

FROM THE MANNING TO MAJDANEK
THE WAR HISTORY OF
PRIVATE ERNEST MAXWELL SAWYER NX1488

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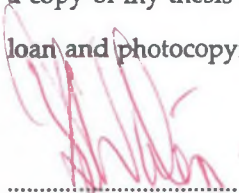


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De profundis clamavi ad te Domine
Ps 129

This work is respectfully dedicated
to the women of
the Sawyer family especially.

Enid,
Vera,
Betty,
Beryl,
Mary

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This work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Paul O'Shea, June 1997

SYNOPSIS

Ernest Max Sawyer (1920-1984) joined the 2nd AIF in 1939 and saw action in North Africa and was captured in Greece in April 1941. He was despatched to *Stammlager* XVIII A Marburg and joined a *Arbeitskommando* for work on various Austrian farms.

Denounced to the local *Gendarmerie* Sawyer was sentenced to the *Straflager* at Graudenz in northern Poland. Escaping Sawyer was recaptured and sent to Majdanek. Until his death Sawyer claimed he had been incarcerated in the KL. Family memories along with documents from medical files trace the slow decline of a man who had suffered trauma consistent with imprisonment in a KL. Sawyer was a victim of the Nazi *Endlösung*.

This thesis attempts to unravel the war history of Max Sawyer. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the background of Sawyer's family within the context of early twentieth century Anglo-Australia. Chapter 3 examines the effects of the 1914-1918 war on the life of Max's father. Chapter 4 looks at Max Sawyer in the world of the Manning Valley in the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter 5 considers Max's army service and his capture in Greece. Chapter 6 details the experience of Australian prisoners of war in Austria and Max's time in Eichburg before his arrest in 1943. Chapter 7 reconstructs his time in Graudenz and then Majdanek in chapter 8. Chapter 9 deals with Max's journey to Odessa and return to Australia. Chapter 10 is an examination of Donald Watt and *Stoker*. The closing chapter discusses difficulties encountered with historians and an examination of Holocaust literature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis grew out of a conversation in a school photocopying room in the first term of 1995. What began as a fascinating story of a colleague's father, soon became an absorbing investigation to discover the truth of an Australian soldier's wartime history. It has been a journey that has covered most of the years of the twentieth century, and moving across the globe from the dairy farms of the Manning Valley to the hellhole of Majdanek. It is an understatement to say that this work would not have been possible save for the constant help and encouragement from Mary Sawyer Brown. Her unflagging interest and willingness to contact members of the family has been a help beyond measure. My thanks go in like manner to the entire Sawyer family.

I am indebted to Max's two sisters, Enid Steele and Vera Joyce, who offered wonderful hospitality as they recalled memories of their family and the sometimes-distressing recollections of their brother returning from the war. Max's widows, Elizabeth and Beryl generously gave me access to their memories as well as to letters and photographs from the war years. Spending time with these women taught me the valuable lesson that history is made of flesh and blood, not just the gathering of data from archives. Sadly Elizabeth died shortly before this work was completed.

Thanks go to Max's former comrades in the 2/2nd who gave me valuable details on the Middle East campaigns and the doomed Greek expedition. In particular, I thank Wilson Myatt who was imprisoned with Max in Austria and later in Graudenz. Wilson's memories of the years 1941-1943 were clear and precise and were shared willingly.

Special thanks go to Colin Burgess who responded enthusiastically to my original letter in late 1995 and who has since provided me with resources, suggestions, criticisms and directions to archival material in Australia and overseas. Colin's advice as a historian of Australian prisoners of war has been of enormous value, and has made my task easier.

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Finally, I offer my gratitude to Chris, who has put up with my “enthusiasms” for years. I could not have written this thesis without him.

The research contained within owes much to many; the errors, naturally, are my own.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Australian Archives
AM	Anton Maurer
AW	Allan Williams
AWM	Australian War Memorial Canberra
BP	Burgess Papers
BS	Beryl Sawyer
CARO	Central Army Records Office Melbourne
CCP	Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers
CS	Clarrie Smith
DCLM	Department of Conservation and Land Management NSW
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
EMS	Ernest Maxwell Sawyer
ES	Enid Sawyer Steele
ETS	Elizabeth Tarrant Sawyer
EWS	Ernest Wiseman Sawyer
Gestapo	<i>Geheime Staatspolizei</i> (Secret State Police)
HB	Harry Bell
HSSFP	<i>Höheren SS und Polizeiführer</i> (Higher SS and Police Leader)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross Geneva
IMT	International Military Tribunal Nuremburg 1945-1946
JR	Julia Rosenburger
JS	Jack Sawby
KL	<i>Konzentrationslager</i> (Concentration Camp)
KZ	Alternative abbreviation for <i>Konzentrationslager</i>
LM	Leo Murnane
LTO	Land Titles Office
MB	Mary Sawyer Brown
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces)
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RSAH	<i>Reichssicherheitshauptamt</i> (Reich Main Security Office)
SD	<i>Sicherheitsdienst</i> (Security Service)
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> ("Defence Echelon")
VJ	Vera Sawyer Joyce
WM	Wilson Myatt

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Note on German usage.

During the years of the Third Reich language was used as a powerful weapon to cloak the true nature of genocidal activity. Euphemisms for mass murder, torture and illegal imprisonment are part of the lexicon of National Socialism. These terms have been used throughout this work, as they are a part of Max Sawyer's history.

Terms such as *Konzentrationslager* and *Straflager* remain unchanged in singular and plural use. In these and similar cases, German relies on the definite article in order to denote number (with the exception of the dative and ablative cases—For convenience we have not employed these.) Terms such as *Arbeitskommando* add *s* to denote plurality. The definite article has not been employed. The reader will be able to identify singular or plural usage from the context.

Chapter One: Introduction

Ernest Maxwell Sawyer was an Australian soldier who had served with the 2/2nd Battalion, 2nd Australian Imperial Forces during World War II. Most people who knew Max also knew that he had been a prisoner of the Germans for the greater part of the war. Few realised he had been incarcerated in a punishment camp (*Straflager*) contrary to the Geneva Convention, and had most likely spent several months in one of the most infamous of the Nazi concentration camps, *Konzentrationslager* Lublin, better known to the world as Majdanek. Max Sawyer, a non-Jewish Australian but presumed by his captors to be Jewish, was caught in the Holocaust by what he saw and what he experienced. He carried the memories of those months and years for the rest of his life; he handed to his children unresolved trauma, in ways remarkably similar to the descendants of Jewish survivors.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast of places: from the lush dairy farms of the Manning Valley to the man-made desolation of KL Majdanek. Yet the story of Max Sawyer links both. Nazi racial bio-politics and the “Final Solution”, generally regarded as having nothing to do with Australia, were introduced into rural Taree and Tinonee, not by way of Jewish refugees but in the person of a “typical” Australian man. What had been considered utterly foreign and alien to Australia made its impact on ordinary Australians in a terrible and frightening way. For years, Max Sawyer’s neurotic behaviour was blamed on his years in the *Stalags*. Elizabeth Tarrant Sawyer, his first wife, believed his years of captivity were a major cause of their marriage breakdown. However, recollections of former comrades who were with Max in the *Stalags* and on the Austrian farms, recounted no unusual or bizarre behaviour. By the time Max reached Australia in mid-April 1945, he was a broken young man. Something beyond the ordinary hardships of prison life had taken place between 1943 and 1945. What “it” was, was only alluded to rarely over the following forty years. When “it” was mentioned there emerged scenes akin to Dante’s inferno. Max sought relief in painting. His subjects were often bleak, terrifying and graphic depictions of tortured people behind barbed wire, being herded towards ominous smoke-belching barracks. Max’s second wife and widow, Beryl, was in no doubt that these scenes came from his fearful memories of Majdanek. It was to be another forty years before

the Australian Government made a public statement recognising the suffering of men like Max.

Late 1987 was chosen by the then Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, to announce that Australian service personnel who had been incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War would be given compensation. In February 1988, 27 Australian ex-servicemen received a \$10 000 *ex-gratia* payment from the Government. Forty-three years of official denial and bureaucratic intransigence were over. Colin Burgess, in *Destination Buchenwald*¹, described the process that began in 1963 in Britain to have heard the claims of ex-servicemen who had been in the camps. It was primarily a matter of the truth being told and confirmed.² Australian politicians of both major parties took more than twenty years beyond this before they, too, acknowledged the irrefutable evidence that Australian servicemen had been held in the Nazi KL system.

What this admission did on one level was to offer a symbolic gesture on behalf of the nation, recognising that these men had suffered torment. It was a belated apology to men who had come to believe that the country whose uniform they had worn with pride did not care or believe them, or did not want to know about them. For the men who received the payment, the gesture itself was enough: a vindication that they were now seen as men who had been denied justice, not men who had concocted a grand illusion.

On a second level, the admission by the Government did something more profound. The popular imagination of Nazi Germany has been divided into two distinct, and often misleading, areas. The first is the gothic drama of the Third Reich with its colour, spectacle and disturbing appeal that led to the war and the battle between the Good Allies and the Bad Nazis and their “comic opera” colleagues, the Italians. Film, literature and propaganda portrayed the Allied cause as noble and destined to succeed. War memoirs appeared almost immediately after the guns ceased firing, and myths and legends began to appear extolling the bravery of the Allies and vilifying the

¹ Colin Burgess, *Destination Buchenwald*, 1995.

² *ibid*, 169-170.

dastardly Germans. Stories were simple, filled with action, and with a predictable heroism that would simply win the war.

Australian war writing promoted the “Sons of Anzac”, worthy inheritors of the mantle of the 1915 Diggers.³ Men who became German prisoners of war, however, had to counter the suspicion that by being captured, they had effectively surrendered their manhood. No matter how bravely they had fought, the prisoner was seen, often by himself, as a compromised man. Commenting on Geoffrey Dutton’s war novel, *Andy* (1968), Robin Gerster comments:

Given the lusty milieu of 1939-45 heroism, the prisoner moreover had to answer the implied charge that he had relinquished his very sexuality as well as his manly courage and independence. In *Andy*, a woman with whom Dutton's licentious hero has a torrid sexual encounter brutally denigrates her husband — then a POW in Germany — for being incompetent as a sexual partner. As she says, “The sort of man who would be taken prisoner.”⁴

The negative self-image of the prisoner was not shared by the rest of the country. One has only to read the letters of Max's father, Ernest, a veteran of the 1914-1918 War, to see the respect and admiration for his son that was undoubtedly a major source of comfort for young Max in the *Stalags*.

Prisoners of war who did write about their experiences did so in two main ways. Books that appeared in the first ten years after 1945 tended to have a *Boys Own* flavour about experiences. Stories of great heroism in escaping from the Germans, keeping the British values of honesty, loyalty and determination to do “one’s bit” to defeat the enemy, dominate this period. Hardship is part of the daily grind of life, but is always kept in the perspective of the ultimate victory of the Allies. Consequently, the most popular genre in the first ten years after the War were the escape books: Eric Williams’s *The Wooden Horse* (1949), Paul Brickhill’s *The Great Escape* (1951), W B Thomas’ *Dare to be Free* (1953), Richard Pape’s *Boldness be my Friend* (1954)

³ Robin Gerster, *Big Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*, 176-177.

⁴ *ibid*, 228.

and Aidan Crawley's *Escape from Germany* (1956). Another popular style came from some of the more famous prison camps, especially *Oflag IV C Colditz*, made famous in Patrick Reid's *The Colditz Story* (1952) and *The Latter Days* (1953).

War adventure stories remained good sellers. However, the post-Vietnam War era and the growth of a strong anti-war and anti-nuclear movement within Australia, along with the emergence of a critical re-appraisal of Australia's war-time policies, saw a new critique of prisoner experiences. By the 1980s there was a change in style. Former prisoners were aging, and in books that often bear remarkable similarities with Holocaust survivor stories, tales of the years of imprisonment were told in a much harsher and brutal manner. Discussed and examined in this new genre were issues of the difficulties of life in the German *Stalag* system and feelings of impotence and failure at having been captured. For the first time, resentment at those who did attempt to escape was mentioned because of the reprisals taken by the Germans on those left behind. Finally, there were the brooding fears and suspicions of terrible things happening to those who "disappeared." Among former prisoner writers who typify this genre are Ian Ramsey, *A Digger in Hitler's Prison Camps* (1985), Barney Roberts, *A Kind of Cattle* (1985), Frank Taylor, *Barbed Wire and Footlights* (1988), Michael Clarke, *My War* (1990), Charles Robinson, *Journey to Captivity* (1991), Jack Goyder, *A Touch of Sabotage* (1992) and David Wild, *Prisoner of Hope* (1992).

At the same time, scholars and writers began collecting the experiences of ordinary Australian soldiers to present the stories of everyday men in the ranks. The work of John Barrett, *We Were There* (1987), Margaret Barter, *Far Above Battle* (1994) and Mark Johnston, *At the Frontline* (1996), paint a detailed portrait of Australian soldiers in the Second World War. A few books attempted to look at the Australian prisoner of war experience. In this category are the works of Colin Burgess and Hugh Clarke, *Barbed Wire and Bamboo* (1992) and Patsy Adam-Smith, *Prisoners of War* (1992). The most informative work on prisoners in occupied Europe has undoubtedly been W. Wynne-Mason's volume, *Prisoners of War in the Official History of New Zealand and the Second World War* (1954). The New Zealand experience was often very close to that of many Australian prisoners, and many ANZACs shared *Stammlager*, *Arbeitskommados* and *Straflager* together.

The second area is that of the Holocaust, the deliberate and systematic attempt to exterminate European Jewry. For most Australians, this event was primarily somebody else's tragedy. The Holocaust happened in Europe, thousands of kilometres away, in a different country, to a different people. It had nothing to do with Anglo-Australia: it was foreign. Australians read about the horrors of the Holocaust throughout the war years in their newspapers, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Adelaide Advertiser*.⁵ Rural Australia also read of the massacres and camps in papers like the *Taree Northern Champion* and the *Manning River Times*. Many saw graphic newsreels from the liberated camps in 1945 and 1946. Yet, while Australians were genuinely horrified and sickened by what they saw, they had also been exposed to scenes of other brutal and barbarous behaviour — the Japanese treatment of Australian prisoners.⁶ In particular, the treatment of captured Australian women, mostly nurses, who had gone to work with the sick and wounded, remained in the Australian mind as the nadir of Japanese evil.⁷ This, it is argued, attuned the Australian public's mind more than anything else to a definition of war crimes, something much more powerful than the kind of evidence submitted in Nuremberg's Court rooms.

Japan's aggression against Australia has become part of the "cultural baggage" of the nation's memories of the war. Changi has become synonymous with Australian courage and endurance in the face of insurmountable odds. At Gallipoli, the Digger was born; in Changi and on the Burma-Siam railway, the Digger was tried and tested. From these two iconic experiences the Australian post-1945 war history was shaped.

The European tragedy, whilst having cultural and religious aspects that were identifiable in Australia, was nonetheless a European drama. It simply wasn't Australian.

Despite all the interest in the Holocaust, however, at no time has it been considered as an issue which in any way pertained to Australia.

⁵ Paul Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust*, chapter 10.

⁶ Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese*.

⁷ Patsy Adam-Smith, *Prisoners of War*, 447-474.

Indeed, apart from the efforts of a few university academics, the role of Australia during the Holocaust has never been questioned by Australians. One of the main foci for discussion during the committal hearing of the men charged with war crimes was that any crimes they many have committed took place over fifty years ago, outside Australian territory and beyond Australian jurisdiction. Such considerations tend to absolve Australia from having any direct interest in the Holocaust, and in so doing also remove the Australian role between 1933 and 1945 from the national agenda.⁸

The Australian Government went on to offer refuge for many survivors in the post-war migration schemes.

More than a few war criminals were able to enter Australia, eyewitnesses from the side of the perpetrators to some of the most heinous crimes of the Holocaust. To date none have ever been successfully prosecuted despite the December 1988 *War Crimes Amendment Bill*, and the celebrated Ivan Polyukhovich court case in Adelaide in the 1990s.⁹ The level of feeling against trying “geriatrics before the court” was such that any serious attempt to bring perpetrators to justice met with widespread scorn.¹⁰ Justice Brennan argued that since genocide was not defined as a crime until 1948 the events of the war years could not be classified as such. “The Germany of 1941 to 1945, the killing Germany, was too far away, too remote from today’s Australia.”¹¹ The Holocaust was a European tragedy, and not one that touched Australia directly. There had been no Australians involved, and those who thought differently learnt to remain silent. Both victims and perpetrators were growing old, so let the past fade. And so it faded, and the myths grew.

Ernest Max Sawyer (1920-1984) fought for Australia in the 2nd Australian Imperial Forces during World War II. He was captured by German troops in Tempe Gorge,

⁸ Bartrop, op cit, 244.

⁹ David Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 209ff.

¹⁰ Senator John Panizza cited in Colin Tatz, “Genocide and the Politics of Memory”, in Colin Tatz (ed) *Genocide Perspectives I*, 328. See too 327-332.

¹¹ Tatz, *ibid*, 329 Australia’s attitudes to War Crimes Trials had been ambiguous from the beginning. In January 1942 the Australian delegation at the London Allied joint declaration condemning German atrocities commented that they were there under protest. The Australian attitude waxed and waned

Greece, in April 1941, and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of the Germans. If this were all that Sawyer's story amounted to, his would have been no different to many of the several thousand Australian POW stories from Nazi-occupied Europe. Sawyer's story is different. Sometime in 1944, he attempted an escape from the *Strafgefängnis* Graudenz in northern Poland. He was caught wearing the nametags of another soldier, probably Jamie Dunbar, and was sent to the *Konzentrationslager* Majdanek.

This, at least, is the reconstructed story, the one that sounds most plausible. Records of the *Kriegsgefangenenwesen* were largely destroyed in the last months of the war, and much of what did survive was seized by American troops in April 1945. Some of the records eventually ended in the archives of the Ministry of Defence at Hayes in England. Even with this information, coupled with archival material from Australian military sources, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the memories of family and former comrades, the story of Max Sawyer may never be fully known. Since he was illegally held in *Straflager* Graudenz, contrary to the *Geneva Convention* of 1929, evidence such as letters sent to him by his father are always addressed to the nearest Prisoner of War Camp, *Stalag* XX A Thorn.

It is virtually impossible to ascertain the veracity of Sawyer's possible imprisonment in KL Majdanek. Records that did survive the hasty evacuation of the KL in July 1944 were seized by Soviet troops, used for the Majdanek Trial in October 1944, and then sent to archives outside of Moscow. It has only been in recent years that these archives have begun to be opened for scholarly research.¹²

Max was just 24 when he returned to Australia from Odessa in March-April 1945. The young man who came home was, in many ways, broken. Severely traumatised, he brooded alone over experiences of the "slaughterhouses" he claimed to have witnessed in eastern Europe. He had returned while the European war was in its death throes, and the Pacific theatre still very much alive. There was no time, or even place, for "self pity" and moroseness: besides this would not have been Max Sawyer's way.

throughout the war. Tom Bower, *Blind Eye to Murder*, 28, 75, 86.

¹² George Browden, "Update on the Captured Documents in the former Osoby Archive, Moscow", in *Central European History*, 26.3, 335.

Surrounded by a loving family, Sawyer was nursed back to health, and in November 1945 he married Elizabeth Aaltje Tarrant in Taree. His family did not know of the terrible experiences their son and brother had been through in Europe, and Max rarely spoke of them. That would not have been the “right thing to do.” One cousin, Dorothy, recalled that Max behaved in a similar way to her brother, who had been a prisoner of the Japanese. Therefore Max’s wartime years as a POW in Germany accounted for his sometimes erratic behaviour. He was “understood”, and the matter was never probed. Consequently, Max remained more or less silent about his war years in Austria and Poland until shortly before his death in 1984. In this regard, he was similar to thousands of other survivors of great traumas.

Researching Sawyer’s war history has revealed a number of important historical problems. These can be summarised in three particular areas. First, the majority of western war and military historians do not understand the Nazi *Weltanschauung* that drove the machinery of the National Socialist Reich and provided the rationale for the Holocaust. Consequently I argue that their interpretation of the war is limited and faulty. In some cases the Holocaust and the attendant persecution of other *Untermenschen* is either omitted or repressed altogether. Second, Holocaust historians have maintained a near exclusive focus on the extermination of the Jews and have spent little time recognising or detailing the experiences of other persecuted groups, including prisoners of war.¹³ This imbalance needs to be addressed. Third, the whole nature of war and Holocaust literature needs re-appraisal in order to present an inclusive, accurate and truthful account of events within particular fields of research. My research has highlighted a difficult case and begs the question: how do we fit an Australian soldier, who “should” have remained in a *Stalag* protected by the Geneva Convention, into the hell-hole of KL Lublin-Majdanek? If there was anyone who did not fit any of the classes of people slated for extermination, who was as far removed from the historical and cultural antecedents that made the Holocaust possible, and who was literally “in the wrong place at the wrong time”, it must be Max Sawyer. He bore witness to the events of the Holocaust by default. Sawyer’s

¹³ Much work has been done on the Nazi treatment of Soviet and Polish POWs, but comparatively little research has been done on western POWs in eastern Europe. This point is elaborated in Chapter 6.

case is, I suggest one of many, which do not fit the accepted patterns of war and Holocaust historiography. It is time to create a new pattern.¹⁴

What Max's story does present is recognition that the Holocaust of European Jewry touched the life of an Australian soldier and his family. The family did not have sufficient understanding of the Holocaust to intertwine it with what they knew of Max's experience. They simply saw a young man whose life had been irrevocably changed by his years in the *Stalags*. His body bore witness to torture and beatings, to great hunger and deprivation. Mentally, Max was deeply scarred. Memories of the camps often woke him at night in dreadful sweats and with screams that terrified his young children, experiences common with camp survivors, both Jewish and non-Jewish.¹⁵ The psychological care of returned prisoners was minimal. The former soldiers were expected to resume "normal life" as soon as possible, so many of the men hid the fact they had spent the war "behind wire" or places beyond the imagination of "ordinary people."¹⁶

Had Sawyer been Jewish, a claim his captors asserted in Europe, he would have had at least the solidarity of other survivors, even if, like many of them, he chose to remain silent. Indeed, had it been accepted that there had been Australians in the KLs, Sawyer may have found a camaraderie among former inmates. Since none of these prospects were realised among non-Jews in Australia, Sawyer remained alone.

Sawyer's post-war history was marked by an increasing incidence of neurosis and traumatic behaviour. Leo Eitinger, the Norwegian psychiatrist and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, developed a theory aimed at explaining what he called "KZ syndrome" (concentration camp syndrome), wherein he created a symptomatology that was common among KZ survivors.¹⁷ Max's post-war history fits into this category to an extent that other former prisoners of war do not. Further, his post-1945 history is consistent with what is today known as Post Traumatic Stress

¹⁴ I am not claiming to be the first writer to research the situation of POWs in the KL system. There are a number of recent works that narrate POW experiences in forced labour camps and KL. However, none of them have integrated these testimonies into the matrix of Nazism beyond simplistic explanations. Cf Claire Swedberg, *Work Commando 311/1*.

¹⁵ Leo Eitinger, "Psychosomatic Problems in Concentration Camp Survivors", in *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 13, 183-189.

¹⁶ John Barratt, *We Were There*, 381.

