain but held German and Austrian passports.

Having escaped Nazi persecution and welcomed as political refugees by the British government, they were suddenly deemed "enemy aliens" and shipped to Australian prison camps, on the other side of the planet.

Meyer (1892–1950), already a professional musician and composer when he was rounded up in Britain, was among the many talented individuals incarcerated in Australia during the war. They were just some of the hundreds of thousands of German, Italian and Japanese civilians—men, women and children—imprisoned in Britain, the US, Canada and Australia during World War II.

Most of the "Dunera boys," as they came to be known, were incarcerated in a barbed-wired prison camp, 750 kilometres from Sydney at Hay in south-western New South Wales. Four hundred were held for a short period at Orange, with others incarcerated at Tatura, 167 kilometres north of Melbourne. The Tatura inmates were later joined by over 260 people—Germans, Austrians and other so-called enemy aliens—who were rounded up in Singapore, then still a British colony, and transported to Australia on the *Queen Mary*.

Prior to the outbreak of World War II over 70,000 refugees, predominantly Jews from Nazi Germany and Austria, were given sanctuary in Britain. When war broke out on September 3, 1939, Britain declared all German, Austrian and Italian residents "enemy aliens" and possible spies and/or saboteurs.

The Home Office quickly established internment tribunals that set to work investigating every UK-registered enemy alien over the age of 16. Run by government officials and local bureaucrats, these agencies—120 in total—operated in all the major cities. The majority were in London where the largest number of refugees, and long-time German and Italian residents lived. All those "investigated" were categorised according to their "threat risk."

The British government soon abandoned these categories and, starting in May 1940, began jailing these "enemy aliens" in hell-hole prisons across the country.

The most infamous was Warth Mill, an abandoned and rat-infested

cotton mill just outside Manchester. Over 20,000 were incarcerated on the Isle of Man, constituting half the island's population at that time. Thousands of those imprisoned were born in Britain, but of German or Italian heritage, many of them having only ever spoken English.

Canadian and Australian governments, which systematically locked up long-time residents of German heritage during the First World War, agreed to imprison several thousand of the "enemy aliens" in their countries for the duration of WWII.

Over half of the first group of 1,100 prisoners bound for Canada on the *SS Arandora Star* were killed on July 2, 1940, when that ship was sunk by German torpedoes off the coast of Ireland. Within days, hundreds of the shell-shocked survivors were herded onto the *Dunera*, which set sail for Australia, one week later.

HMT Dunera was only supposed to carry 1,600 people, including crew, but almost 3,000 were packed into the ship. Aged between 16 and 66, they thought they were being sent to Canada. The married men were falsely reassured that their wives and children would later be allowed to join them. Their families were not given any information about the men's whereabouts until they were incarcerated in Australia.

The 57-day journey—the first mass shipment of prisoners to Australia since Britain abandoned "transportation" in 1868—was a trip from hell.

The prisoners slept in hammocks, on benches, or on the floor and were only allowed a few minutes up on deck each day. There were just ten toilets for the prisoners, with one piece of soap per week for twenty men, and one towel for ten men. Skin diseases, dysentery and other illnesses were rampant, but only one military doctor was on board.

Prisoners were beaten and verbally abused by their British guards who stole their watches, rings and other valuable items. Insulin and other prescription drugs, as well as letters and other personal keepsakes found in suitcases, were thrown overboard by the British soldiers.

We refugees were pushed to the lower part of the ship deck with sadistic brutality, like sheep before a herdsman's dog. They clubbed with their rifles like professional bandits... Right down the stairs soldiers stood with their rifles, the Sergeant with a big stick in his hands, ready to kill us. – Boaz Bischofswerder^[1]

One prisoner was bayoneted in the stomach by a soldier after he attempted to go to an out-of-bounds toilet on deck at night. He spent the rest of the voyage in the ship's hospital. Another prisoner, 36-year-old year Jacob Weiss, was so distressed when guards tore up his papers for emigration to Argentina that he committed suicide, throwing himself overboard.