Disorder. PTSD, first named in the late 1970s during research with United States Vietnam War veterans, established that the delay in recognising a psychological derivative for PTSD lay in a reluctance to challenge accepted psychiatric and psychological theory. Historically,

it is commonly believed that the etiology of pathology lies not in adult but childhood traumas. To argue that trauma in adult life can have profound and longlasting psychological consequences even among individuals who were previously normal, is to contradict this developmental theory.¹⁸

The trauma or syndrome, is, or was, one which experienced events

grossly at variance and incongruous with one's previously established self concepts and basic mental schema for being in the world. These traumatic experiences also have a shocking and unexpected quality, an unendurably prolonged quality, or both.¹⁹

Symptoms of PTSD and KZ Syndrome can occur soon after the trauma, but might often surface months or years later. Symptoms can include re-experiencing the trauma through vivid memories, flashback nightmares and panic/anxiety attacks.²⁰ Throughout the 1960s to the 1980s, Professor Z J Ryn conducted extensive research on Polish KL survivors. He concluded that for the vast majority of KL survivors the "KZ Syndrome" developed over a relatively short period of time, although for some former prisoners symptoms could appear as late as ten years after liberation. The syndrome had "a chronic, progressive character and was refractory."²¹

Former prisoners who had been traumatised in the *Stalags* and KLs were dismissed by government departments because they could not produce concrete evidence of their trauma. The Australian Government's recognition of the ex-servicemen incarcerated

¹⁷ Anton Gill, *The Journey Back from Hell*, 91.

¹⁸ Stephen Sonnenburg, *The Trauma of War*, 17.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 103.

²⁰ Ada Kahn, *The Encyclopedia of Phobias, Fears and Anxieties*, 325.

²¹ Z J Ryn, "Survivors Syndrome: Transgenerational Evolution", in *Genocide Perspectives I*, 294-295.

in the KLs evolved out of a change in psychological theory, which, in turn, led to a change in government policy. Max died before the change in government policy was made. He died believing that the country he had served during the Second World War did not know the extent to which he had suffered under the Nazis as a witness to the “Final Solution.”

Research on Australians who were held in the *Konzentrationslager* is minimal. Colin Burgess, in his *Destination Buchenwald*, (1995) investigated Australian and Allied airmen who were sent to KL Buchenwald in the late summer of 1944. His work is important in this whole area, but the subjects of his book were not typical of men such as Sawyer, who had been in eastern European *Stalags* since April 1941. The airmen were mostly captured in France after the D-Day landings which opened the Second Front. Their prospects of liberation, despite Buchenwald, were significantly higher than Sawyer’s in eastern Europe, where the Nazi terror held a firm grip on the population until moments before the Red Army arrived.

In 1995 Donald Watt published *Stoker: The Story of an Australian Soldier who Survived Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Within some academic circles Watt’s book raised a storm and introduced serious anomalies in the area of researching Australians in the *Konzentrationslager*. To a largely uneducated popular audience, and some survivors eager to have non-Jewish validation of their experiences, Watt’s book was amazing. His work, however, is fraught with historical inaccuracies, from descriptions of Auschwitz itself, to the very fact of Watt’s survival in Birkenau after eight months spent feeding the furnaces. Reviewing the work in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Robin Gerster asserted that “to doubt its veracity would look like moral callousness. Or worse, it would place one in the ranks of conspiracy theorists like the historian David Irving.”²²

Such questionable literary reviewing by Robin Gerster sets off alarms among academics and Holocaust scholars. A work of the calibre of *Stoker* demands a stringent approach on the part of the researcher, not only to ensure the accuracy of such sources, but of the methodology employed. Watt’s book is simply not true and

²² Robin Gerster, “War Horrors Merge Reality and Fiction”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22.04.1995.

the “delicate handling” afforded it by the media does nothing to rectify what is a potentially dangerous document. Donald Watt’s book has prompted the start of a serious academic study into Australians held in the *Konzentrationslager*.

Max Sawyer, like all the soldiers of the 2nd AIF, came from an Australian environment that was, to use the phrase of John Williams, a “Quarantined Culture.”²³ He grew up in a country still recovering from the traumas of the Great War and trying to re-align itself in the Imperial orbit.

It is necessary to explore briefly the history of Australia from Federation to the outbreak of war in 1939. Australia, perceived as an outpost of Empire and loyal Dominion, was moulded and shaped by the Imperial climate of the day. The cultural, social, political and economic life of the young Commonwealth was dictated by concerns in London, as much as in Melbourne. The 1914-1918 War was Australia’s great opportunity to demonstrate her maturity within the Imperial family of nations. Gallipoli became the icon and test of Australian manhood, a gauge by which all could be measured.

Sawyer was the son of a returned soldier, a man who had fought in the Middle East Campaign between 1916 - 1919. He was shaped by the myths of the ANZACs of Gallipoli, and the heroism of those who did their duty for “God, King and Empire.” That his father was not an ANZAC did not diminish for him the power of the myth. Life in the Manning Valley between the war years was a series of fluctuating markets. It was coupled with the constant encroachment of the modern world, presenting challenges to the small villages, including Tinonee, which supported the Imperial ethos with vigour as a touchstone of their continued existence. Like so many other young men who enlisted in the first months of the War, Max was filled with pride in being Australian, eager to see the world outside his parochial parameters, and keen “to do the right thing.”

Sawyer’s war history has been reconstructed through the memories of former comrades, official documents from within Australia and overseas, and the process of

²³ John Williams, *Quarantined Culture*.

corroboration with evidence drawn from official and private sources. The years 1939 to the time of his capture on 18 April 1941 form one identifiable section that is relatively easy to reassemble. His experiences on the *Arbeitskommando* in Austria, and his first months in *Straflager* Graudenz, have been reconstructed through memoirs and interviews with survivors. After 1943, the history becomes muddled and indeterminate. This section is the most academically challenging because of a lack of reliable sources. However, it is possible to reconstruct a scenario that is plausible, using memoirs of survivors and the recent advances made in medicine and psychiatry.

History sometimes reveals its secrets reluctantly. Max's story presents challenges that, in part, appear daunting. The writing of this thesis has been motivated by a sense of completing "unfinished business." Max died without his war history being either vindicated or disproved. His experience in Europe between 1944 and 1945 was dominated by the Holocaust. His family were swept into Max's experience in a non-understanding way after 1945, and lasted for four decades. In one way, Max Sawyer's death in June 1984 closed another chapter of a life that had been forever affected by the Nazi ideology of *Herrenvolk* and *Untermenschen* and the world of the *Konzentrationslager*. The family continues to carry the legacy of those years. Perhaps that legacy may now be better understood.

Chapter Two: Australia 1900 - 1914

In 1900 Australia — or rather, the colonies that lived on the Australian continent — was an optimistic and forward looking collection of societies. An unshakeable faith in all things British, from the matriarchal benevolence of the Queen Empress Victoria and the great Anglo-Saxon Empire to the sheep's back and the Sheffield steel which shore it, Australia reflected the values of an imperial outpost. "God Save the Queen" and "Advance Australia Fair" perhaps best typify the brash and supremely confident attitude of many Australians at the opening of the twentieth century. Pride in being British marked Australian life. Australia had no need to fear enemies abroad, for as long as Britannia ruled the waves Australian shores would be safe. Within such seemingly permanent security, Australians could afford to indulge the new 'crazes' that were emerging from Europe. New art, new dance, new music and new literature could all be absorbed without great trouble. The parameters of white society were fixed. "Mother Britannia" was big and maternal enough to cope with them all. Within a generation these attitudes had been sorely tested and strained; yet Australia remained not only firmly Anglo-centric, but resolutely turned away from the dalliance with modernism that had become a symbol of all that was wrong with the world, and a foreboding sign of dangers yet unleashed. By 1920, the shutters had well and truly come down on Australia.

Federation was the sign of a new era for Australia. For the Anglo-Australian imperialists, it was a rite of passage from colony to Commonwealth and to a new status within the Empire, a sign that the British political genius was alive and well in the antipodes. The unpalatable truth that Australia was quite often regarded condescendingly in Britain as a land of "colonials", descended from convicts, who were marginally better than Americans was, quite naturally, ignored in the celebrations of the day.¹ And the stigma stuck and struck a chord deep within the Australian psyche. For the less imperially minded Labour Party, the Commonwealth was blessed, "free of most of the superstitions, traditions, class distinctions, and sanctified fables and fallacies of the older traditions. Australia stood on the threshold

¹Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 127.

of the future with its fate in its hands.”² Whatever political hue Australians belonged to on January 1, 1901, the promulgation of the Commonwealth of Australia marked not an independence and separate national identity, but a collection of various identities that found some sort of unity through the mantle of British imperialism, encapsulating the values of inevitable progress in all spheres. “Felix Australia” would, as the new Commonwealth, continue to be an imperial treasure-trove of natural resources that would line the pockets of Sydney and London brokers.

Imperialism dominated the later half of the nineteenth century and characterised Australian political and social institutions for the first half of the twentieth. Edward Said defines imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory.”³ Imperialism develops from acts of acquisition, usually, though not always, against the will of the indigenous people. From this it cultivates a colonial, or perhaps more accurately, a hybrid culture that attempts to slavishly copy and reproduce the “mother country” in all its aspects with little regard to local conditions. The mind of the colonialist is not distinct from the culture of origin since the colony is perceived as an extension of the “mother country.” Further, Said argues that imperialism fostered an essentially racist world view that surpassed economics and market forces. There was, he says, a belief which “on the one hand allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples should be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the imperium as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advantaged peoples.”⁴ The colonialists themselves adopt a subservient attitude towards the culture of origin. Once the colony has been established, as it was in Australia, the distance from the metropolitan centre, in this case, London, made communication difficult in the earlier stages of nineteenth century imperialism. However, with the development of telegraphic and cable communication, the “tyranny of distance” was gradually annihilated. Consequently, colonial society grew in a strange, almost fossilised fashion, retaining and maintaining the culture of the

² Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 193.

³ Said, *op cit*, 8.

⁴ *ibid*, 10.

“mother country” at the time of foundation and only slowly making adaptations out of necessity.

Whereas the United States had a national identity shaped out of its experience of breaking away from Britain and developing a particular character that resonated with the majority of its citizens, Australia did not. Imperialism and the “imperial adventure” took the place of an indigenous Australian nationalism. With few exceptions, most notably the *Bulletin*, people were content to enjoy the *status quo*. Colonial literature, whether fiction or not, demonstrates how thorough the imperial *zeitgeist* had permeated. Said, writing about Rudyard Kipling and *Kim*, observes:

whether we like it or not, [Kipling] is writing not just from the dominating viewpoint of a whiteman in a colonial possession but from the perspective of a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning, and history had acquired the status of virtual fact of nature.⁵

The same comments could be transposed for the poetry of Banjo Paterson or Henry Lawson and the novels of Ethel Turner or Mary Grant Bruce. Even the *Bulletin* was laden with the prejudices and characteristics of the imperium. Its support for the White Australia policy and antagonism towards the Chinese quite clearly demonstrate this.

Australia was an imperialist country with all the trappings of the British variety. The celebration of Empire Day on 24 May was a more significant national day than 26 January, since Queen Victoria had become for imperialists the most accessible symbol of the Empire. At the time of the Golden and Diamond Jubilees, the Mother Country “and Her Majesty’s dominions across the sea” joined together in London, offering thanks to God for the wise and sage reign of the Queen.⁶ Her portrait was everywhere; she appeared immortal, and the myth created about her was such, that Victoria came to embody the very idea of the British Empire. Her birthday was

⁵ *ibid*, 162.

⁶ Caroline Chapman, *Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 and 1897*, 41 Cf also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19.06, 21.06.1897. Hereafter *SMH*.

therefore akin to a religious festival, whereby the imperial family was bonded together in common Anglo-Saxondom. Sir Joseph Carruthers introduced Empire Day in 1905. In his thinking, parochial Australia Day could only have secondary importance to the celebration of the Empire.⁷ Anglo-Australia was safe within the bonds of this great imperial family. At the turn of the new century, with imperial red splashed across nearly a fifth of the globe, it was difficult to imagine the new Australian Commonwealth as anything else than British. It is possible, even necessary; to argue that while the embryonic forms of an Australian nationalism were present in 1901, Australia *qua* Australia was thoroughly subsumed in the greatest empire the world had ever known.

John Williams's analysis of imperial Anglo-Australian society in the opening decade of the twentieth century reveals a society modern and outward-looking in its approach to the world while at the same time closely reflecting the anxiety of Europe, namely, when would war break out. Taking the last year of peace, Williams writes of two 1913s,

one in which everyone was young, beautiful and upper-middle class, wore white and lived in eternal innocence and sunshine; and in another, more neurotic 1913 the frolicking was hectic and accompanied by furtive over-the-shoulders glances at the looming apocalypse.”⁸

Such a description could well have been written about 1913 in London, St Petersburg, Paris or Berlin. This *angst* was rarely alluded to in Australian society, and yet it formed a strong undercurrent both in the voice-in-the-wilderness *Bulletin* and in some more forward looking politicians, notably Prime Minister Alfred Deakin.⁹

The *Bulletin* reflected the ‘larrikin’ non-conformist side to Australian life, fulfilling the role of Court Jester, the only one who could speak fearlessly and frankly to the King. Radical, nationalistic and modernistic, the *Bulletin* loudly criticised Australia

⁷ Bede Nairn, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 7.557. Hereafter, ADB.

⁸ John Williams, *op cit*, 36.

⁹ *ibid*, 38-39; Gordon Greenwood, *Australia: A Social and Political History*, 221-222.

for not developing an independent industrially based economy that would exploit the country's so far underdeveloped manufacturing sector and the alarming rise of the nation's debt. "It had a point, for with a 'living wage' of £2.14s weekly and a population of less than 5 million, Australians bore the highest per capita debt on earth."¹⁰ A diversified economy would need to be on the Commonwealth agenda. Such a prospect was unlikely as the states constantly railed against Commonwealth intervention. Arguably it was too early for the Commonwealth Government to be sure of its own role. The new states guarded their domains jealously. The federal government was not a strong force. It "provided a framework within which its citizens traded with the rest of the world and decided who might enter it; it provided encouragement for local enterprise, regulated the terms of employment for part of the workforce and made provision for those whose working lives were over. But in the matters that chiefly touched everyday life, the states remained more important."¹¹ The need to diversify the economy and the persistent reluctance of governments to do so, pointed to the entrenched imperial orientation of the Australian mind.

Alfred Deakin's decision to build an Australian Navy was greeted without great enthusiasm — after all, the "guns of the world's greatest navy" would always be there to defend Australia and the Empire.¹² Described as one of Australia's "great" Prime Ministers, Deakin was a rare politician in 1908.¹³ He was determined that while Australia would always remain loyal to Britain and be a proud part of the Empire, Australia's regional concerns were not to be ignored. "He sought, as on the naval defence issue, to reconcile legitimate national aspirations with an effective working partnership...he thought of the empire as an association with members equal in status if not in power."¹⁴ His impassioned rhetoric impressed politicians in London as much as in Melbourne.

The myth of the Australian bush farmer also served to highlight the dangerous gap between developing Australia's realistic potential as an industrial society with a strong agricultural sector and the continued pursuit of the unrealistic dream of a

¹⁰ Williams, op cit, 38-39.

¹¹ Stuart MacIntyre, *The Succeeding Age 1901-1942*, 95.

¹² Williams, op cit, 56.

¹³ Donald Horne, *SMH*, 11.11.1995.

¹⁴ Greenwood, op cit, 222.

country “cut up into yeoman farm blocks.”¹⁵ Mythology continued by adding, as though an afterthought, an incidental industrial and manufacturing sector. Unreality abounded! Every Australian farmer would have been able to tell any “expert” that the precarious nature of Australia’s water supply ruled out widespread intensive farming. The dreadful droughts of the 1890s were still very recent in the minds of many farmers who had been ruined through over farming and pushing the grain belts too far into semi-deserts. Fantasies about huge subterranean water supplies the size of the oft-sought-after inland seas of the early nineteenth century had been more or less refuted. Yet many held to a slightly less exotic hope that irrigation and water storage would still realise the hope of creating farms that followed the European model. From Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and other cities, politicians and economists argued that “Australia’s problems could be solved by a few scientific wonders backed by millions of men of the right type and muscle to chop, plough, dig, plant and carry - a formulation Australians mostly agreed with.”¹⁶

Australia’s romantic affair with the bush reached deep into the psyche of the country. Exercising enormous power over popular imagination and culture, the image of the “pure bush” as opposed to the “corrupt city” dominated the political and social agendas for decades. Australia’s bards – Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay-Gordon – wrote mostly about bush and bush-related themes. Australian school children learnt by rote the poems that encapsulated the heroic Australian battling the isolation and loneliness of the bush, building a new world free from the taint of the city. No matter how hard the labour or sacrifice, it would be in the crucible of the bush that the authentic Australian would be found.

Only having been refined by the experience of the bush could one lay any claim to having found the “soul” of the country and so discover that “Not as the songs of other lands, Her song shall be”, as George Essex Evans wrote in “An Australian Symphony”:

The grey gums by the lonely creek,
The star-crowned height,
The wind swept plain, the dim blue peak,

¹⁵ Williams, op cit, 47.

¹⁶ Williams, op cit, 46.

The cold white light,
The solitude spread near and far,
Around the camp-fire's tiny star
The horse-bell's melody remote,
The curlew's melancholy note
Across the night-¹⁷

It is also to the bush that the Australian turns to or returns in order to be “reconnected” with the true spirit of the land. “There’s a track winding back to an old fashioned shack along the road to Gundagai” expresses more than Paterson’s romance with the bush. It underscores the mythical quality that rural Australia held over the city.

The Kyabram campaign of 1902 illustrated the merger of myth (the honest farmer, producer of the nation’s wealth), prejudice, (the army of parasitic public servants) and fear (a burgeoning government that grew more powerful every year). While its supporters made much noise, the actual results of the campaign to “clean up” wasteful government expenditure were negligible. The long-term effects of campaigns such as these was to keep alive a suspicion of “dirty politics”, an urban reality which the bushman avoided assiduously.¹⁸ “The Man From Snowy River” is more of a man and has a greater freedom than do his cousins in the city: he is larger than life with a daring and courage that is awesome. Australia’s early poets cemented the bush into the national self-perception to the point that most Australians knew more about the exploits of Andy the Overlander on Queensland cattle tracks than they did about the banks which controlled their mortgages, or the workings of the factories in which they laboured, or even their own suburban backyards in Melbourne or Sydney.

Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin and the other Heidelberg School artists perpetuated the mythical qualities of the bush in their paintings. Of course they were not alone, but the Heidelberg School stands out as the most prestigious Australian “style” in the early twentieth century. Again, the preoccupation with the bush dominates their art. Roberts’ “Shearing the Rams” portrays with great effect the

¹⁷ George Essex Evans, “An Australian Symphony”, in H E Daw, *Victorian Readers 8th Book*, 3.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, op cit, 96-98.

toiling shearer. Well-toned masculine bodies engaged in their work, shearing the sheep, that potent symbol of the country's wealth, illustrate the great, honest nobility of the shearer, the rural worker, and the power of the imperial economy. Here was the shearer helping to make Britannia's bounds "wider still and wider." Australian wool joined New Zealand dairy produce, South African gold, Canadian wheat and Indian cotton to keep the industry and mills of Britain turning. Streeton's and McCubbin's landscapes bathe the harsh countryside in brilliant light that often shows the hard working farmer or bushman with his supportive and loving wife and new-born infant battling against the odds to tame the bush. The figures are stoic and accepting in their poise. Here are Australia's heroes; noble Anglo-Australians determined to reach their natural best through their endeavours on the land.

It is in the children's literature of the pre-war years that we find another indicator of the extent of "bush mythology." Throughout the first half of the twentieth century most children's literature was written by British authors. When writing about subjects outside of Britain, imperial authors of the late nineteenth century wrote great adventure stories that showed the superiority of the Briton in all circumstances. When these authors wrote for children, the outcomes were still the same, but the moral messages were spelt out in no uncertain terms.

Alfred Harmsworth who published the *Boys Own Annual* (1885-) believed that popular imperialism should be a standard part of education. Harmsworth published many books for boys, and his ideology ran through the gamut of imperial attitudes and prejudices: racism, protection of the Empire, Australia the frontier country, the poor young Briton who makes good in the colonies with lots of adventure, the superiority of the British race over all others, the task of all 'good' Britons to spread the credo of Empire for the good of the world. The evangelical type flavour of Harmsworth's writing was typical of the day. His characters are hardy outdoor figures who eschew the comforts of "home" for the call of the Empire. Their's is a civilising vocation: to take the Union Jack and British virtues to the far corners of the globe. This would not happen in cities and towns, but in the wild and unchartered territories of the colonies. Often alone, and relying on their own wits in the face of fearsome adversaries, these pioneers call upon their natural British courage and intelligence to confound the foe and overcome all obstacles. Recognised as gallant

heroes they receive the accolades of a grateful superior and undying fame as they are placed among the “greats” of British manhood.

Qualifying this genre of literature is the unspoken assumption that British is always preferable to anything else, even “home grown” literature or art in the colonies. The inference remained that colonial literature and art was “good” only if it reflected British literature and art. The syllogism was completed with the logical conclusion that since British was best, Australian writers and artists would follow the British example. It mattered little therefore that Australian conditions were totally dissimilar to those of the Mother Country. Herein lie the origins of the phenomenon known as the “Cultural Cringe.” Hughes defined it as

the assumption that whatever you do in the field of writing, painting, sculpture, architecture, film, dance or theatre is of unknown value until it is judged by people outside your own society...the essence of cultural colonialism is that you demand of yourself that your work measure up to standards that cannot be shared or debated where you live.¹⁹

Consequently, in Australia, all literature and art were prejudged by the expected reception they would receive “at home.” Perhaps the greatest irony of this was the discovery of an artistic Cultural Cringe in Britain where English artists of the early twentieth century were forever being compared to the latest arrivals from the Paris salons.²⁰

There were few Australian authors, and they tended to continue with similar thematic structures as the authors “back home.” Loyalty to God, the Crown and the Empire, combined with loyalty to one’s family, form the basis for the Australian writers. Noticeably, most of the Australian authors were women, in particular Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce. Turner’s books are an Australian interpretation of imperialism. Her books stress the value of mateship and domesticity, large families and gender roles that give ultimate satisfaction. *Seven Little Australians* (1895)

¹⁹ Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 4.

²⁰ *ibid*, 178.

idealises the class-conscious structure of late colonial New South Wales. Everyone has his or her place, even rebellious Judy. The social system of the household reflected the broader social system of the late nineteenth century. When the children are sent to Yarrahappini for a holiday dressed in clothes that were more suited for England than New South Wales, they become almost arcadian. The naivety of city life with all its attendant ills disappears in the healthy life of the Hassal's property. Turner unwittingly makes an observation about Australia's literary style in her description of Nellie's discovery about the true nature of sheep. Most Australian literature lived in the same conundrum.

Nellie was disappointed in the sheep; exceedingly so. She had expected to find great snow-white beautiful creatures that would be tame and allow her to put ribbon on their necks and lead them about.

21

Reality rarely connected with a good Victorian - Edwardian story. The "true" Australian is once again found in the "purity" of the bush, away from the tainted city.

Mary Grant Bruce, writing between 1910 and 1946, created a series about an outback station called "Billabong", located somewhere in Victoria (!) The comfortable, snobbish environment of the sheep farming Linton family, as seen through the experience of the heroine, daughter Nora, promotes idyllic images of the pioneer woman supporting husband and provider. Founded on "mateship", class structured and racist, "Billabong" echoes "White Australia" as the outpost of Empire, a feudal fiefdom in a great land that has awaited until late, the advent of British civilisation to tap untold and untilled riches. Again, rural Australia is paramount. The city is avoided, as are grimy factories and gloomy slums. Industry is the preserve of the land, and Australia's greatness lay in the land and on the sheeps' back.

While poets and writers extolled the goodness of the bush, broader Australian society, operating under the influence of Anglo-Saxon Imperial chauvinism, moved to ensure that the bush and the rest of Australia remained firmly white and British. Central to

²¹ Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians*, 150.

the new Commonwealth of Australia was the “White Australia Policy.” Traditional xenophobia, directed mainly towards Asia, had been reinforced during the later nineteenth century with fears of an invasion by the “yellow peril.” Japan’s rising industrial and military prowess also caused alarm in Australia. If Australia were to survive, the land must be populated with appropriate racial stock, and that stock must be British.

An inherent racism was one of Western imperialism’s more dangerous accessories. The treatment of Australia’s indigenous people since 1788 had been largely one of murder, official neglect and the oft-expressed wish that “they” would simply vanish.²² By 1900, Australia’s Aborigines were a remnant of the many different peoples who had lived on the continent for upwards of 60 000 to 80 000 years prior to the European arrival. For most white Australians, the Aborigines were at best thought of as archaeological specimens of a dying race or, at worst, pests to be exterminated. “Aborigines, while useful as trackers, were depicted as at best harmless unhygienic dolts, and at worst, stupid, shifty, physical degenerates, fit only to act as a target for the white man’s jokes or drawings.”²³

Since all attempts to civilise the Aborigines into being good and docile subjects of the British Crown had so far failed, it was left to the Aboriginal Protection Boards and the Churches to take care of this fading race.²⁴ “Philanthropy, pseudo-scientific racial theories, a concern to preserve cheap pastoral labour and unadorned contempt” towards the Aborigines were parts of the everyday culture of ordinary Australians.²⁵ The history of genocide had been rationalised and justified to a point where it could not be hidden or ignored, and Farwell’s statement about the Lake Eyre and Simpson Desert massacres could well be said about all slaughters of Aborigines since 1788: “No official enquires were ever held into these massacres, which appeared to have been the common morality of the day.”²⁶ Indeed, W E H Stanner perhaps best summarised the non-Aboriginal attitude as a “history of indifference.”²⁷ Aborigines were to be segregated and isolated from white society, their children were to be removed

²² Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, 198-200.

²³ Williams, *op cit*, 50.

²⁴ IC, in *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, 2.707; Ian Howie-Willis, *ibid*, 903-904.

²⁵ MacIntyre, *op cit*, 109-110.

²⁶ G.Farwell in Elder, *op cit*, 156.

so that they at least could be “rescued” and made obedient domestic servants or farm hands.²⁸ In the long term, Anglo-Australia would be free from the embarrassment of their presence. Ironically, it was the Nazi Consul General, Dr Rudolf Asmis who made an insightful assessment of Australian “racial policy” in 1935. Asmis deplored the fact that white Australians had destroyed the native peoples of the land, for in so doing, they had destroyed the most valuable pool of cheap labour. This, according to Nazi bio-economic logic, was an unforgivable crime.²⁹ At any rate, Aborigines posed no threat to Anglo-Australia.

Racism in the British Empire was expressed more in terms of keeping undesirable races out of the Empire, and controlling those already found within. Comparatively, Britain’s treatment of indigenous people in the colonies was better than most. This does not mean that Britain showed a highly enlightened approach to the “native.” Economic prosperity of a colony depended on a compliant labour force, so it made no sense to brutalise the local inhabitants. Alongside the economic concern was the evangelical fervour of missionary Christianity, which sought to transplant the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *King James Bible* wherever the Union Jack was raised. Good behaviour, economic rationalism and Christian zeal did not make the British any less racist than any other imperial power. “Britons never, never, never shall be slaves” was not mere rhetoric. Social Darwinism, the belief in the “survival of the fittest” and the demise, however sad and pitiable, of the racially inferior had become a part of the cultural baggage of Europe.

Outside of the Anglo-Saxon world, the rest of humanity was divided up into a series of categories that ranked from greater similarity to least similarity. Northern Europeans, Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians came at the top of the list, followed by Central Europeans and groups such as the French. Southern Europeans were perceived as unstable and volatile, but since so much of Western Civilisation originated in Italy and Greece, the heirs of these great cultures must have some redeeming features. Slavs were barely tolerable, most likely because they were, after

²⁷ W E H Stanner, “The History of Indifference Thus Begins”, in *Aboriginal History*, 1.1-2, 23.

²⁸ See *Bringing Them Home, Report of the Government National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Children from their Families*.

²⁹ Konrad Kwiet and Olad Reinhardt, “A “Nazi” Assessment of Australian Racial Policy from 1935”, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 34, 403.

a fashion, Christian, but the Russians were allies of Britain so that made them different. At the bottom of the racial heap came the peoples of Asia, collectively lumped under the one label, and the “Negroids” of Africa. Although the justification of the White Australia policy was never made clear in racial hierarchical terms, nonetheless the underlying prejudice lay within the political and social attitudes of the early twentieth century.³⁰

The illogicality of this imperial racialism rarely seems to have impinged upon the minds of Australians. When Kaiser Wilhelm II celebrated his Silver Jubilee of Accession in 1913, Australian papers commented on the similarity between the two great peoples, Britons and Germans, and dismissed notions of war, even if Australia did feel unsettled at German expansion in the south Pacific.³¹ Germans were thoroughly decent, sober and industrious, unlike Britain’s partner in the Entente, decadent and corrupt France. The perceived threat to Australia lay, not unexpectedly, with the “yellow peril” to the north. Australian racism, like racism in general, “was a mass hysteria fed on ignorance and fear.”³² A year later, Australian papers would pillory the Kaiser as the most evil barbarian on the face of the earth, and Japan, one of the sources of Australian xenophobia, became an ally of the defenders of civilisation.

Australia had a well-developed policy of exclusion dating back to the gold rush years of the 1850s. Middle class fears of the dangers to civilisation, working class fears of the loss of jobs to “coloureds” and liberal fears of the dilution of Anglo-Saxon blood were appeased with the passing of the *Immigration Restriction Bill* in 1901. Justification for the Bill was usually couched in the language of “racial purity”, “the dangers of being swamped by an inferior race”, “contamination”, “and “degradation.” Edmund Barton summarised the debates by expressing his opinion that “the equality of man did not include racial equality.”³³ Australia’s survival depended upon her being “white” and all the major organs of Australian social and political thought agreed. The policy was expressed in the negative rather than the positive. And of the politicians who debated the legislation, “They might not know much about outsiders

³⁰ Cf Colin Tatz, “Measuring Genocide” in *Generation 3.1*, 17-19; Brian Murphy, *The Other Australia*, 40.

³¹ Jürgen Tampke, *Australia Willkommen*, 156-157.

³² MacIntyre, *op cit*, 124.

³³ Sol Encl, *Equality and Authority*, 159-160.

or race, but they knew what they did not like... The only real issue at stake was... how to effectively prevent Asians, Africans, and Pacific Islanders, from entering Australia.”³⁴

Having passed legislation designed to keep racial undesirables out, “The governments that held office between 1901 and 1909 were determined to raise the white man to a high level of material civilisation.”³⁵ In economic terms, that meant on the one hand, protectionism for Australian trade, and on the other, immigration from Britain to populate the continent. In social terms, the White Australia Policy “became a powerful force for cultural unity: it united by race those who were divided by class. Adherence to the White Australia policy not only fostered notions of social and cultural homogeneity but a national Australian identity.”³⁶

The *Bulletin* expressed the popular racist sentiment of the day. In two editions in January and February 1913, the journal satirised the Chinese as “leper burners”, poked fun at the Jews (insulting the Rothschilds in particular), warned against Japanese militarism and exalted Scott of the Antarctic as an example of a “white man who dared” as opposed to the “brown persons who didn’t.”³⁷

Populating the country with Anglo-Saxon stock became the primary focus of immigration plans, a policy that remained intact until the end of the Second World War. The terms of reference were clear: Australia’s “empty spaces” had to be filled, “millions more of white men are needed to develop and defend the country.”³⁸ Australia’s birthrate had fallen between 1891 and 1903 from 34.5 live births per thousand to 25.3. Immigration slowed during the 1890s as a result of the depression but had, by 1905, begun to climb again in part due to assisted migration schemes. A total of 420 000 Britons arrived in Australia by 1915, of whom 40% were assisted.³⁹ The hoped-for fifty million expressed in some circles remained only an imperial dream.⁴⁰

³⁴ Murphy, op cit, 31-32.

³⁵ Clark, op cit, 199.

³⁶ Encel, op cit, 216.

³⁷ *Bulletin* 23.01.1913; 20.02.1913.

³⁸ *Sydney Mail* 21.01.1914.

³⁹ Murphy, op cit, 42.

⁴⁰ Williams, op cit, 134.

Related to the overt racism expressed in Australia was antisemitism. Jews had been a part of Australian society since the arrival of the First Fleet.⁴¹ The peaceful history of Australian Jewry stands in marked contrast to the experience of Jews in most other places, where persecution and discrimination were part of daily life.⁴² Throughout the nineteenth century Jews were a virtually indiscernible part of the fabric of colonial society, enjoying a generally high level of acceptance with their Gentile neighbours. Living mostly in the major towns of Australia, Jews formed strong communal organisations and gravitated towards “occupations (in both commerce and the professions) which were self-employed and not subject to discrimination.”⁴³

There was a variant of antisemitism that did run through Australian society. The *Bulletin* would rarely let an opportunity go by if it involved someone Jewish. In 1913 it made much of “a Hebrew, Lieutenant-Colonel Monash of Melbourne” who had recently been appointed commander of the Thirteenth Brigade.⁴⁴ The *Bulletin* had regular antisemitic cartoons that perpetuated the stereotype of the “stingy Jew”.⁴⁵ In September 1913, the *Bulletin* published a major essay entitled “Obituary - the Jew.” Readers were told that Jews would vanish within one hundred years because of assimilation and the “continuous secession to Christianity.”⁴⁶ In this piece of thinly-veiled antisemitic diatribe, the author argued that antisemitism was “a factor in accelerating Jewish apostasy. The gain which anti-Semitism brings to Judaism is ephemeral - the loss is lasting. The Jew must disappear.”⁴⁷ Even such blatant racist propaganda as this essay must be seen in the broader context of Australian popular racism, which existed more in theory than in practice towards those already in Australia who were “different.”

Antisemitic stereotyping was found in Australian papers and journals in the late nineteenth century, using the traditional figures of Shylock, money-hungry usurers

⁴¹ Suzanne Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, 8.

⁴² Shmuel Ettinger, “Jew Hatred in its Historical Context” in *Antisemitism through the Ages*, 13-39.

⁴³ Rutland, *op cit*, 111.

⁴⁴ *Bulletin*, 31.07.1913. The Royal Sydney Golf Club prohibited Jewish members in 1908, citing “the pressure of general social opinion”! Cf Colin Tatz, *The Royal Sydney Golf Club*, 45-46

⁴⁵ *Bulletin*, 23.01.1913.

⁴⁶ *Bulletin*, 04.09.1913.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

and economic parasites with big noses.⁴⁸ Bartrop points out that most of the obvious antisemitic commentary and cartoons in the Australian press prior to 1914 was directed not at “good” Anglo-Australian Jews, but at “bad” Jews, which can be read as *Ost Juden*, the Russian and Polish Jews who did not look or sound like the familiar “good” Jews. For the vast majority of Australia’s Jews, the new Commonwealth was a very good place to be, a chance for Jews to live as full members of a theoretically egalitarian society, free from the Jew-hatred of the Old World. Australia was therefore “a society in which there were antisemites; it was not, however, an antisemitic society.”⁴⁹

These observations of Australia in the years before 1914 do not detract from the general picture of a young country enjoying relative domestic harmony and prosperity. One of the greatest ironies emerging from a study of pre-1914 Australia is the great power that the national and imperial myths held over Australians. In 1914 Australians were amongst the best-informed people in the world. A highly developed, articulate and free press provided a deluge of information from around the globe. So frequent were mentions of some of the more famous works of modern art in the regular reviews and critiques, that illustrations were deemed unnecessary: it was simply presumed the reader would already be familiar with the work in question. This is an indication of a very literate and exposed readership. Australians were able to follow international events with ease, could read about the latest developments in everything from agriculture to zoology, and everything else in between: “...The cultural power of the press was almost total.”⁵⁰ This seeming contradiction — between a well-informed public and the power of national and imperial myth — demonstrates the irrational nature that lay behind the veneer of “inevitable progress.” In a society that held cultural values built upon an unreflected social Darwinism, racism, British hegemony and a belief that God had ordained it so, it becomes less of a surprise to read the same papers which had lauded German urban design in 1913, soon condemn everything Teutonic as the work of an inferior and demonic race barely twelve months later.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Peter Love, *Labour and the Money Power*, 8, 49.

⁴⁹ Bartrop, op cit, 14-15, 17.

⁵⁰ Williams, op cit, 19.

The world that lay beyond Australia's shores was not a tangible threat, although at times, various segments of Australian society felt the Government should do more about this or that perceived problem. Government was determined to make the Australian economy strong through protectionist policies, while at the same time attempting to address the social problems demanding attention. There was a definite drift to parochial complacency, an Australian "Indian Summer."⁵² And yet, at the same time, the troubles in Europe and the rising power of Japan created a sense of unease.

In 1908 the Royal Australian Navy was founded, and in 1909 and 1910 *Defence Acts* were passed authorising compulsory military service. Although a minority dissented from the suffocating imperialism and jingoism, the vast majority of Australians proudly identified with the Empire and "Mother England." Young Australians looked forward eagerly to the opportunity to fight in defence of the Empire and the values it represented. Australia's safety and security rested with Britain, and so, if Britain were dragged into another European conflict, Australia would be there. Joseph Fisher's speech at Colac on 31 July 1914 captured the mood of the country: "But should the worst happen... Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and shilling."⁵³

Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the first decade of the new 1900s Australia remained cocooned from much of the tensions of Europe and the "old world." Anglo-Saxon imperial virtues were handed on from one generation to the next. There was, from the Australian perspective, a timeless quality about the world. In the rural districts of New South Wales, in the villages of the Manning Valley, the world appeared secure and fundamentally British. The Sawyer's of Tinonee shared the aspirations and hopes of many of their fellow Anglo-Australian countrymen. In the coming years the conglomeration of a vague Christianity and the imperial myths were to provide a continued source of identity and serve as powerful reminders of the "rightness" of the Empire and Australia's place within the imperial orbit. Within a few weeks the seemingly secure world of Tinonee was to be subjected to enormous

⁵¹ *ibid*, 61. Cf also Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 6, 18.

⁵² Greenwood, *op cit*, 252.

⁵³ Clarke, *op cit*, 204.

stresses and strains. By 1914 there was a growing premonition that the storm was approaching.

The tension broke on 4 August 1914 when the Government announced that Australia had joined the Mother Country in the war against Germany. “What had begun chiefly as a concern for their own security was to take them to the uttermost ends of the earth, to die in tens of thousands in a war in no way of their making.”⁵⁴ Among the “tens of thousands” was a young man from the Manning Valley, Ernest Wiseman Sawyer.

⁵⁴ Gammage, *op cit*, 3.

Chapter Three: "Take a hand in the Battle for Right"

In Taree on 6 June 1925, Major General C T Cox, CB, CMG, DSO, VD, and Senator of the Commonwealth, officially dedicated a clock tower that had been commissioned as a memorial to the men of the Manning District who had served "God, King and Country" in the Great War. The intersection of Victoria and Manning Streets was filled with "a very large crowd." Carved into the stone was the inscription: "Erected to perpetuate the memory of the men of Taree and district who served in the Great War 1914-1919." The sentiments expressed by the speakers reflected the significance of the occasion in the history of Taree and the Manning Valley. Reporting the proceedings, the *Northern Champion* quoted the Presbyterian Minister, Reverend S P Stewart, who exhorted the crowd to see in the memorial not a mute witness but a lively reminder that everyone must remember the crisis that sought to destroy Australia and the Empire.

The monument would silently perpetuate the memory of the men who had served their country, and in time to come the children will know from the inscription the purpose of the stones.¹

Mr Stewart then encouraged his audience to see the greater monument about them, the men whose spirit of sacrifice was enshrined in the memorial.

Mr Stewart closed his address with the grim forecast that another war was not more than ten years away. He expressed confidence that the next generation would follow the example of their fathers to ensure the Empire would remain secure.

The British Empire was the right Empire to maintain the weight of balance in the world, as that Empire was the best exponent of liberty and used it more wisely than any other nation. She had united liberty and law which no other nation had ever done.²

¹ *Northern Champion* 10.06.1925 Hereafter *NC*.

² *ibid*

Senator Cox officially dedicated the memorial, declaring the men whose names were carved on the sides, "the bravest creatures God ever made and the bravest men the world had ever seen."³

Taree had dedicated its memorial, as had in virtually the same way almost every city and village throughout Australia. Honour Rolls were carefully inscribed with the names of local men who had answered the call of the Empire. Taking the place of highest honour on Taree's memorial were the names of thirty-six men who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. Following this were the names of 195 men who had served and returned home. The name of Ernest Wiseman Sawyer was among them. It is highly probable that Ernest Sawyer was at the dedication with his five year-old son, Ernest Max Sawyer. Ernest Sawyer was to hand on to his son the virtues that had been instilled in him: loyalty to Australia and the Empire, the ethic of honest hard work, the Australian sense of "fair play", mateship, and the paramount honour of doing one's duty. In short, the young Max Sawyer was expected to live in the same accepted way that had shaped his parents, grandparents, and the early settlers of the Manning Valley.

From 1818 the Manning Valley had been explored by Anglo-Saxons, and settled from 1827.⁴ Over a period of twenty-five years the new arrivals gradually displaced the indigenous people of the Biripi Nation. The Biripi were seasonal nomads, moving between the coast and mountains further up the valley. With the arrival of the Europeans, the Biripi resisted encroachment on their traditional lands, resulting in an attack on "Waterloo" homestead and another attack on employees of the Australian Agricultural Company. Initially, the Biripi were able to halt European settlement outside of small villages at the mouth of the Manning. However superior weaponry and a determination to harvest the economic wealth of the valley meant that white settlers would soon return and settle permanently. When they did, these settlers adopted a policy of deliberate extermination. Flour laced with arsenic was the preferred method of "pacification."⁵ By 1900, the last remaining Biripi were herded onto the reservation of Purfleet, several kilometres from the village of Tinonee. The

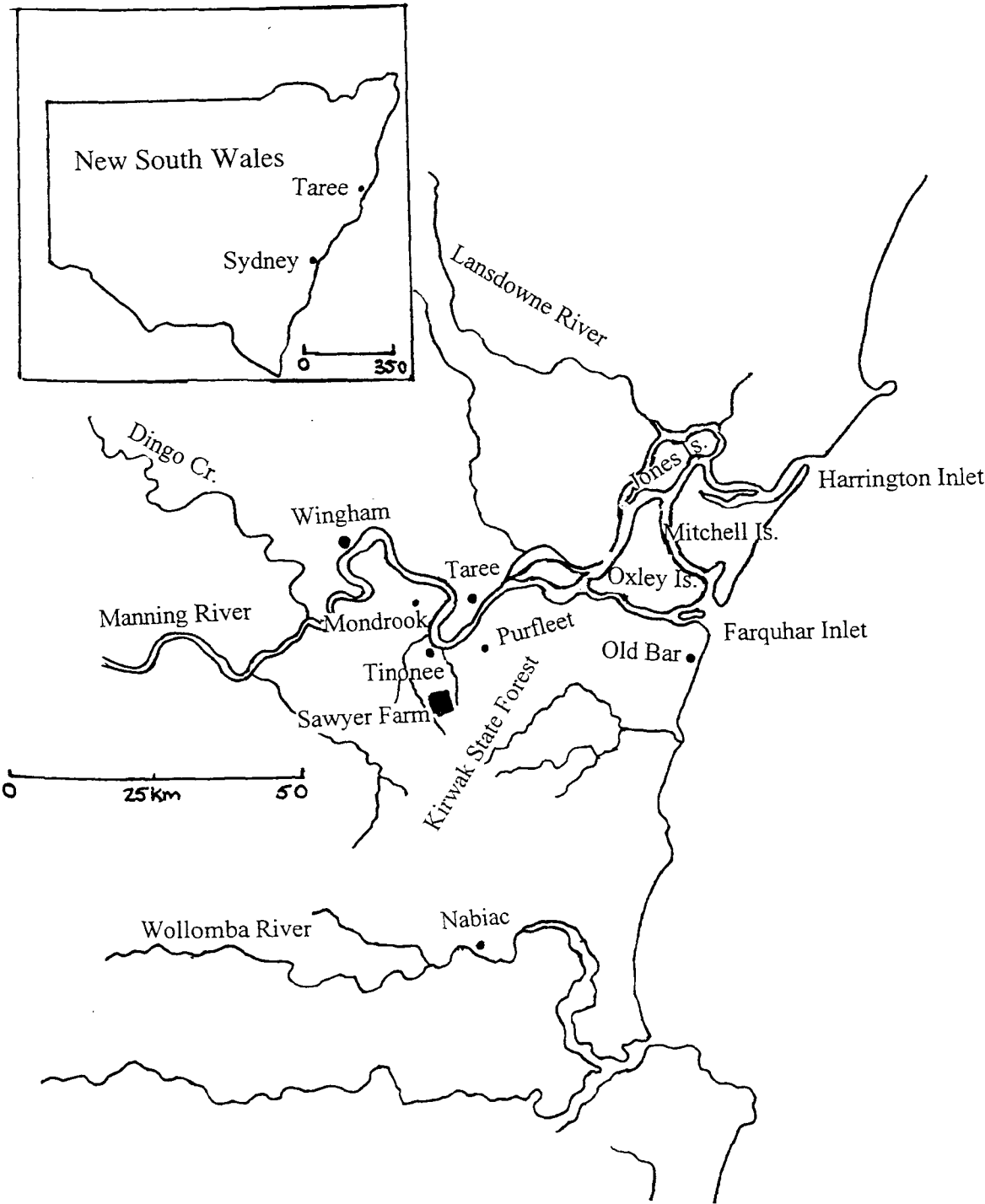
³ ibid

⁴ W K Birrell, *The Manning Valley, Landscape and Settlement*, 40-41, 59.

⁵ Frederick Fitzpatrick, *Peeps into the Past*, 9; D R Horton in *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*

original inhabitants of the Manning Valley were now a source of a cheap labour for local white farmers, as well as being the subject for reminiscences in collections of local history such as *Peeps into the Past*.⁶

MAP 1: THE MANNING VALLEY



1.127-128.

⁶ Fitzpatrick, *ibid*, 29-86; Horton, *ibid*, 1.908.

Taree had become a thriving port town by 1850, but attempts to grow tobacco in the 1830s had failed because of the climate. However the rich cedar forests proved to be a more lucrative source of income, and coupled with the coastal sea traffic from Newcastle, Sydney and Brisbane, Taree was able to develop herself into a commercial centre of considerable enterprise with a European population in the district of 348 in 1841.⁷ Agriculturally, sheep and cattle were grazed on pastoral runs from 1836, although by 1852 most runs only grazed cattle.⁸ The gold rushes of the 1850s slowed the growth of the valley, and it was only after the 1860s that the farms around the district "became economic in the commercial sense and moved away from being mainly subsistent in nature."⁹

Deforestation and soil degradation saw the tenor of the valley change dramatically. Maize had replaced other cash crops during the 1870s, but the "vagaries of climate, periodic floods, occasional severe dry seasons and the plagues of caterpillars continued to damage and, at times destroy the crops, leaving the farmer with the prospect of debt and poverty until next season's harvest."¹⁰ By the 1890s the Manning had huge areas of cleared land suitable for pasturing dairy cattle. In 1892, the Lower Manning Co-Operative Dairy was established, followed in 1897 by the Australian Dairy Company at Purfleet. In 1900, 495 dairies were registered in the valley. Alongside the dairies were pig farms, considered the "concomitant of dairying."¹¹ Although the dairy industry had largely replaced cash crops by 1900,

the new form of work was hard, constant and grinding: the cows waited to be milked morning and evening on every day of the year; the cream had to be separated before being despatched to the factory; the parts of the separator had to be scalded and stood up to dry; the cans had to be washed and scrubbed; the yards had to be thoroughly cleansed; and a score of other jobs had to be completed before the sun set in the west.¹²

⁷ Birrell, op cit, 68,75.

⁸ ibid, 77-78.

⁹ Ian Mcdonell and John Ramsland, "Road, Punt and Rail - Taree as a pioneering township 1830-1913", in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 76.266.

¹⁰ Birrell, op cit, 181.