Major William Patrick Scott, *HMT Dunera*'s commanding officer, was a bullying racist. In a lengthy report to Australian authorities, he insisted that his officers had not beaten any prisoners or stolen their belongings.

Scott praised pro-Nazi Germans, who had also been crammed onto the ship. Their behaviour was "exemplary," he declared, "They are of a fine type, honest and straightforward, and extremely well disciplined."

Echoing Hitler and Goebbels, Scott described the German and Austrian Jewish refugees, as "subversive liars, demanding and arrogant, and I have taken steps to bring them into my line of thought... [They are] definitely not to be trusted in word or deed."^[2]

Australian customs officials boarded the *Dunera* when it docked in Fremantle on August 27. They were indignant over the condition of the prisoners' baggage and said they would make an official report about it. More details emerged about the sadistic onboard abuse of the *Dunera* refugees, forcing the British government to acknowledge that these "enemy aliens" should never have been imprisoned or deported.

Prime Minister Churchill eventually apologised, declaring the incarcerations and deportations, "a deplorable and regrettable mistake." This led to a parliamentary investigation and court martial proceedings against Scott and two other senior officers. Scott was "severely reprimanded" and one of the officers, a regimental sergeant major, was jailed for 12 months and then kicked out of the army.

Churchill's two-faced apology was no doubt motivated by the government's need to free some of the imprisoned highly trained professionals and skilled workers to boost Britain's war effort. In March 1941, the Home Office dispatched Julian Layton to Australia to investigate. He was given an honorary military rank but was a stockbroker with established interests in Jewish welfare. He recommended that the internees be reclassified as "refugee aliens" and repatriated to the UK.

By mid-1942, about 1,300 men had been released, with many returning to Britain. Those who decided to stay in Australia were later freed with about a third joining the Australian Army's 8th Employment Company which did manual labour in essential industries.

HMT Dunera deportees were an extraordinary group of individuals—writers, artists, designers, musicians, academics, doctors, scientists, engineers and highly skilled tradespeople. It was, in fact, the largest single shipment of scientific and artistic talent brought into Australia that century, individuals who later played a key role in the country's post-war scientific and cultural life.

The incarcerated included Social Democrats, anarcho-syndicalists, left-wing Christians, as well as over 100 Communists, including participants in the 1923 German revolution, and at least one former member of the Comintern. Some joined the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia and its Eureka League youth movement following their release.

Sigmund Freud's grandson, Anton Walter Freud, a chemical engineer who later played a significant role in the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, was imprisoned, as was Richard Sonnenfeldt, who served as the chief interpreter for the American prosecution at the postwar Nuremberg trials. Other incarcerated refugees included nuclear physicist Hans Kronberger; Martin Löb, a mathematician; and the later world-renowned athletics coach Franz Stampfl.

German novelist Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz (*Der Reisende* [*The Passenger*]) was another notable prisoner. He tragically died, aged 27, along with hundreds of other released prisoners returning to Britain after the *Aboisso* and *Waroonga* transport ships were sunk by German torpedoes in 1942 and 1943, respectively.

German surrealist painter Hein Heckroth (1901–1970) was incarcerated in Hay. He worked with Salvador Dali and Picasso in the 1930s and moved to Britain where he became a highly successful stage and film designer before being jailed in Australia. Heckroth gave lectures on

surrealism to his fellow prisoners.

Released in 1943, he returned to Britain and worked on several films for directors Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (also a refugee from Nazi Germany), winning an Oscar in 1948 for his radical colour choices, set designs and costumes for *The Red Shoes*.

Life inside Australia's isolated barbed-wire prisons

While the gratuitous violence on *HMT Dunera* was not repeated in Australia, life inside its barbed-wire camps was harsh, particularly at Hay with its intense summer heat and massive dust storms. In the first months of their incarceration, the prisoners lacked adequate clothing and other essentials.