¹¹ John Ramsland, *The Struggle Against Isolation, A History of the Manning Valley*, 105.

¹² ibid, 159.

It was in this environment that Ernest Sawyer and his family lived and worked as carpenters and teamsters in Tinonee.

The Sawyers were a well-established family from the village of Tinonee, some eight kilometres south-west of Taree. It was settled on the banks of the Manning River at a site that afforded easy crossing of the river and “was a suitable spot to load produce from the south bank of the Manning for transportation to Sydney aboard coasting vessels.”¹³ Consequently, from its foundation in 1855 until the advent of the railway from Newcastle in 1913, Tinonee was an important communication and commercial conduit for Taree and the rest of the Valley.¹⁴ A punt “installed in the 1860s” that crossed the river, connected Tinonee with the main roads to Gloucester, Stroud and Raymond Terrace, and thus was pivotal for the sending and receiving of mail from all the Manning towns.¹⁵ By the mid-1870s, Tinonee was described as “a thriving little business place...[with] two hotels, small churches, three general stores, a small Public School and the office of the *Manning River Times*.”¹⁶

Tinonee in the late nineteenth century was a village planned on a grid, with nine formally named streets. In the late twentieth century, Tinonee is still recognisable as a little rural village. Once the railway took over from the punt as the primary commercial transport link with the rest of the Valley, Tinonee “froze” and little development took place. The early wealth of the area is evident in the number of substantial brick buildings and large houses. Among these are the Police Station, (now Police residence), the John Knox Presbyterian Church, the Public School and St Luke’s Anglican Church. Along the principal street, Manchester Street, one can still see more than a few well-appointed houses set back from the road, on quarter and half acre blocks of land. However, at the same time, there is evidence of the decline of the village. All that remains of the Government Wharf are a couple of rotting pylons. The site of first office of the *Manning River Times* is now a park, and the sole trace of the Tinonee punt is the descending causeway from the corner of Hutchinson and Manchester Streets. Only the main streets are paved; the remainder are still dirt roads,

¹³ *ibid*, 43.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *op cit*, 105; McDonnell and Ramsland, *op cit*, 270-271.

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *ibid*.

most likely not much different to how they were in the mid-1870s. Across the village on Beecher Street (the road to Gloucester) is the Recreation Ground, where sport days were held. The original grounds have long since changed; only the Norfolk Pines survive. Further down Beecher Street heading towards Gloucester is the Tinonee cemetery, where lie many members of the pioneering families including William Wynter, the man who opened the Manning Valley up to Anglo-Saxon settlement. Lying nearby are the graves of some of the Gores and Sawyers.¹⁷

The Sawyers were teamsters and carpenters who had been in the valley for two generations. Ernest's grandfather, John Duggan, worked in one of the banks at Gloucester, and it was here that he met Esther Sawyer (1836-1882). Esther Wetherall Walker had arrived in New South Wales with her family from England, aboard the *Cathaginian* which dropped anchor at Sydney Cove on 28 January 1842. In 1852, aged 16, she married John Sawyer (1818-1859), with whom she had four children between 1853 and 1859. John Sawyer was among the first purchasers of land in the district, buying 95 acres of land at Killawarra in 1854.¹⁸ He was killed in a dray accident on 24 February 1859, with his baby son William. At the time John was killed Esther was five months pregnant. The son, born in June 1859, was named John William. Needing to support herself and her children, Esther went into domestic service, and subsequently met John Duggan. The family asserts that the vulnerable widow was seduced by Duggan's charms, and on 22 July 1866, bore him a son named James. Because of the stigma of illegitimacy, James was given his mother's married name as his own. Esther remarried in 1877 to Henry Gore, whose daughters Martha and Alice eventually married Esther's sons, John William, and his half brother James. James married Alice Gore in 1890. The Gores, another Manning pioneer family, lived in Tinonee, and Alice was a woman of independent means, operating her own Maternity Hospital in Mill Street, Tinonee. Ernest Sawyer was born in November 1893, the second of six children. He attended the local Public School, and since the *Public Instruction Act* of 1872 made education compulsory, remained at school until the age 12, learning to read and write, and being well versed in the history of the Empire and the imperial vision for Australia. Secondary school was virtually

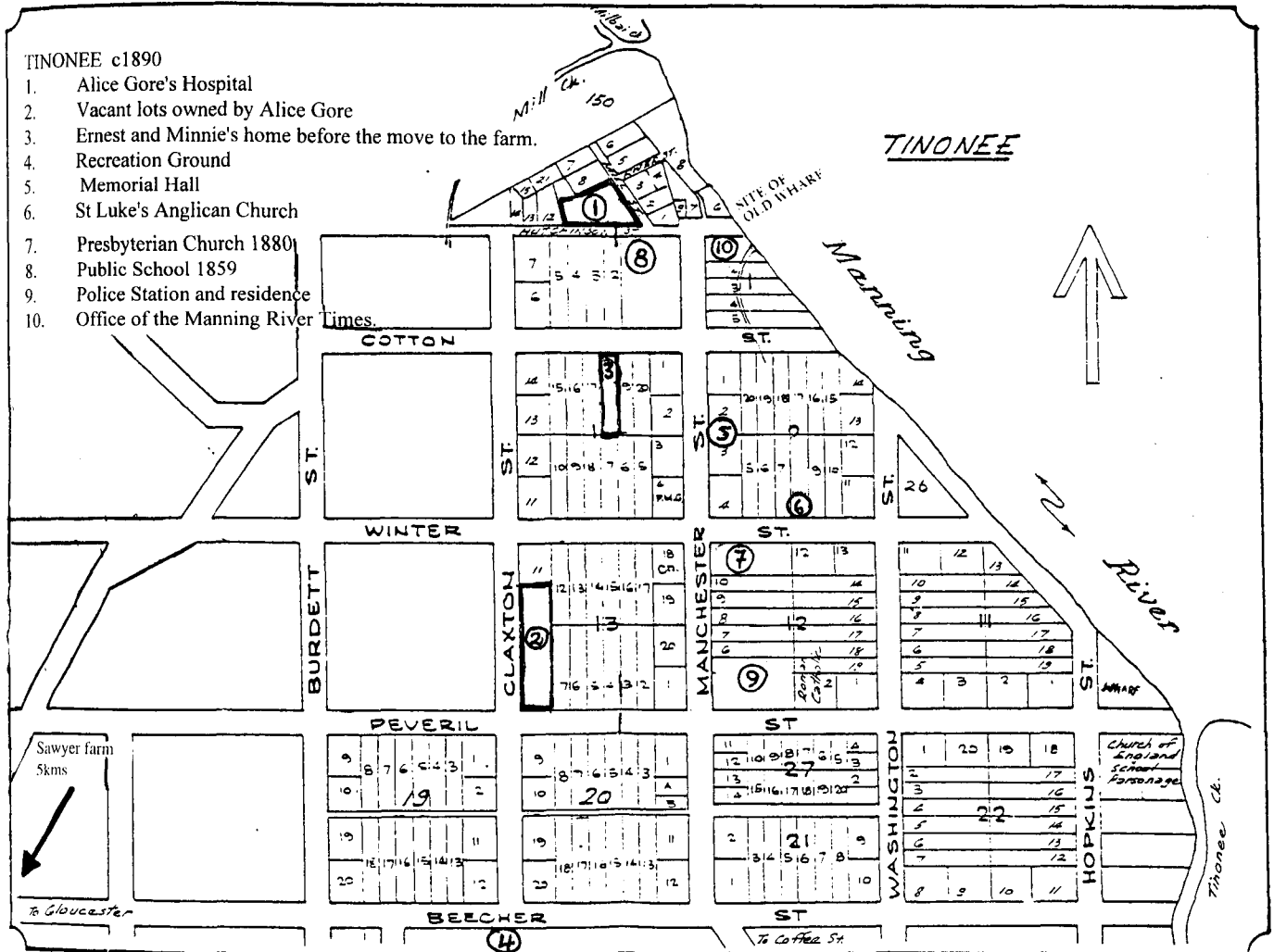
¹⁶ Ramsland, op cit, 67.

¹⁷ POS. Field trips to Tinonee, 10.04.1996; 09.01.1997.

¹⁸ Birrell, op cit, 251.

unknown outside the large cities and in any case, Ernest would have begun working with his father hauling logs.¹⁹

MAP 2:THE VILLAGE OF TINONEE c1890



¹⁹ Jessie Sawyer to POS, April 1996, Enid Sawyer Steele, 10.04.1996. Hereafter ES.

Like most of the early British settlers, the Sawyers came from Protestant backgrounds. The majority of settlers came either from the Scottish Highlands or Ulster. The reasons they cited for leaving were high rents for farming land, and a general poverty.²⁰ The Manning valley boasted a solid Protestant non-conformist religious tradition that helped shape the conservative rural political atmosphere of the district. The Protestant work ethic was not only preached from the pulpits of Tinonee's chapels and kirks, but was lived in the daily routine of the valley. Hard farm and forest work, coupled with the real threat of flooding, ensured that the people of the Manning remained firmly entrenched in a culture of egalitarianism, nineteenth century liberalism that recognised the principle of "a man's home is his castle", and a "no frills" Protestantism that wrapped the whole of life under a divine *placet* for the order of things. Society was stable, secure and purposeful. While the politics of Britannia may have meant little to the people of Taree and Tinonee, the knowledge that they belonged to the greatest Empire in the world gave their hard lives a sense of deeper meaning, that appealed especially to the many non-conformist religious groups in the valley. Godliness was definitely next to Britishness.

In the valley, there was a high proportion of non-conformist traditions that settled well before the Anglican and Roman Catholic congregations were able to form distinct parishes and deaneries. A congregation of the Church of Christ was founded in Tinonee in 1863, followed by the Methodist Chapel in 1872 and the Salvation Army Citadel in 1889. Despite having been baptised and married within the Anglican Church, it was to the Church of Christ that the Sawyers gave their allegiance. The reason for the change in tradition was most likely due to the popular appeal that Church of Christ evangelists enjoyed in the Manning area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ Max Sawyer's sisters, Enid and Vera recalled being "dragged off to the Church of Christ Missions" where they and the rest of the family were encouraged to dedicate their lives to God.²² American in origin, evangelical and non-ritualistic, the Church of Christ based its doctrine on a moderate Biblical fundamentalism that placed the Scriptures as the highest law and the only source of truth. It held much of the modern world in disdain, and preached sobriety, family life

²⁰ Helen Hannah, *Voices: A folk history of the Manning Valley*, 9-11.

²¹ Taree Church of Christ, *One Hundred Years Anniversary Souvenir*, passim; ES.

²² ES and Vera Sawyer Joyce. Hereafter VJ.

and respect for the given Anglo-Saxon order of society as God's will for humanity. The Sawyers were not particularly religious, but as was common with rural communities, the Church provided a major social focus for the community.²³ There was a strong social expectation to be attached to a congregation for rites of passage and the attainment of that pre-eminent nineteenth century value, "respectability."²⁴ The isolated nature of the valley encouraged insular "self supporting" Christianity. Anglicanism and Catholicism were potentially "foreign" because of their hierarchies and diocesan structures that spoke of broader connections outside the district. The respect both the Anglican and Catholic clergy enjoyed was due more to the hard work and Christian lives of early missionary priests, than to the *Book of Common Prayer* or the *Catechism*.²⁵ Overall, the Protestant Ulster and Scots Highland origins of the majority of the Valley disinclined them towards the "Establishment" Church or the "bells and smells" of the universal Romans.

Ernest Sawyer's life was probably similar to most of his contemporaries. His daily routine was governed by the observances of small town life where in all likelihood he expected to see out the rest of his days, and the routine of daily work. The security of Edwardian Australia seemed even more stable when, in 1913, he married Minnie Wynter, daughter of Douglas Dellamore Carter Wynter and Delila Fleming, a descendant of William Wynter (1786-1853), who had received the first land grant in the Manning Valley from Governor Darling in 1830. The Wynters were a well-known pioneer family whose own history was closely tied to the history of Taree and the Manning valley.²⁶ Minnie's uncle, A M Wynter, was the treasurer of the Taree Church of Christ, a man described as having "a wonderful testimony" and who had helped build the Taree church in 1907.²⁷ Notwithstanding their convictions as members of the Church of Christ, the Wynters resented their daughter marrying "beneath her station", especially to the descendant of a supposed convict, and the son of an illegitimate man. Minnie's father was heard to say to his daughter, "Don't forget you are a Wynter!", which, understandably, grated upon her husband. The irony of Wynter's remarks lay in his being a member of the same trade as his son-in-law, a

²³ ES.

²⁴ Barrett, op cit, 72.

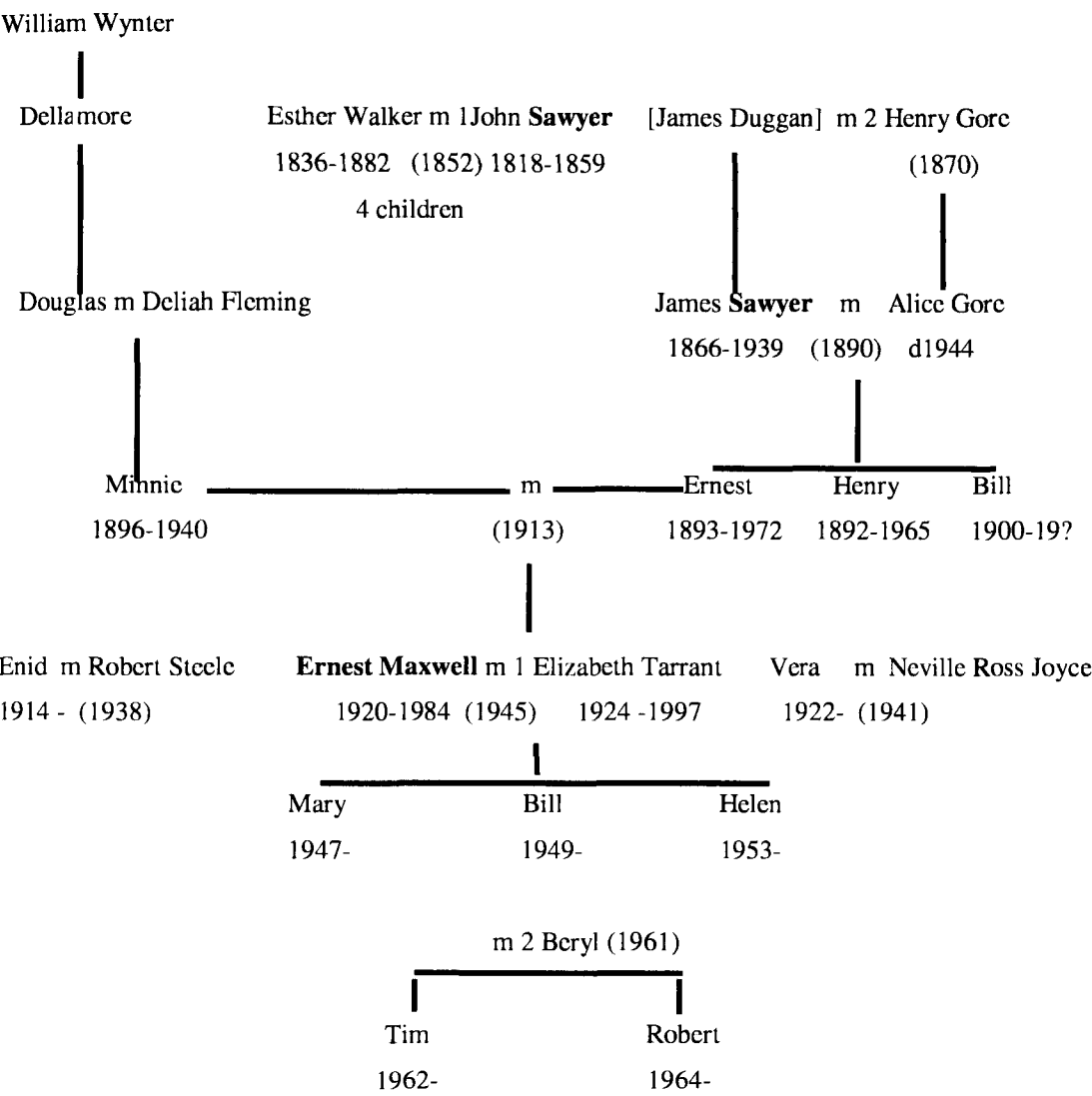
²⁵ Ramsland, op cit, 132-140.

²⁶ ibid, 20-23, 46,48.

²⁷ Church of Christ, op cit, 9,15.

carpenter!²⁸ The much touted Australian egalitarianism was somewhat lacking in parts of the Manning valley. From all accounts, the union was “a love match” and remained so until Minnie’s death in 1940.²⁹ In January 1914, Minnie gave birth to their first child, Enid.

Table 1: SAWYER FAMILY TREE



²⁸ ES.
²⁹ Mary Sawyer Brown 26.02.1996 Hereafter MB.

On 5 August 1914, the Commonwealth Government declared war on Germany. There was never any question of “should Australia enter the war”, the question was how Australia could aid the Mother Country in her hour of need.³⁰ The security and stability of life in the Manning Valley was challenged with this call to arms. Across Australia men like Ernest Sawyer heard the call and thousands rushed to answer.

Commenting on the outbreak of the war, the *Bulletin* said, without any imperial sabre rattling: “Prologue: Enter, before the curtain WAR, an old bespectacled gentleman in his gorgeous uniform of Generalissimo...³¹ Almost alone among the outbursts of patriotic and imperial fervour, the *Bulletin* lamented that the war would be no good for Australia:

Lately the war resumed business at the old address, the Danube...But the evil possibilities of a purely European war, so far as Australia is concerned are mostly financial...Australia is not prepared for war...³²

However, it was not to rational thought that the crowds responded during the first weeks and months of the war. The Empire was in danger and Australia had to do her duty:

The bugles of England were calling o'er the sea,
as they had called a thousand years ago,
were calling now to me.³³

Australia's war fever reflected a naivete of a country that had never known organised war on her own soil and who possessed no martial trait in the European tradition. Sending one's sons to the Army was never part of Anglo-Australian culture. Volunteers had always come forward in times of need, such as in the Maori Wars, the Sudan Campaign and the Boer War.³⁴ In the opening days of the 1914 conflict there was no reason to think there would be a dearth of volunteers. “Australia's entry into the European struggle appeared as a great adventure which promised to supply the

³⁰ MacIntyre, op cit, 142.

³¹ *Bulletin*, 06.08.1914.

³² *ibid*

³³ J D Burns in Encel, op cit, 421.

³⁴ George Odgers, *Diggers: The Australian Army, Navy and Air Force in Eleven Wars 1860-1994*,

colonial craving for an heroic role in history, and to emancipate the nation from its ignoble and insignificant past.”³⁵

War fever raged through the Manning valley as powerfully as it did in Newcastle and Sydney. Australia had offered Britain a 20 000 man Expeditionary Force, which had been accepted immediately by the Imperial Government. From across the country men were on the move. By the end of 1914, 52 561 men had enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces.³⁶ Men from the Manning enlisted for all the same reasons as men from other parts of the country. Loyalty and a sense of duty to Britain and the Empire, a hatred of Germany, outrage at the invasion of Belgium, and the belief that a great evil confronted the world went hand-in-hand with the thrill of a great adventure, the opportunity to see the world, and the chance to prove oneself a man. "There were in addition a thousand particular and personal reasons for enlistment. Loneliness, family trouble, public opinion and unemployment each contributed a measure." ³⁷

Readers of the *Wingham Chronicle* were regular witnesses of patriotic sentiment. The issues at stake revolved around the questions of liberty and freedom, and from the

bush, the farm and the station,
They're packing their kits, and boarding the train -
to take up a soldier's vocation...³⁸

The duty of the Empire's sons was to “maintain the strife o’er despots who slay human life.”³⁹ Local bard Dorothy Frances McRae used the “feminine touch” to encourage local men to enlist:

The Empire is calling my son, my son,
I heard it last night when I struggled to sleep.
Will you stand idle, with battles unwon?
With comrades unburied and kingdoms to keep?
Women have need of you over the sea.
Soldier, my soldier, march forward for me!⁴⁰

15,18,28.

³⁵ Francis Barrymore-Smith, *The Conscription Plebescites in Australia 1916-1917*, 2

³⁶ Gammage, op cit, 7.

³⁷ *ibid*, 10.

³⁸ *Wingham Chronicle*, 12.09.1914 Hereafter WC

³⁹ WC 10.10.1914.

⁴⁰ WC 26.09.1914.

Patriotic funds, a Belgian fund and the Red Cross were established to “keep the home fires burning” and serve as reminders that everyone must do their duty.

Although the rural areas of Australia were generally considered more conservative than urban centres, and while rural imperial loyalty was sometimes more fervent, the country areas were loathe to give up their men. Manpower equalled economic survival and stability for families. Farmers in particular feared the sudden rush to go to war, especially as they were obtaining the best prices for their produce since Federation.⁴¹ Their fears were echoed by the editor of the *Wingham Chronicle* who voiced his concerns that the local timber industry was already suffering in November 1914. The concerns could easily have been voiced over dairy farms.⁴² These rural concerns highlighted a dichotomy between the expressed patriotic and imperial fervour and sentiment, and the pragmatism of economics and parochial interests. After the news of Gallipoli had inspired enlistments to an all-time high of 36 000 in July 1915, recruitment declined and an atmosphere of “grimmer purpose” ensued.⁴³ Domestic trouble surfaced as the country experienced continued unemployment, a falling gross domestic product, a rising Commonwealth public debt and stagnant economic growth.⁴⁴ The tensions within Australia’s social fabric grew more obvious and accusations of disloyalty became more frequent. Venting anger and frustration at the 130 000-strong German-Australian community relieved some of the pressure, but in overall terms, internment and petty persecution played an insignificant role.⁴⁵ Nowhere were tensions within Australian society more dramatically seen than in the fierce debates which preceded the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917.

Ernest Sawyer and his brother Harry felt the “call of duty” to go to the war. The familial responsibilities of both men with wives and young children, would have been compelling arguments to keep them at home, but they believed that at least one of the Sawyer men should go. Eventually Ernest was the one who went. How the brothers

⁴¹ Barrymore-Smith, op cit, 24.

⁴² WC 07.11.1914.

⁴³ MacIntyre, op cit, 152.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 154-155.

⁴⁵ Tampke, op cit, 185-189.

decided is unknown; “they may have just tossed a coin!”⁴⁶ Approximately 85per cent of the men who enlisted in the Light Horse were from rural areas, and the total number of men from rural backgrounds in the AIF amounted to 17.36per cent.⁴⁷ It is reasonable to assert that Sawyer’s case was not an isolated one. Leaving Minnie and their daughter Enid, Ernest travelled to Holdsworthy, outside of Liverpool, where on 25 October 1915 he swore allegiance to “His Sovereign Lord, the King” and was ordered to present himself for training in the Australian Imperial Forces. Ernest’s skill as a fine horseman would have played a significant part in his placement within the AIF.⁴⁸ On 9 December he was appointed to the 13th Reinforcement of the 1st Australian Light Horse Regiment.⁴⁹

On 20 December 1915 Ernest Sawyer embarked for active service overseas.⁵⁰ The Gallipoli campaign was drawing to an inglorious close having become, in its folly, the motif of “Australian valour, an achievement beyond any other in the country’s history and the embodiment of all the was worthy in the national character.”⁵¹ For the new soldiers fresh from Australia, Gallipoli was to be the benchmark that would measure their worth. Despite the failure to secure their objective, and despite the stupidity of generals, the “Diggers” had emerged as a respected fighting force who had “learnt to put their trust first in themselves” fighting for King and Country and maintaining “their own reputations.”⁵² Ernest Sawyer had a great heritage to live up to, even though he would spend his wartime service in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. The First Light Horse had become known, in the words of Commanding Officer Colonel Harry Chauvel, “a fine lot of men and horses”, who had survived the severe mauling of their regiments at Gallipoli.⁵³

Shortly after arriving at Heliopolis on 1 March 1916, Sawyer suffered an attack of appendicitis. Between 15 April and 8 June 1916 he convalesced at Tel-el-Kebir, about seventy kilometres north of Heliopolis. Three months was not considered a

⁴⁶ ES, VJ.