The inmates, however, established a democratically elected governing body to run the camps' internal affairs and did everything they could to maintain sanity and morale. Newspapers and informal universities were set up with former academics giving classes in art, history, literature, philosophy, numerous languages, writing and various crafts.

Instruments and sheet music were eventually provided by the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council and locals living near the camps. Music performances ranging from classic works—secular and religious—to jazz and light music and vaudeville, cabaret and serious theatre became regular events.

These activities, however, could not overcome the prisoners' loneliness and geographical isolation. No one knew how long they would be held, let alone what was happening to families left behind in Britain, or whether parents or other relatives in Germany, Austria and Eastern Europe had been exterminated in Nazi concentration camps.

How the prisoners assuaged their hopes and fears is reflected in the Orange Museum exhibition and Max-Peter Meyer's *Mass*. Artists exhibited include Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, Georg Teltscher, Robert Hofmann, Klaus Friedeberger, Erwin Fabian, Emil Wittenberg and Heinz Tichauer.

Desolation, a wood cut by Hirschfeld-Mack (1893–1965), is a simple but haunting image depicting the fate of hundreds of men held in the Australian camps. It shows a solitary figure with his back to the viewer, silhouetted against a barbed-wire fence and staring at the Southern Cross. He produced several variations of this image in Hay, with his final version completed in Orange.

Hirschfeld-Mack studied art and music in high school and served in the German army during WWI. He became a pacifist, going on to study art, sculpture and experimental arts at the Bauhaus under Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.

After the Nazis took power in Germany, he moved to England where he helped to reskill unemployed Welsh miners and became a Quaker. In 1940 he was categorised as an "enemy alien," incarcerated in the Isle of Man, and then transported to Australia. He was eventually released, granted "refugee alien" status in December 1943, taught art in Australian schools, including at the prestigious Geelong Grammar until 1957, and held several one-man exhibitions.

Georg Teltscher (1904–1983), another former Bauhaus student, was an established and highly skilled graphic designer from Austria. A former German Communist Party member, Teltscher fought in defence of republican Spain in 1936, and later moved to London.

He gave classes in Hay on modernism and Bauhaus aesthetics and designed a short-lived internal currency for the camp, persuading the publisher of the town's newspaper to print it. Denominations of the "camp money" were displayed at the museum. Upon release in 1941, he returned to the UK where he worked in mapping and designed leaflets for

the British war effort. He later worked as a graphic designer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Two hands sinking into the sea, a Teltcher water colour, is a poignant semi-abstraction. It appears to be in memory of internees who died when SS *Arandora Star* was sunk and an appeal for the release of all those locked up in Australia.

Robert Hofmann (1889–1987) studied art as a young man and then fought in WWI. After the war he became a successful portrait painter in Vienna. He was 51 when he was incarcerated in Australia. A small selection of his numerous drawings of fellow inmates were exhibited at the Orange Regional Museum.

One his images—*Roll call trouble*—is a whimsical sketch of one of the *Dunera* prison guards, either quickly put down on paper en route to Australia or recalled from memory after arrival.

Heinz Tichauer (1920–1999), a young commercial artist and photographer, was transferred from Hay to Orange in 1941. His watercolour, “View of Orange depicting the Showgrounds, 1941,” is in the exhibition.

After his release Tichauer, who anglicised his name to Henry Talbot, became a leading fashion photographer in Melbourne. He established a successful photographic partnership with Helmut Neustädter, later known as Helmut Newton (1920–2004), who had been arrested in Singapore, and deported to the Tatura prison camp. Newton eventually returned to Europe working in London, Paris and elsewhere for *Vogue* and other high-profile fashion magazines.

The images in the Orange Museum exhibition, however, are just a small selection of the art produced by prisoners during the short time they spent in the barbed-wire prison in the town’s showground. A comprehensive overview of all the *Dunera* artists and their work—at Hay, Orange and Tatura—can be explored here.

The *Dunera Mass*

Last month’s performance of Max-Peter Meyer’s *Mass* was introduced by Nicole Forsyth, a professional violist and lecturer in Historic Performance and Strings at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

Performances of Meyer’s music are referenced in many published accounts of the *Dunera* journey and life inside the Australian detention camps. The original manuscripts of his compositions were unknown until they were rediscovered in 2002.

Meyer was born in Munich in 1892. Originally Jewish, he converted to Catholicism in 1935 but was jailed for six weeks in Dachau concentration camp, in November 1938, following *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass), the Nazi’s anti-Semitic pogrom. Nazi storm troopers and thugs, starting on November 9 and continuing till dawn, murdered dozens of German Jews, burnt down almost all the country’s 1,400 synagogues and destroyed 7,000 Jewish shops and businesses.

Following his release from Dachau, Meyer fled to Britain, where he taught at the London College of Music, until he was arrested and transported to Australia. Meyer returned to Britain in 1942, resuming his old position at the London College of Music, where he was later made a Fellow for his work and contribution to music. Meyer was not the only musician and composer transported on *HMT Dunera*. Others included Felix Werder and his father Boaz Bischofswerder, concert pianist Peter Stadlen and violinist Ivan Pietruschka.

There are two existing versions of Meyer’s *Mass*. The first, for unaccompanied male voices, was the version performed in Orange. It was written on various scraps of paper and sung aboard the *HMT Dunera*. The second version was written for soprano, alto, tenor and bass, with organ

accompaniment, and performed in the Tatura camp in 1941.

Other rediscovered Meyer works written and performed in the Australian camps include a requiem for those killed on the *Arandora Star*; the psalm *De Profundis*, arranged for a classical orchestra; and a Piano Quartet in C major.

Introducing the last month’s performance, Nicole Forsyth, said Meyer’s compositions were an important example of the “participatory artistic culture inside the camps” and a solace to their inmates. Written in D minor, a particularly affecting key in the Baroque style, Meyer’s mass, she said, conveyed longing, yearning and sadness.

Last month’s Orange Museum exhibition and Meyer’s *Dunera Mass* were a significant and deeply moving cultural event. Like similar presentations about the *Dunera* boys in recent years it is the occasion for new generations to seriously investigate the political and economic factors that gave rise to the barbarity unleashed against millions by fascism, nationalism and imperialist war, and to learn from it.

In the maelstrom of imperialist war, individuals previously defined as “refugees” can be transformed at the stroke of government pens into “enemy aliens,” permanently under suspicion as spies or potential saboteurs, and then jailed.

Such a study demonstrates that there are no fundamental differences in the persecution of the *Dunera* boys and the ruthless treatment by governments on every continent of the more than 30 million refugees in the world today, in violation of international conventions and basic human rights.

Max-Peter Meyer’s *Mass* will be sung again at the forthcoming Canberra International Music Festival on May 6. The event will also include a performance of *Cantata Judaica*, written by Boaz Bischofswerder, Felix Werder’s father. Both men were internees and collaborated with Meyer. The concert deserves a wide audience.

Dunera Lives: A Visual History, written by Ken Inglis, Seumas Spark, Jay Winter and Carol Bunyan, Monash University (2018).

Alien Worlds: Dunera Artists at Hay (2022), a documentary film by Seumas Spark and Kate Garret.

Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport (2001), written and directed by Mark Jonathan Harris.

The Dunera Boys (1985), Australian television mini-series written and directed by Ben Lewin and starring Bob Hoskins, Warren Mitchell and John Meillon.

[1] *Dunera Lives: Profiles*, written by Ken Inglis, Seumas Spark, Jay Winter and Carol Bunyan, Monash University (2020), p. 414.

[2] *The Dunera Scandal: Deported by Mistake* by Cyril Pearl (1983), p.55.



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