⁴⁷ Gammage, op cit, 138n69, 280.

⁴⁸ ES.

⁴⁹ AA B2455 Sawyer Hereafter AA Sawyer.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ MacIntyre, op cit, 151.

⁵² Gammage, op cit, 83.

⁵³ G J Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse*, Chapter 5.

long recuperation period in an era with no antibiotics or even sulphur drugs to mitigate infection.⁵⁴

Tel-el-Kebir was the site of a huge camp where the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions were sent as battle reserves. The remainder of the Australian forces, including the Light Horse, was based at Moascar, fifty kilometres to the west, on the Suez Canal.⁵⁵ Recovered, Sawyer spent the remainder of 1916 in training at Moascar. In November he was “taken on strength” with the 1st Light Horse Regiment and stationed with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), the generic name given to all Imperial forces in Egypt, which included New Zealand, British and Indian troops.⁵⁶ More training followed in July 1917 and another tour of duty with the EEF from 20 August to 20 October 1917, when he was again hospitalised, this time with “sick rheumatism.”⁵⁷ After a month in hospital, he returned to his unit and was “in the field” from 15 November 1917 to 17 August 1918 when he was once more forced to report sick with “rheumatism.” He was discharged from hospital on 7 October 1918 and remained on active service until his return to Australia on 3 March 1919.

The experience of the Middle East Campaign was vastly different to that of France. Mobile, active and usually victorious, the Light Horse spent more time actively engaged in “orthodox” warfare than did their comrades on the Western Front. However, Egypt and Palestine were often considered secondary theatres to the place where many believed they should be, namely France; “directed by the Australian press and alarmed by the power of Germany’s war machine, they longed to assail the Hun.”⁵⁸ Because of his appendicitis, Sawyer had not been sent to France where many of his comrades went in 1916. The fact that he was not selected to go was a source of great hurt; however, as his daughter reflected eighty years later, “it probably saved his life.”⁵⁹ The Light Horse spent most of 1916 in sporadic fighting against Turkish troops, conducting patrols in the Sinai desert, and keeping the detested Arabs at bay.

⁵⁴ ES.

⁵⁵ C.E.W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*, 184,190.

⁵⁶ Hill, op cit, 69.

⁵⁷ AA Sawyer.

⁵⁸ Gammage, op cit, 119; Hill, op cit, 72.

⁵⁹ ES.

General Allenby's arrival in June 1917 marked an acceleration of the Middle East theatre. In the autumn of 1917, Allenby launched his campaign that culminated in the capture of Jerusalem on 9 December 1917 and three days later "Allenby, in marked contrast with the pomp of the Kaiser in 1908, entered the city on foot."⁶⁰ 1918 was a year marked by swift victories over an ever-weakening opponent. The Turkish armistice on 30 October, followed by the general Armistice of 11 November 1918, brought the war to an end. For the men of the Light Horse, "the end of conflict was greeted with little demonstration...they waited, quietly but expectantly, until the army should order them home."⁶¹ Between April 1916 and December 1918, the campaign had claimed 973 Australian lives in battle, 430 from other causes, 3351 wounded and 73 taken as prisoners of war. The daily death toll on the Western Front was higher. Sawyer had fought in a war that was not regarded as serious, "against an enemy who was deluded, not fiendishly bent on the destruction of mankind."⁶²

Sawyer could have been forgiven if he had thought he was fighting in a "forgotten war" as the local papers in Taree and Tinonee made little mention of the Middle East battles. Instead the newspaper headlines were dominated by the events at Gallipoli and the Western Front. Local men were mentioned in reports dealing with the battles at Anzac Cove, Fromelles, Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, but not from Egypt, or Palestine.⁶³ The eventual capitulation of the Ottoman Empire barely rated a paragraph in the *Northern Champion*.⁶⁴ By late 1915, Australia was becoming increasingly divided over the question of whether or not to introduce compulsory military service for all eligible men. Imperial loyalties found voice in groups such as the Universal Service League, the conservative political forces, professional associations, the Education Department, many Christian clergy, including most of Australia's Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, the media and the indomitable Billy Hughes. Hughes's argument was simple: "All sections of society...had to stand together to defend the homeland and advance Australia's special interests; there could be no room for internal dissension."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Bean, op cit, 391.

⁶¹ Gammage, op cit, 133.

⁶² *ibid*, 143.

⁶³ Ramsland, op cit, 197-201.

⁶⁴ NC 02.11.1918.

A powerful example of what Hughes viewed as “standing together” were the “Coo-ee marches” which meandered across rural New South Wales towards Sydney. As the march passed through a town or village, young men were encouraged to enlist. A recruiting march by the “North Coasters” left Grafton on 18 January 1916 and passed through Taree and the Manning valley in February 1916. Led by a Lieutenant Austin, the 200 men were greeted enthusiastically by the Mayor, Alderman W Wrigley, and many of the townspeople. The marchers were accompanied through the town by “a sixty strong detachment of the Boy Scouts, the mayor and alderman of Taree in formal attire, members of the Taree Recruiting Association and members of drill and rifle clubs”. Bands of the Salvation Army and Taree Brass Band also provided suitable martial music until the march reached Belmore Hall where “an elaborate tea was served at 6.30pm...the local branch of the Red Cross and 'several scores of young ladies' waited on the tables.”⁶⁶ Occasions such as this served to reinforce the urgency of the war effort and give local people the opportunity to express their loyalty to the cause, as well as increase their efforts to encourage local men to enlist. Three months later the *Northern Champion's* editorial commented:

As part of the British Empire, Australia is in this war and it is her duty to see it through with all her might. Had she 'cut the painter' some years ago and declared herself a Republic she could have been quietly annexed by Germany and would now be experiencing the rigours of the German military system.⁶⁷

The people of Taree were left in no doubt as to where they should place their faith. All men of enlistment age had a moral duty to join up, and if horror stories of German atrocities did not succeed, then conscription would.⁶⁸ The war was a Darwinian struggle in which the “advanced British race was striving to preserve itself against the onslaughts of envious and degenerate Hun tribes.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ MacIntyre, op cit, 161.

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ NC 20.05.1916.

⁶⁸ NC 24.05.1916.

⁶⁹ Barrymore-Smith, op cit, 10.

Opposition to conscription was voiced with equal volume by the Union Movement, the working class, the womens' movement, a large part of the Australian Labour Party and the formidable Dr Daniel Mannix, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne. Mannix summed up the "anti's" arguments by simply stating that the war was not of Australia's making, and so Australians should not be expected to carry it on. He echoed the sentiments of many Australians of Irish descent who resented the brutal suppression of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin.⁷⁰ However noble these aspirations may have been, Barrymore-Smith suggests a more economic foundation for the "anti's." The "compulsory dispatch of Australians overseas would give local capitalists the excuse to import cheap, docile, coloured labourers, who would be used to break the trade union movement and smash the purity of White Australia."⁷¹ The arrival of 98 Maltese men aboard the *Arabia* in September 1916 appeared to confirm the "anti's" worst fears. The fact that they were bona fide immigrants who had paid their own passage was ignored by the Government who quickly sent the liner on to Fiji with the hapless Maltese on board.⁷²

In Taree, the debate had become nothing less than an exercise in imperial propaganda and vocal support for Billy Hughes. Prior to Referendum Day, the *Northern Champion* exhorted its readers to do their duty and vote "Yes." The consequence of a "No" vote would be akin to rats deserting a sinking ship.⁷³ The result of the Referendum on 28 October was a clear "No." The Manning Valley lay in the Federal Division of Cowper. Of 36 174 enrolled voters, 29 623 voted, a turn out of 81.89per cent. The electors voted 13 958 (48.31per cent) in favour of conscription, and 14 933 (51.09per cent) against. Cowper was 6per cent ahead of the State average for the "Yes", and 6per cent behind for the "No" vote.⁷⁴ Propaganda and exhortation had not been strong enough to convince the small margin of voters necessary to "swing" the vote. The soldiers of the AIF recorded their votes giving the Referendum the "Yes" by a margin of 13 500. MacIntyre argues that the men at the front were against conscription, and the "Yes" majority "came from the Light Horse in Egypt and troops

⁷⁰ Joan Beaumont, *Australia's War 1914-1918*, 55-56.

⁷¹ Barrymore-Smith, *op cit*, 7.

⁷² Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War*, Volume XI, 354-356.

⁷³ NC 25,28.10.1916.

⁷⁴ *Military Service Referendum Act 1916*, Mitchell Library.

training in England.”⁷⁵ There is no evidence to indicate how Ernest Sawyer voted, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he voted “Yes.” Pondering the loss of the Referendum it had so actively supported, the *Northern Champion* commented bitterly:

The Kaiser, out of a heart overflowing with thankfulness, is meditating the sending of a second Deutschland (sic) to Sydney laden with Iron Crosses for the friends that stood by the Fatherland on Saturday last.⁷⁶

Billy Hughes regrouped his forces and refused to let the “No” vote stop him. Having walked out of the Federal Labor Party with his supporters on 14 November 1916, Hughes formed an interim government and went to the people. The results of the 5 May 1917 election were 54per cent for Hughes’s Nationalists, and 44per cent for the Labor Party.⁷⁷ There was strong support in rural New South Wales and in areas which had registered a high “No” vote five months earlier. “The people wanted the government to continue the war effort, provided there was no conscription.”⁷⁸ Bolstered by what he thought was support for the Government’s total war policy, Hughes announced a second referendum. The battle preceding the 20 December 1917 poll was more fierce and bitter than the fight for 1916. The *Northern Champion* published editorials damning Mannix⁷⁹, calling all to put Australia first⁸⁰, reminding readers that the war was a contest between democracy and autocracy⁸¹, appealing to women, duty and honour, and to remember the desperate plight of Britain.⁸² The paper’s final comment, made before the results were known, was “If ‘No’, we are disgraced in the eyes of our allies.”⁸³ “No.” The referendum was defeated nationally by a higher margin than October 1916. The low voter turn out for the second referendum reflected the growing apathy felt by many Australians who simply wanted the war to end and for their sons and husbands to come home. The *Sydney Morning Herald* recognised the defeat in a conciliatory editorial entitled “Verdict of the

⁷⁵ MacIntyre, op cit, 167.

⁷⁶ NC 01.11.1916.

⁷⁷ Clement MacIntyre, *Political Australia: A Handbook of Facts*, 1.

⁷⁸ Barrymore-Smith, op cit, 25.

⁷⁹ NC 24.11.1917.

⁸⁰ NC 05.12.1917.

⁸¹ NC 08.12.1917.

⁸² NC 19.12.1917.

⁸³ NC 22.12.1917.

Electors.”⁸⁴ The *Northern Champion* commented on the Referendum outcome in a terse paragraph, describing the result as a victory for the Labor Party.⁸⁵ Many Australians were becoming increasingly tired of a war that seemed to drag on with no end in sight, and the antics of a Prime Minister who appeared to take notice of no one, least of all his cabinet, but who was determined to win the war and make Australia a power that could not be overlooked and who would get her share of the victor’s spoils.⁸⁶

When the Armistice was announced and the war was finally over, Australia rejoiced along with the Imperial family of nations and the other allies. In its editorial on the Armistice, the *Northern Champion* viewed the German capitulation with cynicism, a sentiment shared by many.

‘Der Tag’ dawns on another Germany. The great military nation now tries to bluff that it has become a great democratic nation which hates militarism of which it has been a proud protagonist. It is the last effort of the military caste to retain its hold over a schooled and docile people...⁸⁷

Celebrations rightly belonged to the victorious Allies and “Australia has every right to rejoice that ‘The Day’ is not being toasted in another tongue.”⁸⁸

From a population of less than five million, Australia had sent 331 781 men, or 20per cent of her eligible military manpower, to the war. 59 342 (or 18per cent) were killed, and 152 171 (51per cent) were wounded.⁸⁹ Every Australian family knew someone who had been directly affected by the war. The scale of trauma in a society without professional psychological help or counselling is hard to imagine.⁹⁰ Once the guns were silent the longing of soldiers and civilians was to “get back to normal”, but the

⁸⁴ *SMH* 22.12.1917 Copies of the *Northern Champion* for this time are unavailable.

⁸⁵ *NC* 05.01.1918.

⁸⁶ Beaumont, op cit, 131-132; MacIntyre, op cit, 177-179.

⁸⁷ *NC* 13.11.1918.

⁸⁸ *ibid*

⁸⁹ Bean, op cit, 532.

⁹⁰ Kate Blackmore, *War, Health and Welfare: The Great War and its Aftermath*, 56-60.

transition was not to be smooth - too much had changed during the years of war. The old world that had seemed so secure and eternal was gone. New forces had emerged, in particular the use of the word “democracy”, and the nemesis from Russia, “Bolshevism.”

In Paris and London, Billy Hughes took the part of a statesman. In Australia, early 1919 saw the newspapers filled with ominous warnings about Bolshevik plans to conquer the world alongside articles about returning soldiers.⁹¹ Readers were warned of the menace the Bolsheviks posed to western civilisation, and in language reminiscent of that used to describe the German “Hun” only months before, Australians were warned that the Jewish Bolsheviks nursed an irrational “hatred of Britain and are determined to destroy the Empire.”⁹² The linkage of Bolshevism with Jews and the creation of “Judeo-Communism” had become an accepted fact in the Australian media by early 1920.⁹³ “Judeo-Communism” was in fact the latest

propagated version of the Jewish world conspiracy myth...Literature in the 1920s and 1930s contains numerous references to a purported apocalyptic struggle by the forces of atheism, materialism and socialism, masterminded by international Jewry, against the foundations of European civilisation and Christianity.⁹⁴

Worse was to come: the “Red Flag Riots” revealed that Bolsheviks had been uncovered in Brisbane, but had been appropriately dealt with by returned servicemen⁹⁵, earning for the soldiers high praise from the Prime Minister in Paris at the Peace Conference.⁹⁶ The “Red Flag Riots” unleashed a great tide of Australian xenophobia and anger at those who appeared to make a mockery of the sacrifices “ordinary” Australians had made during the war. “Social cleansing” was demanded and many in power, even some with socialist sympathies such as Queensland Premier Theodore, believed that returned soldiers, “those skilled warriors...must now lead this

⁹¹ *Sydney Mail* 29.01.1919.

⁹² *Sydney Mail* 17.03.1919; *Telegraph* 17.01; 28.01; 01.02.1919.

⁹³ Williams, op cit, 155.

⁹⁴ Andre Gerrits, “Antisemitism and Anti-Communism: The myth of ‘Judeo-Communism’ in Eastern Europe”, in *Eastern European Jewish Affairs*, 25.1, 54.

⁹⁵ *Telegraph* 23.03; 04.04.1919; *NC* 26.03; 29.03.1919.

⁹⁶ *Telegraph* 29.04.1919.

fight to the death for their hearth and home; just as they had vanquished their Hunnish enemies.”⁹⁷

Ernest Sawyer returned to Australia in March 1919, as the country came to terms with the peace, the outbreak of the Spanish influenza epidemic and news of the Bolshevik hordes rampaging through Russia and threatening the rest of the world.⁹⁸ Sawyer, like most of his comrades, wanted to go home and resume their lives. Disembarking in Sydney with the rank of Acting Sergeant on 16 April 1919, he came home to Tinonee and to his wife Minnie and daughter Enid, now four years old. “The returned men of the Manning contemplated quietly on their permanently changed lives to the local sounds of the cow bell and lowing cattle, the butter churns and the ring of the axe.”⁹⁹ Ernest Sawyer, returned serviceman and veteran of the Middle East Campaign, now became Ernest Sawyer, farmer, husband and father. Along with many of his comrades, he spoke little of the battles and hardship of war outside the circle of fellow veterans, having become, in the words of Gammage, “men apart.”¹⁰⁰

The return to “normalcy” was in many ways completed for Ernest and Minnie Sawyer when, on 7 May 1920, their son Ernest Maxwell was born. The memories of the war could be allowed to fade.

⁹⁷ Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots*, 124.

⁹⁸ NC 15.02; 29.03.1919.

⁹⁹ Ramsland, *op cit*, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Gammage, *op cit*, 275.

Chapter Four: TINONEE 1920-1939

In its edition for 1 March 1919, the *Northern Champion* published a poem written by local Taree poet Louis Untermeyer, who entitled his work “Return of the Soldier.”

The last flash...and the hideous attack,
Dies like the wisp of storm discouraged flame;
And so on these battered heroes will come back
The same, yet not the same.¹

Throughout 1919 soldiers returned to the Manning Valley. A “Welcome Home” Committee had been formed in March, and individual soldiers were feted with speeches from the Mayor and other local dignitaries.² In mid-May 1919, Sergeant Ernest Sawyer stepped off the train from Sydney and was welcomed home to Tinonee, which he had not seen since October 1915. An official “Welcome Home” was celebrated on 22 May at the Federal Hall in Tinonee.³ His four-year-old daughter Enid recalled how her father returned as a stranger to her, she had no memory of him, and “I resented him a bit...bossing me around!”⁴

Although back from the war, Sawyer’s local battles were only beginning. His wife Minnie had fallen ill with the Spanish influenza. Minnie was never a strong women and had always suffered from a bronchial ailments.⁵ The *Northern Champion* monitored the spread of the ‘flu from early February and watched with growing anxiety as it spread up the coast from Newcastle.⁶ The first case of the “flu” in Taree was reported on 27 March, and an emergency hospital was set up in the Taree Showground in April.⁷ Minnie was admitted to the Showground hospital shortly after Ernest returned home.⁸

¹ NC 01.03.1919.

² NC 12.03.1919.

³ NC 17.05.1919.

⁴ ES.

⁵ VJ.

⁶ NC 15.02; 19.02; 05.03; 12.03; 19.03; 22.03; 26.03.1919.

⁷ NC 29.03; 19.04.1919.

⁸ NC 17.05.1919. After this illness, Minnie never fully regained the indifferent health she had been used to and spent at least part of every year in hospital until her death in 1940. (VJ)

Ernest went home to his new farm just outside Tinonee, where Minnie and Enid had been living for some months. In so doing, Ernest joined the thousands of other ex-servicemen who accepted a Government invitation to settle on the land. Before we explore Ernest and Minnie Sawyer's life on the land we need to place them within the context of post-war rural Australia. The context helps us establish the Sawyer experience and make it easier to understand the *milieu*, in which they lived and worked. Central to the experience of post-war Australia was the growth of government intervention in daily life and the gradual intrusion of the outside world.

The question of demobilising the AIF upon its return from the war had exercised the minds of Commonwealth and State ministers as early as May 1915, barely a month after the landings at Gallipoli. Citing examples from ancient and more recent British history, the idea of settling returned soldiers on the land "grew like a weed."⁹ Behind this arcadian notion lay a continuation of dreams to populate and cultivate as much of Australia as possible.¹⁰ The "true" Australian was still the rural worker, and the close of the war would provide Australia with the opportunity of opening up the continent by settling soldiers on the land.

...it is intended to settle at least 5000 returned men on areas on which they will be able to earn a comfortable living. Ultimately the land will become their own.¹¹

There was no reason why any returned soldier, who so desired, should not be able to make his way on the land.¹²

Soldier settlement of the land had been first mentioned in the Victorian Legislative Assembly in May 1915. Australia was not alone in exploring the idea. Throughout the Empire, as Morton remarked

The paradox of ex-servicemen was clear to contemporaries: a threat to society if idle, yet also the potential focus of national regeneration;

⁹ Blackmore op cit, 44.

¹⁰ Williams, op.cit, 135.

¹¹ *Sydney Mail* 15.01.1919.

they were of economic importance as a reserve army of labour, as well as military importance as a reserve army. Patriotism, too, created a feeling of obligation to those who fought for king and empire...[the imperial statesmen] accepted land as their focus of national reconstruction, and the soldier farmer fitted their ideology well.¹³

At a special Conference of State and Commonwealth representatives held to discuss soldier settlement, between February 17-19, 1916, fears were expressed at the prospect of “200 000 to 250 000 men” returning to Australia and trying “to get back into their old niches.”¹⁴ Debate followed over the number of men who would eventually settle on the land. A figure of 40 000 was finally reached after a wide margin was subtracted of men who would eventually decline the offer of farms.¹⁵ Once the men were on the land they would require training, lest they return to the “big cities where the lights and music are to found.”¹⁶ Clearly the motivating forces for settlement were twofold. Firstly, the Governments were eager to exploit the potential labour market along traditional lines, namely the expansion of Australia's rural sector. Secondly, fears of hundreds of thousands of ex-soldiers roaming the cities prompted a radical social solution, that is, keep potential trouble out of the cities by occupying soldiers with plenty of work. Theoretically, at least, the idea of soldier settlement would remove a potential social problem and boost Australia's primary industry.¹⁷

The technicalities of training and settling land were to be left to the states, while the Federal Government would provide the funds “by way of loans to the States for the purposes of making advances through the Agricultural Banks or similar governmental institutions.”¹⁸ Blackmore makes the observation that Soldier Settlement and indeed the whole repatriation process, “provides and excellent example of the integration function of the state in modern society.”¹⁹ What emerged from the February 1916

¹² Lands Department 6. Hereafter LD.

¹³ Graeme Morton, “Review of Kent Fedorowich *Unfit for Heroes*”, in *The Economic History Review*, 48.4, 832.

¹⁴ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers* 1916:5.1467. Hereafter CPP

¹⁵ *ibid*, 1468.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 1472.

¹⁷ Cf L Pryor, “Back from the Wars”, in *Australian Quarterly*, 18, 43-50.

¹⁸ CPP *op cit*, 1461.

¹⁹ Kate Blackmore, “Aspects of the Australian Repatriation Process: war, health and responsibility for illness”, in *Monash Publications in History* (14), 101.

Conference in Melbourne was a part of a broader development of government bureaucracies. Successive Commonwealth and State Acts of Parliament consolidated the power of the state to “integrate a subordinate class”, in this case, returning soldiers.²⁰ Indeed, the Australian experiment was being watched from overseas.

As early as 1918, the Australian soldier settlement scheme was considered by Elwood Mead, United States Department of the Interior, as a model for American proposals along similar lines. The co-operation between the Federal and State governments was described as making

the movement truly national because it enlists all sections of the country and mobilises in the service of soldiers public agencies which have the practical, technical knowledge needed to secure the desired results with the least effort, money and time.²¹

The increased monitoring of individuals tied to the government by an equally increasing bureaucracy created a wealth of paper work that supervised and documented the growth of officially sanctioned public interference. For the soldier-farmers, the promise of farms came with the other promise of government interest in every aspect of the farmer’s life. This process, which soon encompassed every Australian, began with the exceptional speed with which acts of parliament were passed to make this possible.²²

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Elwood Mead, *Summary of Soldier settlements in English Speaking Countries*, 5.

²² The growth of government bureaucracy can be monitored through a survey of the Acts of Parliament passed during the inter-war years. Family income was taxed under the 1911 *Income Tax Act*, amended annually. The rate of tax was set in 1924 at nine pence in the pound for annual incomes less than £250, and ten pence for those over £250 and under £500. The Sawyer's income remained within the first tax bracket throughout the inter-war years. Health and hygiene was controlled under the 1902 *Public Health Act* with amendments made in 1921 and 1937. Visits to the doctor were regulated under the 1912 *Medical Practitioners Act* and its amendments of 1915 and 1938. Teeth were to be checked according to measures outlined under the 1934 *Dentists Act* that replaced the repealed Acts of 1912 and 1927. Children were placed under the care of the *Child Welfare Act* of 1923, which allowed for direct intervention by government agencies in the case of abuse or neglect. Parents were helped in the rearing of their children through the 1927 *Family Endowment Act*, which provided for a monthly assistance to families. Families such as the Sawyers were gradually covered by many legislative measures, designed in part to make the family a more effective social unit that worked with other effective social units. “Untidy elements” were to be regimented so that society would move more efficiently, thus complimenting the parallel regimentation of Australian industry.

Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s the level of government control of “private” and “public” life increased more by stealth, if the *Northern Champion* is to be used as a measure of this from the perspective of rural Australia.²³ Government involvement in daily life appears to have been accepted as a natural development of a growing economy, and consequently was viewed as a positive benefit. Dissent from this was more associated with a dislike of bureaucrats and the nuisance value of filling in forms and keeping records, rather than resentment at intrusion into one's private affairs. Australia had little history of anti-government or anti-federal antagonism similar to the United States. There are no direct mentions of implementation of Government regulations in the *Northern Champion*, with the exception of an article for mothers advertising “Free Welfare Pamphlets” which gave information about child health care and the child endowment which was to come into effect in 1927.²⁴ For most Australians like the Sawyers, a more regulated life was simply a *fait accompli*.

Political life in the Manning Valley was conservative, suspicious of urban politics, and determined to have the voice of Australian farmers heard in Sydney and Canberra. Taree and the villages of the Valley were supported by the agricultural economy and so were sympathetic to the needs of the farmers. This was in contrast to a town such as Maitland which was supported by the coal mining industry, and which, consequently, had no direct reliance on the dairy farmers of the Hunter Valley. The difference between the two towns is significant. Taree, the local villages of the Manning Valley and the farms, were homogeneous regional communities. They shared a common agenda both in politics and economics. Maitland, on the other hand, was not so directly linked to the surrounding farms; the town had an independent economic base that did not rely on agriculture. In terms of Manning

²³ Ernest Sawyer's life as a farmer was just as effectively controlled. The annual amendments to the 1916 *Returned Soldier Settlers Act*, aimed at smoothing the processes by which returned soldiers were trained to become producers. Application and acquisition of land was governed by the Act and its amendments. Dairy farming was under the auspices of the 1901 *Dairies Supervision Act* and its 1930 amendment. This Act worked together with the 1931 *Milk Act* which replaced the 1929 *Metropolitan Milk Act* and the 1933 *Dairy Products Act* and its 1938 amendment. Farming was regulated by various Land Acts, including the *Returned Soldier Settlers Act*, and the *Marketing of Primary Produce Act* of 1927, with the amendments of 1928 and 1930. Transporting produce to markets and collection points, if done by motor vehicle, came under the *Motor Vehicles Taxation Acts* of 1924 and 1939.

²⁴ NC 27.03.1927.

Valley politics, the agrarian communities of the region were not dissimilar to that of the urban *petite bourgeoisie*. Graham observes:

Both have a slender hold on their socio-economic status; both are characterised by a loosely-knit social structure and a fiercely-held individualistic ethic; both have a profound respect for law and order; are revolutionary only in extremity; and both in times of stress have recourse to class myths of surprising intensity and power.²⁵

The myths, as we have noted, have been a sustaining force in Australian rural life long before “our Andy went a-droving.”

In the immediate post-war years, the perennial insecurity of the rural sector led to the founding of a rural political movement that would attempt to take the needs of the farmers into Parliament. The wheat farmers who had inaugurated the country party movement between 1917 and 1920 drew small graziers and dairy farmers with them. Thus, the new movement reflected a variety of needs.

The dairy farmers wanted the new parties to protest against the price-fixing and marketing controls associated with the wartime butter and cheese pooling schemes, for unlike wheat farmers they were not attracted to the principle of state-controlled marketing agencies; graziers saw the country parties as a convenient means of protesting against the regulation of meat prices in 1918 and against the tariff increases which were canvassed in 1919...²⁶

A major reason for the formation of a rural political force was the perceived need to have “a further instrument to use in their battle against the Labor Party...”²⁷ By the end of the 1920s the country parties were firmly established in the Australian political arena.²⁸

²⁵ Bruce Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 14.

²⁶ *ibid*, 28.

²⁷ *ibid*

The voters of the Manning Valley supported the Country Party at the Federal level, electing Earle Page continually from 1919 to 1956.²⁹ The State seat of Oxley was held by a succession of Progressive Country Party and Nationalist members. Lewis Martin, (first Nationalist then from 1932, United Australia Party) held the seat continuously from 1927 until after the war. (Refer Table 2)

²⁸ *ibid*, 30

²⁹ Australian Dictionary of Biography 7.118-122 Hereafter *ADB*

TABLE 2: State Election Results

STATE ELECTIONS 1920-1938		Seat of Oxley	
20.03.1920		25.03.1922	
G.S. Briner (Progressive)	4633	T.H. Hill (Coalition)	8119
J.J. Fitzgerald (ALP)	4376	R.S. Vincent (Progressive)	7928
R.A. Price (Progressive)	3757	J.J. Fitzgerald (ALP)	7539
H.D. Morton (Nationalist)	3375		
T.H. Hill (Progressive)	1732		
(State: Nat 28; Prog 15; ALP 43 ; Oth 4)		(State: ALP 36; Coal 41 ; Prog 9; Oth 4)	
NC 24.03.1920		NC 5.04.1922	
30.05.1925		8.10.1927	
T.H. Hill (Nationalist)		L. Martin (Nationalist)	6510
5367+Pref			
R.S. Vincent (Progressive)	6001	J. Thompson (Ind Nat)	3148
J.J. Fitzgerald (ALP)	8507	A. Suter (Country Party)	990
(State: NC Nat 32; ALP 46 ; Prog 9; Oth 3)		(State: ALP 40 ; IndLab 2; Nat 33; IndNat 2; CP 13)	
3.06.1925		NC 12.10.1927	
25.10.1930		11.06.1932	
L. Martin (Nationalist)	7433	L. Martin (UAP)	9372
Easton (Communist)	135	J.A. Cooper (State Labour)	2738
Moran (Independent)	195		
Trechurst (ALP)	3804		
(State: ALP 55; Nat 23; CP 12)		(State: UAP 38; CP 23; State Labour 29)	
NC 29.10.1930		NC 15.06.1932	
11.05.1935		26.03.1938	
L. Martin (UAP)	9186	L. Martin (UAP)	7362
F.J. Hartley	3904	Mitchell (Ind. CP)	6043
(State: UAP 38; CP 23; State Labour 29)		(State: UAP 37; CP 22; ALP 28; Ind Lab 2; Oth 1)	
NC 15.05.1935		NC 30.03.1938	

Table 3: Federal Election Results

FEDERAL ELECTIONS 1919-1937	Seat of Cowper³⁰
13.12.1919	16.12.1922
E. Page (Farmers&Settlers) 10058	E. Page (CP) 11857
Ross Pryor (ALP) 5549	J. Thomson (Nationalist) 5775
J. Thomson (Nationalist) 4034	
(Comm: Nat 40; ALP 26; CP 8; Ind Nat 1)	(Comm: Nat 29; Lib(Vic) 2; CP 14; ALP 29; Oth 1)
NC 17.12.1919	NC 20.12.1922
14.11.1925	17.11.1928
E. Page (CP) 22548	E. Page (CP) 28848
J. Thomson (Nationalist) 9515	T.J. Swiney (ALP) 7884
(Comm: Nat 37;CP 14; ALP 23; Oth 1)	(Comm: Nat 29; CP 11: CP Prog 1; ALP 31; Oth 1)
NC 18.11.1925	NC 21.11.1928
12.10.1929	19.12.1931
E. Page (CP) Elected Unopposed	E. Page (UCP) 26093
	Cusack (Federal Labour) 5627
	Roach (Lang Labour) 4243
(Comm: Nat 14; Ind Nat 3; CP 10: CP Prog 1: ALP 46; Oth 1)	(Comm:ALP14; NSWLab 4; UAP34; CP 16; Emerg C'tee SA 6; Oth 1)
NC 16.10.1929	NC 23.12.1931
15.09.1934	23.10.1937
E.Page (UCP) 25237	E.Page (UCP) 26930
T.W. McCristal (State Labour) 8548	A.G. Brindley (ALP) 15612
H.L.Kesteven (Douglas Social Credit)5826	
(Comm: UAP 28; CP 14; Lib 5; ALP 18; NSW Labour 9)	(Comm: UAP 29; CP 16: ALP 29)
NC 19.09.1934	NC 27.10.1937

³⁰ State and Federal election results drawn from Clement MacIntyre, *Political Australia: a Handbook of Facts*, 1-8; 42-46.

In New South Wales, the *Returned Soldier Settlers Act* (RSSA) was passed in March 1916. It acted upon the recommendations of the February 1916 Conference and empowered the Minister of Lands, H G Ashford, to set aside Crown land for soldiers.³¹ Soldiers were invited to apply for registration as a “land seeker.”³² If the individual soldier was unable to register, his parents or “near relatives” could do so for him, completing the required forms before a Justice of the Peace or a Crown Land Agent.³³ So great was the felt need to get the soldiers onto the land that no time limits were initially proposed.³⁴ However, by 1918, the NSW Land's Department had ruled that “residency must commence within six months after confirmation of the farm.”³⁵ The State government promised to provide “an advance up to £500 to help clear and fence the land, purchase equipment and build a house.”³⁶

The combination of imperial ideology, increased government bureaucracy and a blitheful ignorance of geography and history put together a scenario for calamity.³⁷ Little consideration was made for training men with no rural background; even less was made of market demands both within and without Australia, and no attention was paid to Australia's very “un-European” climate. If the soldier settler could “stick it out”, the agrarian myth was vindicated; if he could not, the soldier settler was less than ideal.³⁸ The yeoman farmer belonged to Europe and no advances in science or progress would alter the Australian climate to make it like Europe or North America. Nevertheless, Australian politicians such as H D Morton, MLA for Oxley, and Sir Joseph Carruthers (1856-1932), promoted intensive land settlement as vital for the nation and the empire.³⁹ Morton assured a meeting of primary producers in Taree that

The National Government aims at keeping our producers contented on the soil and has devised legislation to add to their numbers. A rural

³¹ *Returned Soldier Settler Act* 1916, Hereafter RSSA; Mead 19.

³² DL 6

³³ RSSA, “Interpretation given to Regulations 6.1 and 6.2”, in *NSW Government Gazette* 1918:8, 25.01.1918, 429-436.

³⁴ CPP op cit, 1479.

³⁵ DL 8.

³⁶ *ibid*, 13.

³⁷ Cf J M Powell, “Taylor, Stefansson and the Arid Centre: An Historic Encounter of ‘Environmentalism’ and ‘Possibilism’”, in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 66, 163-184.

³⁸ Williams, op cit, 139.

³⁹ NC 27.07.1921.

population, thriving and contented, is the backbone of any country, and now more than at any time in our history, producers should receive the best consideration at the hands of Parliament... The National Party regards the farmer tilling the soil, as a blessing, not a curse.⁴⁰

Settlement would prevent the evil of Bolshevism from taking root, and more importantly, by encouraging Anglo-Saxon settlement from urban Australia as well as from overseas, it would keep “teeming millions of coloured races” out of Australia.⁴¹ While Sir Joseph Carruthers advocated wholesale intensive farming settlements, others, such as E W Brierley, Chairman of the Grafton Land Board, urged caution.⁴² He argued that settlement of Carruthers toted one million farmers would take centuries. It would be better, he argued, to build up populations in existing provincial towns by concentrating on the development of the railways, main roads and waterways. This would encourage urban dwellers to take seriously the option of moving out of the cities.⁴³

In order to help farmers, new and old, become better producers, weekly columns such as “Agricultural and Pastoral Notes for the Man on the Land” appeared in rural newspapers. They contained extensive articles on dairying, orchard development, use of fertiliser, types of cattle and sheep for different parts of the country, as well as advice on soils, grasses and imported seeds.⁴⁴ Conspicuous by their absence were articles on soil conservation, advice on the risks of over-farming, and measures to counter drought conditions. The few articles on advances made in Canada and the United States through the use of motorised farm equipment such as tractors, appear to have made little impression on the readers in the Manning Valley. Throughout the 1920s advertisements for agricultural equipment, from businesses such as Connells of Taree, were still very farmer and horse centred.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ NC 25.02.1920.

⁴¹ NC 27.07.1921.

⁴² ABD 7.578.

⁴³ NC 25.02.1922.

⁴⁴ NC, Saturday editions, 1920-1931, and as “Farming Notes” from 1936 onwards.

⁴⁵ eg NC 23.05.1928.

Australia's agricultural future, for the few lone voices such as Griffith-Taylor, lay on the eastern seaboard, not in the arid semi-deserts of the interior.⁴⁶ However, Griffith-Taylor could not compete with the pseudo-science that bemoaned the underuse of "Empty Australia" with her "Empty and Beautiful" spaces waiting for the millions of white settlers who would tap into unimagined riches.⁴⁷ Occasionally, reality impinged upon the imperial dream, when the recognition of hardship among Soldier settlers and others on the land could not be ignored.⁴⁸ Ultimately it was these reasons, coupled with the onset of economic recession, that Justice Pike nominated as causing the failure of the soldier settlement scheme.⁴⁹

The above concerns would hardly have impinged upon Minnie Sawyer when she was notified in early 1917 that her husband's application for purchasing a block of Crown land had been approved. Prior to enlisting Ernest Sawyer had decided to try his hand at farming, but he did not apply for land under any Soldier Settlement scheme, as they had not been devised at this stage. A Special Lease was available to anyone who cared to apply. Together with a £10 deposit, his application, Special Lease 15/37, was lodged at the Taree Crown Land Office on 2 September 1915. Sometime between September 1915 and September 1917 the application was withdrawn. No reason was given.⁵⁰

The application was reinstated on 7 September 1917 retaining the original 15/37 notation.⁵¹ By this time the *RSSA* had been passed. However, at this stage, the Sawyers were not applying under the provisions of this Act. The area was designated Portion 260, a 203-acre site bordering the area that would be named the Kiwarra State Forest in 1918. The papers were registered in 1917, and approval was granted on 20 February 1917.⁵² A lease was approved on 23 November 1917 with a recommended rent of nine pence per acre, an annual amount of £7.12.8. Leased from 1 January 1918 to 31 December 1924, Sawyer's land was designated for "agriculture

⁴⁶ Powell, *op cit*, 180.

⁴⁷ *NC* 15.04; 17.05.1922; 19.05.1928.

⁴⁸ *NC* 20.05.1922.

⁴⁹ *CPP* 46:1929.23.

⁵⁰ Department of Conservation and Land Management, Taree Office, Ten.60.3004. Hereafter DCLM.

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² DCLM Sydney. G4697/1497, registration number 13335.

and grazing”, and an annual rent of £7.12.8 was charged. The land grant was formally gazetted on 25 January 1918.⁵³

Conditional Purchase of the land was made on 2 June 1919.⁵⁴ On 23 February 1920, Sawyer made application under the *RSSA* for a grant of £625. Under the Act, the State Government agreed to provide funds for returned soldiers to begin their farming careers.⁵⁵

In the post-war euphoria that gripped the Allied world, most Australians looked forward to a “return to normalcy.” Australian academics, such as the *rara avis* and controversialist, Meridith Atkinson (1883-1929), saw the post-war world as an opportunity to create a new social order. Buoyed by what he saw as the superiority of democracy, Atkinson sounded the optimism of the 1920s.

Democratic societies are improving steadily their standard of welfare and measures of social co-operation. The approach towards equality of opportunity is developing a complex of over-lapping and associative interests which render absurd the rigid division into bourgeoisie and proletariat. Economic fatalism is being supplanted by social co-operation...⁵⁶

Social co-operation, internationalism, the role of the League of Nations and Australia, loyal dominion, (even if its economic position was questionable) were all bandied about in political and economic circles during the early years of the 1920s.

Government was determined to bring prosperity to the nation through immigration and the promotion of Australian agriculture. This reinforcement of Australia as one of the great white agricultural dominions within the Empire was asserted with great vigour from the beginning of the 1920s. Australia’s High Commissioner in London, Joseph Fisher heralded the visit to Australia by the Prince of Wales, as “an emblem of

⁵³ *NSW Government Gazette* 1918:8, 25.01.1918, 402.

⁵⁴ Land Titles Office Sydney LTO8104/218:1919/64.

⁵⁵ DL 13.

⁵⁶ Mercedith Atkinson, *The New Social Order*, 70.

the fact that the Empire was impregnable.”⁵⁷ Coverage of the June-July Royal Visit had the “Digger Prince” renewing his ties with Australia’s finest; the veterans of the AIF, not the politicians. This was a well-engineered public relations exercise that proved remarkably successful.⁵⁸ The *Northern Champion* exulted the virtues of “Monarchical Australia”, illustrating the benefits of Australia’s membership in the Empire, making life inherently superior to those lesser nations, such as the United States and their incomprehensible republican system.⁵⁹ The Prince’s visit to Newcastle was noted as giving the people of the Central Coast an opportunity to show their loyalty to the Crown in the person of the Heir. The visit was judged a triumph of the indomitable British spirit.⁶⁰ Australia would be ever safe.

Outside of the semi-hysteria surrounding the Prince of Wales, and for those brave or daring enough to step away from the imperial brouhaha, Australia stood at something of a cross-roads. The 1920s post-war life offered an opportunity to develop industry and modernisation, not unlike the progress of the United States. Australia’s imperial-minded government opted for a safe Britain first policy, that ultimately left the country dependent upon the Imperial Parliament in London and doomed any serious attempt to create an authentic Australian industry, much less an authentic Australian identity.⁶¹ A glance at the *Northern Champion* throughout the early 1920s shows a wide exposure to world events as seen through the lens of Imperial Anglo-Australia.⁶² At the same time, Greenwood asserts there was a demise in the fields of the arts, education and literature, leaving an “aridity, a lack of works of first class imagination and a seeming lack of passionate purpose on the part of those who wrote or painted.”⁶³ The “return to normalcy” was certainly directed at the building up of Australia’s material wealth, and all Australians, it was felt, would share in the cornucopia.

Alongside the determination to make Australia great through economic advancement, was a concerted effort among medical and education professionals to implement ideas

⁵⁷ NC 31.01.1920.

⁵⁸ NC 12.06.1920.

⁵⁹ NC 19.06.1920.

⁶⁰ NC 03.07.1920.

⁶¹ Cf. Gary Lewis, “Millions Farms” Campaign, NSW 1919-1925”, in *Labour History* 47, 58-59.

⁶² NC 28.04;12.05.1920; 15.07.1922.

⁶³ Greenwood, op cit, 299.

that were to find an extreme currency in the rise of Fascism in the 1930s. The experiences of war had a radicalising effect on many political and social theorists. “In other words political ideologies and social philosophies...shaped scientific theory and in some instances the theory was ‘manipulated’ to accord with political imperatives.”

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After the war, there was an enormous increase in the amount of literature published on topics directed at the forming of a better humanity. *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, published in New York, illustrates this point. In the 1922-1924 edition there were nineteen articles on eugenics and 106 articles on education.⁶⁵ In the next edition for 1925-1928, the number of articles on eugenics had risen to 31 with six “see also” categories, while articles on education had risen to 170 with 46 “see also” categories.⁶⁶ Eugenics seems to have diminished as a topic of particular interest by the late 1920s, and all but disappears in the 1930s, especially after the advent of Nazism in Germany.⁶⁷ Education, however, continued to attract a plethora of articles under an increasing number of headings. In the 1929-1932 edition, education articles number 87, with 42 “see also” headings.⁶⁸ Many of the articles were dissertations on the socio-economic aspects of education in American and European schools, and were indirectly linked to other topics such as eugenics and the increasing control of education by the state. Australian education rated a mention in most editions, usually in regard to rural education in the outback.⁶⁹ *The Reader's Guide* reflects the growing internationalism of the scientific and intellectual community, yet while there is no evidence to suggest how many of Australia's scientific community read the articles listed, the journals were available in places such as the universities and State Library of New South Wales.

Medicine was to be harnessed not for the purpose of solving medical problems, but for the greater task of helping to create a better humanity. Eugenics, while never a major feature of Australian medical practice between the wars, did find great support

⁶⁴ Stephen Garton, “Sound Minds and Healthy Bodies: Reconsidering Eugenics in Australia 1914-1940”, in *Historical Studies*, 34:165.

⁶⁵ Alice Dougan *et al*, *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, 6.541, 496-497.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 7.813, 736-760.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 9.743; 10.603.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 8.765-787.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, Volumes 6-10, *passim*.

in the promotion of “mental and physical health, and ultimately human social adaptation...It was primarily concerned with measures of social intervention...”⁷⁰ Education was seen as one of the major ways of effecting social intervention. Children would be instructed to be good citizens of Australia, loyal subjects of the King, and obedient builders of a better world.⁷¹ These trends in education were integral to the way that Max Sawyer and his sisters were taught to view the world in which they lived. Children were to be instructed in the imperial ethos so as to inherit and maintain the *status quo*.

Good citizenship, loyalty to the Empire, and obedience to authority were best encapsulated in the celebration of Empire Day. The formal ceremony of the day, raising and saluting the flag, pledging fealty to the King and praying God’s blessing on His Majesty and themselves through the singing of “God Save the King”, cemented themes the Reverend Stuart Wright of Taree had developed in his thoughts for Empire Day in 1920. He had addressed the assembled school children, telling them that the God-given dominions of the Empire brought a heavy responsibility to promote liberty, spread the (Protestant) Christian Gospel, and promote service to God, King and one another. Binding all of these virtues together was the bond of loyalty, and Australia would become great through her loyalty to the Empire. The implication was that children would likewise become great in their own domains through loyalty to family and those over them.⁷² Empire Day speeches, essays and pageants reflected the general ethos encouraged by the Department of Education and the Government of the day. The King’s Silver Jubilee in 1935 was an opportunity for reaffirming the link with the person of the King in whose person was embodied the unity of the Empire. The King-Emperor was the symbol of British permanence in the world, a guarantee of stability in a changing and often insecure world. The King’s stamp collecting was even cited as evidence of George V’s paternal interest in, and love, of the Empire.⁷³ In the last years of peace Empire Day assumed an even greater significance, subtly expressing Australian fears of isolation and paranoia about security. Europe and Britain’s interests had moved away from the overseas empires, to concern about the

⁷⁰ Garton, op cit, 166.

⁷¹ Atkinson, op cit, 78-79.

⁷² NC 26.05.1920.

⁷³ NC 04.05; 08.05.1935.

growing militancy of Hitler's Germany. The sentiments of loyalty to the Crown and Empire became even more strident.⁷⁴

The Department of Education had been an active proponent of the need to inculcate "sound" political education into the children of New South Wales since before the 1914-1918 War. Schools were the training grounds of the young. Values that were deemed vital to the continuing existence of the nation and the empire could not be left solely to parents.

Many ideas found their way into the school curriculum through the political education process. These included the Anzac legend, the might of the empire, heroism, the significance of the flag, the peace process and what constituted true loyalty. In one form or another they were included in the school program to help foster the ideal of patriotism.⁷⁵

Primary school children were to be instructed in British imperial history, the benefits of living in the Empire, famous Britons, and were to be fully conversant with the great names of English literature. Teachers were to be positive role models who would encourage appropriate sentiments among their students. In 1924, the New South Wales Director of Education, S H Smith, addressed a conference of the New South Wales Public School Teachers Federation, saying that teachers had been entrusted with the task of shaping the lives of the children they taught. "He maintained that by doing this the teachers were looking after the welfare of the country, that is it was the teacher's responsibility to see that the country grew in refinement, honour and freedom."⁷⁶

Education was also perceived as the way out of social and economic indigency. Commenting at a school opening in Lorn, near Maitland, Albert Bruntell, the Minister of Public Instruction said Australia

⁷⁴ NC 27.05.1936; 27.05.1939.

⁷⁵ Ian Willis, "Patriotism and Education in New South Wales 1915-1930", in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 80:75.

was a highly ignorant country and until it was more educated it would not be able to take its place among the nations of the world. Thousands of parents rushed their children into wage earning positions at an early age, and a great percentage of those who were seeking relief on account of being out of work were from that class.⁷⁷

Therefore British economic imperialism, interventionist medicine and school education joined the already burgeoning government bureaucracy in exerting greater control over the lives of Australians. And while the country areas of Australia may not have felt the full impact of the “new order”, they were not immune to it.

The Sawyers were determined to share in the hoped-for prosperity and “make it” as small farmers. This, however, was not going to be easy. Their land grant was situated about five kilometres south-east of Tinonee along Deans Creek Road in hilly country, covered with scrub and thin bush with a creek running through it. Ernest Sawyer’s property was part of a range of hills that marked the southern boundary of the Manning River flood plain, and are themselves part of the central riverine plain that formed the floor of the Manning Valley. The area is dissected with gullies and small creeks that meander into the Manning River. Flooding was not a problem for the farmers on the south side of Tinonee, as the hilly terrain kept them above the floodline, but the constant felling of natural bush timbers made soil conservation impossible. Consequently, heavy rains meant that an ever-increasing amount of precious top soil was lost. To the south of Tinonee rose the steep slopes of hills that stood between the Wang Wauk and Wollomba Rivers. To the west and north was the hinterland and rich farming areas of the Valley; while to the east lay the open flood plain and the coast.⁷⁸

Rainfall was plentiful, an average of 1150 mm per annum. A sub-tropical climate characterised the region, with warm summers and mild winters. The Valley was originally covered by dense forests of cedar, eucalypt, rosewood and coachwood.⁷⁹ By the time Minnie Sawyer moved onto the land in early 1918, most of the virgin

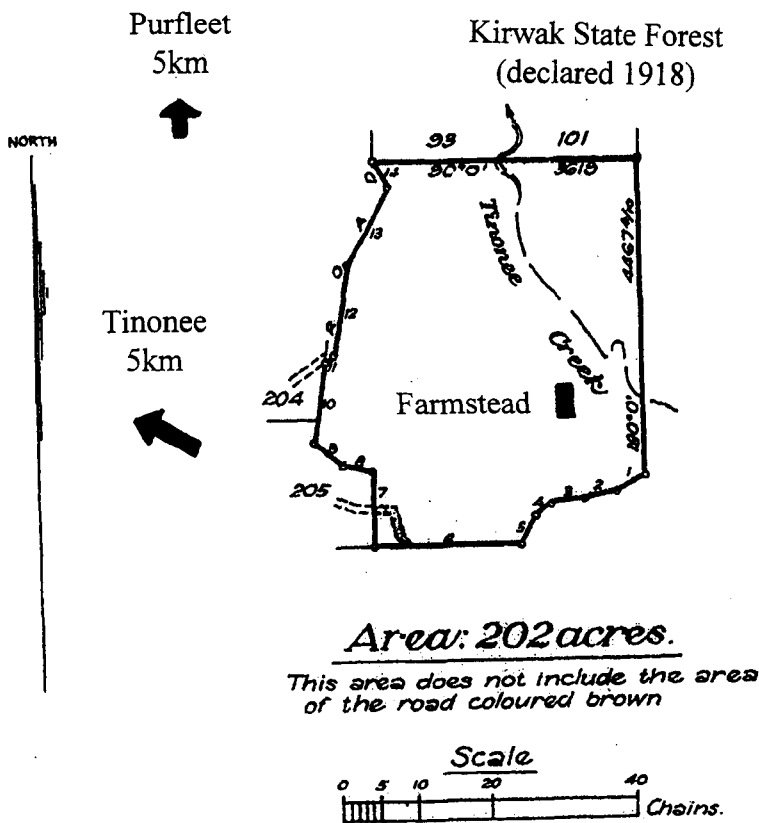
⁷⁶ *ibid*, 96.

⁷⁷ NC 22.09.1920.

⁷⁸ Birrell, *op cit*, 14.

bush had been cleared for grazing. Exceptions were made for inaccessible land, and areas that were poorly drained or unsuitable for commercial exploitation.

Map 3: THE SAWYER FARM



Map from DCLM Sydney G 4697/1497

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 21.

The Sawyers' farm was not in the richest or most fertile part of the Valley. A limited number of dairy and beef cattle could graze well enough, but it would be impossible to grow crops other than legumes on the sides of the gullies.⁸⁰ In the middle of the holding was the rough house that had been built in 1918 by a "working bee" of local men from Tinonee. Made of wooden slats and covered with a tin roof, the "shack" was a two-room cottage divided in the middle by a "galley" style kitchen with a camp stove.⁸¹ At various times over the next twenty years Ernest Sawyer battled with dairy farming, beef cattle, orange plantation and timber hauling. Dairy farming was the mainstay of his farm and the chief source of family income. Milking, morning and evening, every day of the year was done by hand, as electricity was not connected until after the 1939-1945 war. Two or three times a week the cream was taken down to the river where it was collected by the cream boat and transported to Wingham. Several acres of orange trees also helped to supplement the income, although none of the ventures ever proved highly successful.⁸² Soldier settlers in rural Australia were part of an army of hidden paupers of the "Roaring Twenties."

Technology, such as it was, "was little more than the iron age tools of ancient man. The axe, cross saw, and the bruch hook became the cultural symbols" of the selectors.⁸³ Timber felled in the surrounding bush was used to build the farmhouse, dairy sheds and fences, and provided the fuel for the stove or copper. The modern dairy — with Echelon Milking Stalls, automatic cream separator and an Elvery Milking Machine — remained outside Ernest Sawyer's grasp. His earning capacity was probably between £120 and £160 per annum, which meant that the new labour-saving devices would remain firmly in the advertisements in the *Northern Champion*.

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For the majority of Australian farmers the early 1920s were a time of prosperity. Between 1922 and 1923 prices for butter, meat, wheat and fruit rose. Prime Minister Stanley Bruce's imperial vision rested on the fecundity of rural Australia. "Australia,

⁸⁰ MB

⁸¹ ES

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ Maurice Ryan, *Norco 100: A Centenary History of Norco 1895-1995*, 8.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, cf 40.

the dominion, was to develop its resources in harmony with the needs of the Empire. It would send Britain foodstuffs and raw materials, and in turn would receive people, capital and manufacturers.”⁸⁵ In the Manning Valley, dairy farms extended further into the Manning hinterland and good prices encouraged growth up to 1927.⁸⁶ However, for the new farmers, the years of prosperity passed them by. During this time soldier farmers, including Sawyer, had obtained bank loans to acquire equipment and develop their farms, and were beginning to establish themselves. They needed several years of sustained good prices in order to get themselves into the market. The market stabilised in 1925, and started declining in 1926. Most new farmers were just becoming viable as the market stabilised.⁸⁷

Seventy four years later Sawyer’s second daughter (and third child) Vera, born in 1922 recalled, “it was tough.” Farming was difficult, and money scarce. Survival was assured through a combination of constant hard work, Minnie’s managerial skills, and the added income of child endowment.

Our monthly income was about £13. I can remember a cheque for £13 arriving once. Mum carried on like all her Christmases had come at once! We survived on my mother’s good management, her good cooking and the child endowment. Once the child endowment started, we lived on that. All the other money went to pay off the farm. We were poor, but I don’t think we were ever hungry. The rest of the family helped. Dad eventually paid off the farm in 1960. He was only paying £6 or £7 a time.⁸⁸

Child endowment came as a relief measure under Jack Lang’s 1927 *Family Endowment Act*. In order to help married couples with children, and encourage couples to have more children, an allowance of five shillings a week per child was allocated, to be paid in monthly instalments.⁸⁹ The benefit of this allowance to struggling families such as the Saywers was enormous, especially when the basic

⁸⁵ MacIntyre op cit, 203.

⁸⁶ Ramsland, op cit, 214-215; 218-219.

⁸⁷ MacIntyre, op cit, 208.

⁸⁸ VJ

⁸⁹ *Family Endowment Act* 1927, 12.1.

rural wage was officially set at £3/6/0, or eleven shillings per day.⁹⁰ For many, survival often became a matter of waiting for the next endowment cheque.⁹¹

Signs of encroaching modernisation in the Taree of the 1920s, and the veneer of prosperity, had a profound effect on the Sawyers as the perceived gulf between the “well off” in Taree and the struggling farmers of Tinonee grew. The Sawyers had little time or money for the pleasures of the new Picture Palaces; while such “luxuries” as a wireless and a motor car were simply beyond the family’s wildest dreams. The *Northern Champion* is a useful resource for noting the gradual modernisation of the Manning Valley. Automobile advertisements, for example, began appearing in early 1922. A Scripps-Booth motor could be purchased for £640.⁹² Ford began advertising their motors in 1924. Hems also began to rise in the 1920s, and Taree’s fashion conscious ladies could select from a wide range of new styles and accessories from the Parker, Connell Limited Commercial Emporium, while gentlemen could go to W Batger or Scotts for their suits. Freedom from pests in the house was also advertised in the form of insecticides such as “Fly-Tox” which would kill flies, mosquitoes and fleas.⁹³ Throughout the 1920s the level of consumer advertising rose steadily, however luxuries such as the latest footwear or automobile depended upon available cash or credit resources.⁹⁴ For the Sawyers, the advertisements in the *Northern Champion* were more reminders of their hardship and exclusion from the supposed prosperity of the time. Solidarity among other poor farming families around Tinonee and Mondrook gave some comfort, but the primary solace from the hardships of unrelenting struggle came from family, both immediate and extended.⁹⁵

The Sawyers lived amongst a family that extended across several villages and more than a few properties around Tinonee. Family ties were strong and remained strong as part of the social fabric of the area. Economics dictated that family groups supported one another, as well as the “extended families” that also composed the

⁹⁰ NC 26.10.1921.

⁹¹ VJ

⁹² NC 04.02.1922.

⁹³ NC 07.01.1928.

⁹⁴ NC 1920s passim.

tightly knit rural community. Tinonee, as with most rural communities in Australia during the inter-war years, experienced little if any movement. The drift to the cities came after the 1939-1945 war when the fundamental nature and direction of Australia's economy shifted from agriculture to industry. Consequently Tinonee remained a compact social unit, where people continued to live in close proximity to one another as they had done since the foundation of the village in the 1850s. This, in its turn, continued the pattern of social development and tradition that had been transported to the Manning Valley by the early settlers. In the small village world of Tinonee and the surrounding farms, people knew one another and their families with a great degree of familiarity. Life was governed by the cycles of the farming year and the celebration of "days of identity", such as Empire Day and Anzac Day, which linked the village with the broader Australian and Imperial context. Tinonee and rural Australia stood in marked contrast to the rapidly-changing environment of Sydney and urban Australia. The permanence and "quaint backwardness" of the bush and the brash new of the city is nowhere better typified than in Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*, and the stories of Dad and Dave, Mum and Mabel, the country bumpkins who cause hilarious uproar when they come to town.⁹⁶

Ernest Maxwell was the only son and second child of Ernest and Minnie Sawyer. He was born in Alice Gore Sawyer's "Cottage Hospital" in Tinonee, where many of the local women gave birth.⁹⁷ His childhood and adolescence was very much Australian and he was typical of many of the boys who later joined the Second Australian Imperial Force in 1939. Most came from working class or rural backgrounds and had grown up in stringent surroundings, often under the yoke of great hardship.⁹⁸ He grew up on the farm, and from all accounts was a lively and precocious boy who had a constant urge to take things apart and find out how they worked. He had a special liking for dismantling clocks, much to his mother's consternation.⁹⁹ Minnie's constant ill health meant that Max and his sisters often spent a lot of time in the care

⁹⁵ VJ; Letter: Jessie Sawyer to POS June 1996.

⁹⁶ Cf Steele Rudd, *On Our Selection and Our New Selection*.

⁹⁷ ES

⁹⁸ Barrett, *op cit*, 52-58.

⁹⁹ Jessie Sawyer, *op cit*.

of relatives. Max would often stay with his uncle Bill or uncle Henry and his cousins, Keith, Dallas and Eric.¹⁰⁰

Both sisters, Enid and Vera, and his cousin Jessie Sawyer remembered Max as a “lively boy, who loved company. He was a striking boy - very handsome. He had lots of friends.”¹⁰¹ A family photograph from around 1930 shows a young boy about ten years old, standing with his sisters and mother, with his father’s hand on his shoulder. Both Ernest and Minnie look worn, the after effects of continual sickness for Minnie, and the anxieties of the struggling farmer for her husband. Enid, the eldest, would have been about 16 at this time. Maturity had come quickly for her, as she was needed at home to help Minnie raise and care for the family, often taking charge when her mother was too sick or had to go to hospital.¹⁰² Vera, the youngest child, was about seven or eight when the photo was taken. Despite their hardships, all members of the family look well fed and well clothed. Minnie prided herself as not only a good cook, but an able seamstress, and Enid and Vera both recounted stories of their mother’s prowess with a needle and thread.

Mum was a great sewer. She made our clothes. I have a picture of Max and me at school, with the other children. I'm wearing the tunic made by mum, and Max is wearing a blazer, also made by mum. While Dad was away at war, mum brought a sewing machine. She was always sewing.¹⁰³

Ernest stands with his family, every inch the husband, father and provider, although he has aged markedly since the photographs taken in Egypt in 1917. There is a sense of pride in his family, along with an aura of great tiredness. By this time he was probably suffering from the stomach ulcers that eventually caused serious internal bleeding in 1934. An operation recommended by the doctors could only be performed in Sydney, so Ernest decided he would take the risks involved and undergo

¹⁰⁰ ES

¹⁰¹ VJ

¹⁰² ES

¹⁰³ VJ

surgery. He reasoned that “things couldn't be worse than how he felt before the operation.”¹⁰⁴

Standing behind his son, Ernest appears to be handing on to Max the virtues of Australian manhood. For his part, Max looks like the lively young boy of whom his sisters and cousin have spoken. Hair tousled, and already outgrowing his cardigan and shirt, the impression is one of a boy who can't wait for the photograph session to be over so he can return to chasing rabbits or go fishing with one of his cousins, with their faithful beagle in tow.¹⁰⁵ Max showed no great liking for the routine of the farm, and spent a great deal of time elsewhere with friends and cousins, or at his grandmother's hospital. There were many arguments between father and son, which could also explain Max's many absences from home.

Max went to school at Tinonee Public school, a five kilometre walk from the farm. In the late 1920s a bus service would collect the children and take them into the village. The Sawyer children either walked to school or were taken in a horsedrawn sulky.¹⁰⁶ From late 1931 a government travel subsidy of six pence per day was instituted for parents who were in a difficult “pecuniary position.”¹⁰⁷ Children who had completed primary school in Tinonee crossed the Manning River on the punt, and joined another bus into Taree to attend the secondary school, which had opened in February 1925.¹⁰⁸ Secondary education was considered unnecessary for Enid, even though she admitted that she loved learning, and it appears that once the precedent had been set neither Max or Vera went beyond the minimum education required. Yet the memory of school days was positive. Ernest Sawyer was a member of the Tinonee Parents and Citizens Committee (P&C) during the 1930s, serving on the executive for several years, and from 1936 to 1939 he was President of the P&C. Education was only one concern of the P&C. Reading the reports of Annual General Meetings, one notes that the P&C operated like a *de facto* village council, deliberating on roads, drainage, signs for the punt and building maintenance.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ ES, VJ

¹⁰⁵ MB

¹⁰⁶ ES

¹⁰⁷ NC 03.10.1931.

¹⁰⁸ Ramsland, op cit, 150.

¹⁰⁹ NC 22.03.1932; 11.03.1933; 31.03.1934; 21.09.1935; 04.03.1936; 27.03.1937; 19.03.1938; 01.03.1939.

Integral to the education process, as noted above, was the forming of the young into good and loyal citizens of Australia and the Empire. Days of national and imperial importance were celebrated with a semi-religious fervour. The flag was saluted daily, God was honoured, and the King hymned in “God Save the King.” All the virtues of imperial Anglo-Australia were contained in the celebrations that marked the nation’s belonging to the Empire. It had been almost impossible to escape the all-pervading political and social culture that shaped Anglo-Australian identity in the years before 1914. It was still impossible in the years after 1918. Enid, Max and Vera had before them the greatest example of imperial virtue – their soldier father, who embodied literally the nobility of Empire. They were taught of the great privilege it was to be members of the Empire, upon which the sun never set.¹¹⁰ Poverty and hardship could never take away their dignity as members of this great family of Dominions.

Empire Day in particular was a day of great moment. After the official Empire Day ceremony where the children would perform a tableau, play or sing patriotic songs and read essays on British themes, the games were held. In Tinonee, Empire Day games took place in the recreation grounds. The Tinonee celebrations in 1921 were recorded as involving the reading of speeches and essays, followed by lunch and games including “a pretty maypole display by several sets of boys and girls.”¹¹¹ For most the day was a lot of fun, although Enid Sawyer remembered it was “always a bit of an ordeal for me, because I wasn’t a very athletic person. There were all races and prize money...the mothers would bring cakes and sandwiches...we’d have a great old gorge up of all the lamingtons and cream puffs!”¹¹² Max was a regular winner of the long distance race around the recreation grounds, something his father would recall in letters when Max was a prisoner of war.¹¹³

At school Max was not “a brilliant scholar” but seemed to have enjoyed himself, most likely because he was with his friends. The “three Rs” were taught, and he developed a good hand in writing. Drawing was his favourite subject; he excelled in it, and he

¹¹⁰ ES

¹¹¹ NC 01.06.1921.

¹¹² ES

¹¹³ Letter EWS to EMS 13.06.1943.

had a talent for drawing caricatures of local identities.¹¹⁴ Ernest had a love of painting which Max also inherited. There were paintings by Ernest Sawyer on the walls of the house, and Ernest himself had earned some local fame by winning an art prize at the Nabiac show.¹¹⁵ The Sawyers' home was not a "peasant's cottage", there was an appreciation of art that was considered "normal" and which was handed on to the children. Alice Sawyer kept many of her son's paintings in her maternity hospital.¹¹⁶ Max grew up with a naive appreciation of art — a quality that was generally not considered particularly Australian in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹⁷

Rural Australia had experienced minor recessions throughout the 1920s. Seasonal employment, precarious at best, was already drying up in 1927. Australia's huge foreign debt, which had not been properly funded by taxation, had London bankers nervous as early as 1926. When the slump in demand for Australian primary produce hit in 1927, Prime Minister Bruce was "convinced that the country's difficulties were caused by agitators, and he was determined that they should be prevented from working their mischief."¹¹⁸ Accordingly, Bruce's solution was to tighten up the *Crimes Act* and revamp the Arbitration Court. The increasing industrial unrest and falling prices throughout 1928 was, for the Prime Minister, proof of undesirables, especially Communists, hard at work to destroy democracy. Since Australia's exports were 95per cent primary produce, as compared to Canada's 46.2per cent, when the depression finally hit with all its force in 1930, Australia's farmers reeled.¹¹⁹

It was like a great river flooding or changing its course, the way the Depression came - the insidious creeping movement of dark, strong, unpredictable forces, the flow of hidden currents, a clod falling and dissolving, a slide of earth, the cave-in of an entire bank, a sudden eddy swirling around a snag, tilting it over, sweeping it off into a black oblivion.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ ES

¹¹⁵ NC 03.05.1939; VJ; MB

¹¹⁶ VJ

¹¹⁷ Williams, op cit, 168.

¹¹⁸ MacIntyre, op cit, 24.

¹¹⁹ Williams, op cit, 190.

¹²⁰ George Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 152.

The Sawyers were caught. In debt, with low priced markets, lacking the financial and technological expertise to restructure, and without any options for occupation change in a time and region of high unemployment, Ernest Sawyer must have been tempted to walk off the land, an option many other soldier settlers had already chosen.

Max completed his schooling in about 1933, and began toiling in various capacities throughout his teenage years. He worked on a number of farms owned by helpful relatives, and on occasions manned the Tinonee punt. There was no talk of an apprenticeship or a trade. The Depression had hit the Manning Valley with a terrible ferocity, coming as it did only months after the worst floods in the Valley's recorded history.¹²¹ Work opportunities evaporated. In an article headed "Our Boys Leaving School", local identity "Hawkeye" commented in 1932 that the young men of the Manning Valley were facing a hard future. No longer could they depend upon the "easy living" that their parents had experienced during the 1920s. Solutions to the crisis would be stringent and tough. Hawkeye proposed

There are three main avenues of work - trade, industry and the land... close co-operation between primary and secondary industries is urgently needed to lessen this menace and this burden.

Fears of a growing class of non-labourers with no training and skills haunted Hawkeye, a reliable barometer of middle class sentiment in the Valley.¹²² Max, like many boys in the 1930s, faced an insecure future.

Prices for milk and butter tumbled, while cattle were sold for a fraction of their pre-1929 value. Ernest's first herd of saleable beef cattle was sold for £30 - a pittance. The hoped-for profit had been earmarked for interest repayment on the Repatriation loan. Instead, the Repatriation Board decided to ensure a continuation of repayments by taking half of every butter cheque.¹²³ Minnie was "often in tears with anxiety over where the next bob was coming from."¹²⁴ On a national level, wages had fallen, so that the basic wage at the end of 1929 was £4.2.6 for a married man with one child,

¹²¹ NC 13.02; 16.02.1929.

¹²² NC 07.05.1932.

¹²³ ES, VJ

and £2.4.6 for a single woman. Up to two shillings and six pence had been lost in wage cuts for men, and one shilling and six pence for women.¹²⁵ The basic wage remained low, reaching £3.10.0 for men in 1932, before dropping to £3.8.6 in 1935. The wage for women had dropped below the 1929 rate, to £1.17.0.¹²⁶ Farmers such as the Sawyers joined thousands of other Australians in the gut-wrenching anxiety that characterised the Depression years.

Attempting to gauge the extent to which the Depression effected the Manning Valley is difficult since the *Northern Champion* adopted an almost stoic resolve to see the hard times through. In the early 1930s the paper reported little direct news of the effects of the Depression in the Valley. Editorials were written bemoaning the economic state in which Australia now found herself, and offering public castigations of the Commonwealth Government for allowing the situation to arise in the first place.¹²⁷ As unemployment grew, the visible signs of hardship appeared. Young men seeking work around the local farms, businesses closing, wage cuts, dole reductions, the establishment of relief work in Taree and the hope at every year's end that the worst was over.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, the number of articles reporting difficulties was minimal.

A regular theme the *Northern Champion* expounded was putting the unemployed to work. Editorials challenged the community to pull together in a spirit of sacrifice and asked, "Is it a crime to work?"¹²⁹ When unemployment in Australia reached 300 000 in mid-1930, the editorial practically roared.

Here we are with a rich underdeveloped country, teeming with resources of almost every kind, with pressing work needing to be done

¹²⁴ ES

¹²⁵ NC 21.12.1929 The 1929 basic wage of £4.2.6 would be equivalent to approximately \$275 (1997). The basic wage (Federal Award) in 1997 was \$359.40. Figures are calculated from information provided by the Federal Department of Industrial Relations, 11.06.1997.

¹²⁶ NC 27.08.1932; 26.10.1935.

¹²⁷ NC 10.05; 08.12.1930; 23.05.1931.

¹²⁸ Cf NC 26.02.1930; 14.06.1930; 19.07.1930; 24.12.1930; 28.01.1931; 21.03.1931; 28.05.1932; 02.11.1932; 23.12.1931.

¹²⁹ NC 07.03; 23.05.1931

on every hand, and yet we are facing the gravest economic problem in the history of the Commonwealth.¹³⁰

This available army of workers needed to be used in order to rectify the damage done by the urban-based politicians who had neglected the country for so long. Australia's

best interests can only be served by concentrating on, and building up the rural industries and rural populations, and not by succouring industries that are parasitic; then the danger of unemployment will disappear.¹³¹

From the vantage point of the *Northern Champion*, the villains were the banks, greedy industrialists, capitalists and politicians. It was an affront to the dignity of the Australian worker that he should be idle when there was clearly so much work that could be done, especially on the farms. Australia's salvation would come from the one steady and reliable place it always had — the bush. These sentiments were supported vigorously by prominent identities such as Sydney's Catholic Archbishop, Michael Kelly.¹³² One suggestion to alleviate high unemployment among boys and young men, was a "Boys on Farm Scheme", mooted in 1933.¹³³ Feats of mental gymnastics were not unusual. While fully supporting the renovation of Australia's rural sector, the editor of the *Northern Champion* reached the conclusion that following the lead of England would solve Australia's economic problems. The nation that has "for so many years led the world", was "again on top" in March 1932.¹³⁴ Writing in the wake of the Ottawa Conference on Imperial Tariffs — where Australia had been given a guarantee on Imperial Preference, — and seeing the possible advantages for Manning Valley dairy products, this enthusiasm is somewhat understandable.¹³⁵

The family weathered the depression, largely because of the available supply of milk, butter and eggs, and the help of the Wynters, who kept a regular supply of vegetables

¹³⁰ NC 14.06.1930.

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² NC 27.02.1932.

¹³³ NC 21.01.1933.

¹³⁴ NC 14.11.1931; 12.03.1932.

going to Minnie's kitchen. On one occasion, two cousins from Sydney arrived at the farm. Both had failed to find jobs in Sydney and had taken to the road heading towards the country in search of work. One of the men was a plumber and survived by doing odd jobs around the various Sawyer and Wynter farms.¹³⁶

"Swaggies" would call at the farm looking for work or a meal. Many slept in the Tinonee recreation ground as they made their way around the villages of the Manning looking for a day's work.¹³⁷ The Recreation Ground on Beecher Street (Old Pacific Highway) was an ideal place for itinerant travellers as it lay on the Taree-Gloucester road. In 1997 little is left of the grounds from the 1930s except for a row of Norfolk Pines that line the Beecher Street side of the grounds.

An awareness of the outside world was found either in the bi-weekly *Northern Champion* or its sister paper, *The Manning River Times*. Both papers had a wide coverage of international and national news, ranging from intensive editorials on the future of Anglo-French relations to condemnations of all things German, including contemporary German music!¹³⁸ The xenophobic reaction to Germany lasted throughout the inter-war years stemming from the sense of loss caused by 60 000 war dead. This point was never grasped by the German Consul-Generals who worked in Australia between 1923 and 1939.¹³⁹

From the mid-1920s onwards there emerges a definite introspection. International news practically disappears from the *Northern Champion* until the mid-1930s. Local news and gossip took over from events outside the Valley; even news of national importance, such as the Referendum on Prohibition in September 1928, took second place to the details on broadcasting from Newcastle, "Radio in the Home."¹⁴⁰ In a neighbour's house, the Sawyers heard a wireless broadcast in 1927 when they listened to the Duke of York open the new Parliament House. A lasting memory of the day was hearing Dame Nellie Melba sing the National Anthem on the steps of the new

¹³⁵ NC 10.02; 13.02.1932.

¹³⁶ *ibid*

¹³⁷ ES

¹³⁸ NC 28.02.1920; 1922-1923 *passim*.

¹³⁹ See John McCarthy, "Australia and the German Consul Generals 1923-1939", in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 344-353.

¹⁴⁰ NC 01.09; 05.09.1928.

House. Throughout the 1930s events with varying degrees of importance across Australia and the world made their way into Tinonee. When Max was eleven, the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened.¹⁴¹ When he was sixteen, the December Abdication of Edward VIII rocked many peoples' notion of imperial stability. The *Northern Champion* reported that the King was abdicating "against the wishes of his people."¹⁴² Welcoming the reign of the new sovereign, George VI, the paper expressed the hope that stability and continuity would resume. An extensive coronation edition gave lavish details of the ceremony and its significance.¹⁴³

Perhaps the greatest event that shook Australia in the early 1930s was the Bodyline cricket furore of January 1933. Even Hitler had to take second place to a national preoccupation with winning the Ashes.¹⁴⁴ These events were portents of change; the world, previously seen at a distance through the medium of the newspaper, was increasingly more obvious through the wireless and film. One could hear the voices of people previously only read about in the papers as they spoke "live". On Christmas Day 1933 the people of Tinonee, and the rest of Australia, heard the voice of the King-Emperor, George V, in his first Christmas Broadcast.¹⁴⁵ News took on a more immediate nature. Events taking place in London, Berlin, and New York were seen within days in the newsreels at the local Taree picture palaces. The world beyond the valley was now not so far away.

Larger and more portentous events that would later have a major effect on Max's life hardly impinged upon the young man's life during this period. The more important task of getting work and finding some form of permanent employment took precedence over the rise of Mussolini or Hitler. Politics in the Manning Valley were more concerned with dairy and beef markets, the building of good roads, a new ferry/punt at Tinonee, or the increase in motor accidents.¹⁴⁶ One aspect of the Depression that found a political response was a move towards the conservative right, and a resultant hostility towards Jack Lang and the ALP.¹⁴⁷ Fear of poverty,

¹⁴¹ NC 23.03.1932.

¹⁴² NC 12.12.1936.

¹⁴³ NC 13.05.1937.

¹⁴⁴ Williams, op cit, 205-208; NC 18.01; 21.01; 25.01.1933.

¹⁴⁵ NC 13.01.1934.

¹⁴⁶ eg NC 13.01.1932; 27.05.1936.

¹⁴⁷ NC 30.01; 16.04; 28.05; 13.06.1932.

unemployment and communism prompted groups such as the *All for Australia League* to call for political and social reform. Regular reports detailed the misery of Soviet Russia.¹⁴⁸ The Depression had revealed a deep malaise within Australian society, and there was a clear need for remedial action.

Their objects, embracing national unity, balanced budgets and a return to the Anglo-Saxon virtues of thrift and self reliance, have been described aptly as more a set of moral injunctions than a blue print for economic action.¹⁴⁹

Ernest Sawyer sympathised with groups such as these. He would have agreed that the nation needed to get back to its founding values of hard work and self-respect, mateship and honesty. What his son thought about this we do not know; however it is safe to assume that amid the adolescent rebellion that characterised much of Max's teenage years, the "Anglo-Saxon virtues" were present.

In some Australian circles empathy for the National Socialists was voiced. A wife of a Melbourne University professor declared upon her return from a visit to Germany in 1934, "the ideology of the New Germany was clean-thinking, clean living, service to one's fellow man, and eradication of self-aggrandisement."¹⁵⁰ Hitler's labour service, which had removed thousands of young unemployed men from the streets and into quasi-military service, found appeal among many middle-class Australians who feared the great army of unemployed wandering the cities.¹⁵¹ The German-English weekly, *Die Brücke*, [The Bridge], endeavoured to present National Socialism "as a reasonable harmless, 'commonsense' middle-class ideology to which only communists and other 'misguided elements' could take exception."¹⁵²

It is highly unlikely that neither Ernest or Max Sawyer had ever heard of *Die Brücke*, and just as unlikely that they had any idea of National Socialism. However it is safe to assume that many of the ideas contained in *Die Brücke* would have found a

¹⁴⁸ eg NC 09.01; 05.03; 09.04; 23.07.1932; 11.04.1936; 20.03.1937.

¹⁴⁹ MacIntyre, op cit, 268.

¹⁵⁰ Cf John Perkins, "The Swastika Down Under: Nazi Activities in Australia 1933-1939", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26:113.

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

sympathetic hearing. Presenting National Socialism as logical, reasoned and desirable to middle Australia was the strategy of the Nazi movement in Australia; the more insidious elements, such as rampant antisemitism and racial hatred were down played or ignored altogether. Certainly the reports from Germany that appeared in the *Northern Champion* gave no great detail about life in the Third Reich and the military spectacular organised for Hitler's birthday in 1936 only rated a paragraph mention.¹⁵³ It was not until 1938 that regular reports from Germany were printed. Hitler's annexation of Austria, the Sudeten crisis and the famous Reichstag speech in January 1939 were reported with a growing sense of impending calamity.¹⁵⁴ Yet, despite the sense of impending gloom, Australia adopted a policy of appeasement towards the European dictators following the example of Britain.¹⁵⁵ In fact, Menzies remained convinced Hitler could be contained right up until the invasion of Poland.¹⁵⁶

Throughout the 1930s Australia continued its British-led foreign policy. Fortress Singapore was the lynchpin of Australia's defence strategy.

The Singapore strategy, with the construction of the naval base at Singapore and the attendant role of the Pacific dominions in imperial defence, dominated Australian thinking for most of the inter-war period.¹⁵⁷

As far back as 1921 Singapore had been chosen by the Imperial Government as the best site for a new Far Eastern naval base.¹⁵⁸ From Singapore a powerful British and Imperial fleet could defend India, Australia and New Zealand, and the colonial interests in Asia and the Pacific as well as "British trade in the whole of the area east of Suez."¹⁵⁹ However, the reality did not match the rhetoric, and no matter how loyal and faithful Australia was to Imperial policy, if the Australian Government continued

¹⁵² *ibid*, 125.

¹⁵³ *NC* 22.04.1936.

¹⁵⁴ *NC* 13.04; 21.09; 24.09; 28.09; 01.10; 05.10.1938; 01.02.1939.

¹⁵⁵ E.M. Andrews, "The Australian Government and Appeasement", in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 13, 34. The major dissenter in the Lyons Cabinet was Billy Hughes.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, 42.

¹⁵⁷ Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, 127.

¹⁵⁸ Ian Hammil, *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand 1919-1942*, 25.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*, 53.

to ignore the need to develop an independent defence strategy, she did so at her peril.¹⁶⁰

Japanese aggression during the 1931 Manchurian campaign and the later commencement of a full-scale war against China in 1937 reinforced the imperial strategic thinking in the minds of Australian politicians. Accompanying this went the traditional xenophobia towards Japan that had long been part of the country's psyche since the end of the Great War.¹⁶¹ Australia's best defence lay in dovetailing into the Imperial defence plan.¹⁶² The belief that Britain would be able and willing to defend the antipodean dominions blinded Australia's politicians to the reality of the growing power of Japan. However, as the situation in Europe deteriorated during 1939 and the threat of war loomed large, Australia continued to follow Britain in backing up assurances with respect to Polish sovereignty.¹⁶³ When Germany invaded Poland in the early hours of 1 September 1939, Australia waited to see what the British response would be. When Neville Chamberlain announced that Germany had refused to cease hostilities against Poland and Britain was therefore at war, Menzies didn't even wait for the Dominions Office to officially contact him before he announced that Australia too was at war. For Max Sawyer, the outbreak of hostilities opened up an opportunity that he would not be slow to grasp.

¹⁶⁰ John McCarthy, "Australian and Imperial Defence Co-operation and Conflict 1918-1939", in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 17, 25-28.

¹⁶¹ NC 05.02; 16.10.1921; 13.01.1934; 15.09.1937.

¹⁶² MacIntyre, op cit 305.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 325.

Chapter Five: Nulli Secundus

On 15 September 1939, twelve days after Australia declared herself “at war” with Germany, Prime Minister Robert Menzies called for a special force of 20 000 volunteers to assist Britain in the coming struggle.¹ Six days later New Zealand did the same. The Sixth Division was the first army formation of those that responded to the call.

Questions were raised in Parliament on 8 October as to the name to be applied to this volunteer force. Were these new recruits worthy successors to the Anzacs?² Evidently they were, and the new force was officially named the Second Australian Imperial Force in recognition that they were the successors to the First AIF. Initially, volunteers for the 2nd Battalion, 16th Brigade, 6th Division, 2nd AIF came from Newcastle, New England and the Northern Rivers Districts of New South Wales. Volunteers were ideally aged between 20 and 35 years, not less than 5’ 6” (195cm) tall, and not employed in any essential war industry.

On 24 October Max Sawyer enlisted in Newcastle, the closest recruiting centre to the Manning Valley, although it is highly probable that he made his first contact with the Army through the local Militia.³ Since he was not yet 21, he needed parental permission. This he got, apparently after some argument with both his mother and father. Max had been staying at his Uncle Harry’s property at Mondrook when war was declared. He went and got the papers that needed to be signed by one of his parents. Neither parent was keen to sign. Max argued with them and threatened to go to Queensland and lie about his age. Minnie, who was ill and in bed, eventually signed the papers, and said to her youngest daughter, Vera, “I’ll never see my son again.” Minnie’s health, never good, was getting progressively worse, and it was quite possible she knew she was dying.⁴

¹ *SMH* 16.09.1939.

² *SMH* 09.10.1939.

³ ES, VJ, and Beryl Sawyer. Hereafter, BS

⁴ ES, VJ

The 19 year old Sawyer was amongst the 69per cent of volunteers in the 2/2nd aged between 18 and 25.⁵ Max's reasons for enlistment most likely revolved around love of Australia and loyalty to the Empire⁶ and sense of duty: "We all thought it was the right thing to do."⁷ The young men of the 2/2nd appear to have been politically naive with little or no understanding of the issues that had led to the war or the competing ideologies of either side.⁸ Certainly none of them had any idea of the principles of Nazi racial policy, its implementation, or the objectives of the German conquest of Poland.

On the same day as Sawyer enlisted, Lieutenant Colonel George Wootten, a veteran of Gallipoli, established the Headquarters of the 2/2nd at Victoria Barracks, Paddington. Once established, Wootten — accompanied by Quartermaster Captain Dibbs, Lieutenant Black, and RSM Warrant Officer D Sanderson — went to Ingleburn to await the volunteers.

Max joined the 2/2nd agreeing to the terms of enlistment "for voluntary service in Australia or abroad for the duration of the war and twelve months thereafter unless lawfully discharged."⁹ Enlisted, Sawyer would have followed the standard military procedure of induction into Army life and culture. He signed the Attestation Form, and having been certified medically fit took the Oath of Allegiance to the King. He then made out his will, was given his Army number, NX 1488, the rank of Private, and was assigned to 15 Platoon of C Company under Captain W B Toohill, Lieutenant C H Green and Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer Harry Lovatt. The 2/2nd identification patch that Sawyer wore on his uniform was purple over green with a grey border to distinguish it from the militia patch.

Ingleburn Camp, situated about 3km south west of the Liverpool Camp where the 1st AIF had trained, was constructed in 35 days and by 16 November housed over 6 000 men learning to be soldiers "because the same enemy which had threatened

⁵ Margaret Bartar, *Far Above Battle*, 8.

⁶ MB

⁷ Leo Murnane, ex 2/2nd 03.07.1995 Hereafter LM.

⁸ Barrett, op cit, 125,135.

⁹ Bartar, op cit, 5.

civilisation then, would be menacing the world again.”¹⁰ Max arrived at Ingleburn on 6 November and began basic training. Among his comrades in the 2/2nd were

sleeper cutters and timber getters from the Dorrigo and cow cockies and banana growers from the Tweed. There were businessmen and tradesmen from the cities like Newcastle, Grafton and Armidale. There were station owners and station hands from the frosty New England. There were school teachers and bank clerks from practically anywhere and there was a sprinkling of plain hobos.¹¹

Parliamentary debates regarding the worthiness of the volunteers to bear the mantle of the Anzacs also played its part in the moulding of the identity of the 2/2nd. The sacred story of Gallipoli and the demands of the Battalion motto "Nulli Secundus" (Second to None) left a deep impression and sense of responsibility upon the individual soldier, a fact not overlooked by the CO at the first Battalion Parade on 25 November.¹² For the young Max Sawyer and his comrades, the 2/2nd gave him a clear identity. "A battalion is where a soldier belongs: it's his family, his home. He fights for its colours and wears them with pride."¹³

The new recruits were given several weeks of leave for Christmas to bid their families' farewell. While there is no record of Max attending a community celebration to wish good luck to the boys of the 2nd AIF, it is highly likely he was feted at some gathering, such as a hastily convened gathering at Wingham on 29 December. He would have heard sentiments of the kind expressed by the Rev L Ayscough and reported in the *Northern Champion* "The diggers had proved themselves men in the last war, and those who were offering their services on behalf of their country today would, he felt, do likewise."¹⁴

¹⁰ *Newcastle Morning Herald* 16.11.1939 Hereafter NMH.

¹¹ Stan Wicks, *Purple Over Green*, 6.

¹² AWM 52 8/3/2/ Box 1840 (Battalion War Diary) Hereafter WD.

¹³ Olwyn Green, *The Name's Still Charlie*, 23 Olwyn Green was the wife of Lieutenant Charles Hercules Green, NX121, one of the officers of C Company. In 1993 she published a biography of her husband, providing a valuable social history of the officers and men of the 2/2nd. It compliments the more analytical work of Margaret Bartar's *Far Above Battle*.

¹⁴ NC 10.01.1940.

The young soldiers were inundated with calls to emulate their fathers and grandfathers by upholding the Anzac tradition. At leave's end, the 2/2nd joined the rest of the 16th Brigade to march through Sydney on 4 January 1940. Marching eight abreast along Elizabeth Street, the sight caused the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter to wax eloquent: "...the long khaki clad columns thrilled the hearts of Sydney as it had not thrilled for a quarter of a century, since that spring day in 1914 when the first AIF marched through the same streets on its way to ANZAC and imperishable glory."¹⁵ The memory of 1914-1915 was everywhere.

On Tuesday 9 January Sawyer and his comrades boarded the train at Ingleburn for the city and thence to Pyrmont. The following day, amid cheering crowds, Max and the 2/2nd boarded the *Ontranto* and sailed out of Sydney Harbour. The men gathered at the rails of the ship and watched Sydney grow distant. "I remember going out on the ship and we could see the smoke from Bunnerong...we wondered if we'd ever see it again. That was the last thing we saw."¹⁶ Others pondered the enormity of it all: "We were just boys. We were mostly about 18. We were from the bush too. We didn't understand what we were up against."¹⁷ Max Sawyer would not see Australia for another five and a half years.

The voyage followed the regular Sydney-Suez route. From Sydney, the *Ontranto*, soon joined by troopships from New Zealand, made for Fremantle docking on 18 January. Sawyer wrote to his mother on 26 January from the ship as it sailed between Perth and Ceylon. He said he was having a good time, but added, "The only thing I'm annoyed about is that I never brought my sketching pens and ink etc. I have to use a fountain pen and the backs of envelopes."¹⁸ Unbeknown to Sawyer, his mother Minnie had died four days earlier. Her health had not been good for many years, and she had succumbed to bronchiectasis on 22 January. Her funeral was held on Wednesday, 31 January in the private Chapel of Mr T Howard before burial at Tinonee.¹⁹ Sawyer would not have learnt of his mother's death until after his arrival in the Middle East.

¹⁵ *SMH* 05.01.1940.

¹⁶ LM

¹⁷ Harry Bell, cx2/2nd, 03.07.1995 Hereafter HB

¹⁸ EWS to EMS 26.01.1940.

¹⁹ NC 31.01.1940 Minnie was buried in the Tinonee cemetery in an unmarked grave. Ernest was

A stop in Colombo on 30 January was memorable for an outbreak of gastro-enteritis.²⁰ From there the convoy sailed across the Indian Ocean, through the Gulf of Aden and into the Red Sea. Upon their arrival at Suez on 12 February the 2/2nd was greeted by Sir Anthony Eden, Secretary for the Dominions, Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador in Egypt, and General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East. After reading the King's message, Eden told the Australian and New Zealand troops that:

The issue is clear and simple. The German government seeks to dominate the world by brute force...There can be no real life for the peoples of the world until that system is destroyed. The nations of the British Commonwealth are now closely knit in one common endeavour. In that unity lies the certainty of final victory.²¹

To many of the Australian men, Eden's speech was the "usual bullshit" that all politicians were good at.²² To others, however, it was "inspiring" and serves to underscore the diversity of the 2nd AIF.²³ Having done with all the formalities of welcome, the Australian troops disembarked at El Kantara and entrained immediately for Gaza, while the New Zealanders went to join the British and South Africans near Cairo. Egyptian memories of Australian troops rampaging through Cairo during the last war were still fresh enough for the Egyptian Government to insist that the AIF be billeted outside of Egypt.²⁴ From Gaza, the troops moved on to El Majdal and then by bus to Julis camp. Julis camp was on the westside of a hill near an orange grove. It lay some twenty kilometres from Gaza and about eighty kilometres from Jerusalem. It had been the base camp for the Black Watch, most of whom had been withdrawn to Britain.

From the top of the hill you could look down a wide valley dotted mainly with Arab villages and more orange groves...In the north-west

unable to afford a headstone. In 1997 there is no trace of her final resting-place.

²⁰ WD 30.01.1940.

²¹ WD 12.02.1940.

²² Jack Sawby, cx2/2nd 07.07.1995 Hereafter JS.

²³ Richard Roberts, *Frontline: The World War II Diaries of Richard L. Roberts*, 14.

part of the valley a series of white dots were the cottages of the Jewish village of Gan Yavne...To the east reared up the gaunt Judean mountains in whose foothills they [the 2/2nd] were spend much time on 'doovers' (military exercises). Away to the west was the sparkling blue Mediterranean.²⁵

On 20 February the 2/2nd was declared "on Active Service."²⁶

The arrival of so many young Australian men in Palestine proved something of an event. The young soldiers, the vast majority of whom had never travelled outside of their local area, were confronted by the strangeness of a new world. Sightseeing around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem was an introduction to cultures, religions and politics beyond anything with which Max was familiar. He went sightseeing in Jerusalem with Jack Sawby whom he had met aboard the *Ontranto*. They visited the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other tourist places, as well as local bars.²⁷

Generally, the Jews and Arabs liked Australians equally. The "wogs" were not slow to offer hospitality in traditional Middle Eastern ways. An abundance of fresh fruit, the vast array of trinkets, bazaars, and ancient memorabilia made many handsome profits for both Jewish and Arab traders.²⁸ Australian egalitarianism was a marked change from British class-consciousness. In any case, the Australians were not permanent: "Menzie's" tourists" had a job to do.

Australian-English relations were often strained. British officers believed that the Australians lacked discipline and found it hard to understand the relationship that Diggers enjoyed with their officers.²⁹ Australians often felt English soldiers, especially the officers, who referred to them as "bloody colonials", treated them with condescension. This attitude resulted in at least one brawl where Max Sawyer and Jack Sawby had paid for two "shouts" of beer only to have some English soldiers

²⁴ Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War 1939-1945*, 45-46.

²⁵ Green, op cit, 45.

²⁶ WD 20.02.1940.

²⁷ JS

²⁸ Wicks, 28 and passim.

refuse to take their turn. The ensuing fight begun by an English soldier (according to Sawby) escalated from a two-man punch-up into an all-out riot. Sawby and Sawyer managed to extricate themselves and they got out of the melee, watching the spectacle from a safe distance before the military police arrived.³⁰ “English soldier” is used deliberately as Australians tended to be more comfortable with the Scottish soldiers.³¹

Sawyer’s record shows that he kept out of serious trouble. He was reprimanded and fined for several small offences that warranted attention because of the “Active Service” regulations. On 8 May 1940, he caused a “disturbance after lights out” in Gaza; on 3 November he “failed to carry out kitchen fatigue duties” and on 2 December he “failed to appear at a place of parade appointed by the C/O.”³² Max’s behaviour was hardly outrageous for a 20 year old. According to former members of the 2/2nd Max was held in high regard:

he was a pretty good bloke, I'll be quite truthful and we got on pretty well.

We were on leave a couple of times together. He wasn't frightened of much.

We were all frightened, but I mean, you know, he done the job he had to do.

That was it...Yes, he was a good soldier.³³

Another man remembered Max as “a quiet, reserved fellow...a man who kept to himself, but he had his own opinions on everything...Max seemed to be the ideal sort of a fellow who could look after himself.”³⁴

Connections with the past were not forgotten. On Anzac Day 1940, 500 men from all ranks of the 2/2nd participated in a Remembrance Ceremony at the Australian War Cemetery in Gaza, where 100 Australians who had died during Allenby’s campaign of October 1917 were buried.

²⁹ Mark Johnston, *At the Frontline*, 70-72.

³⁰ JS

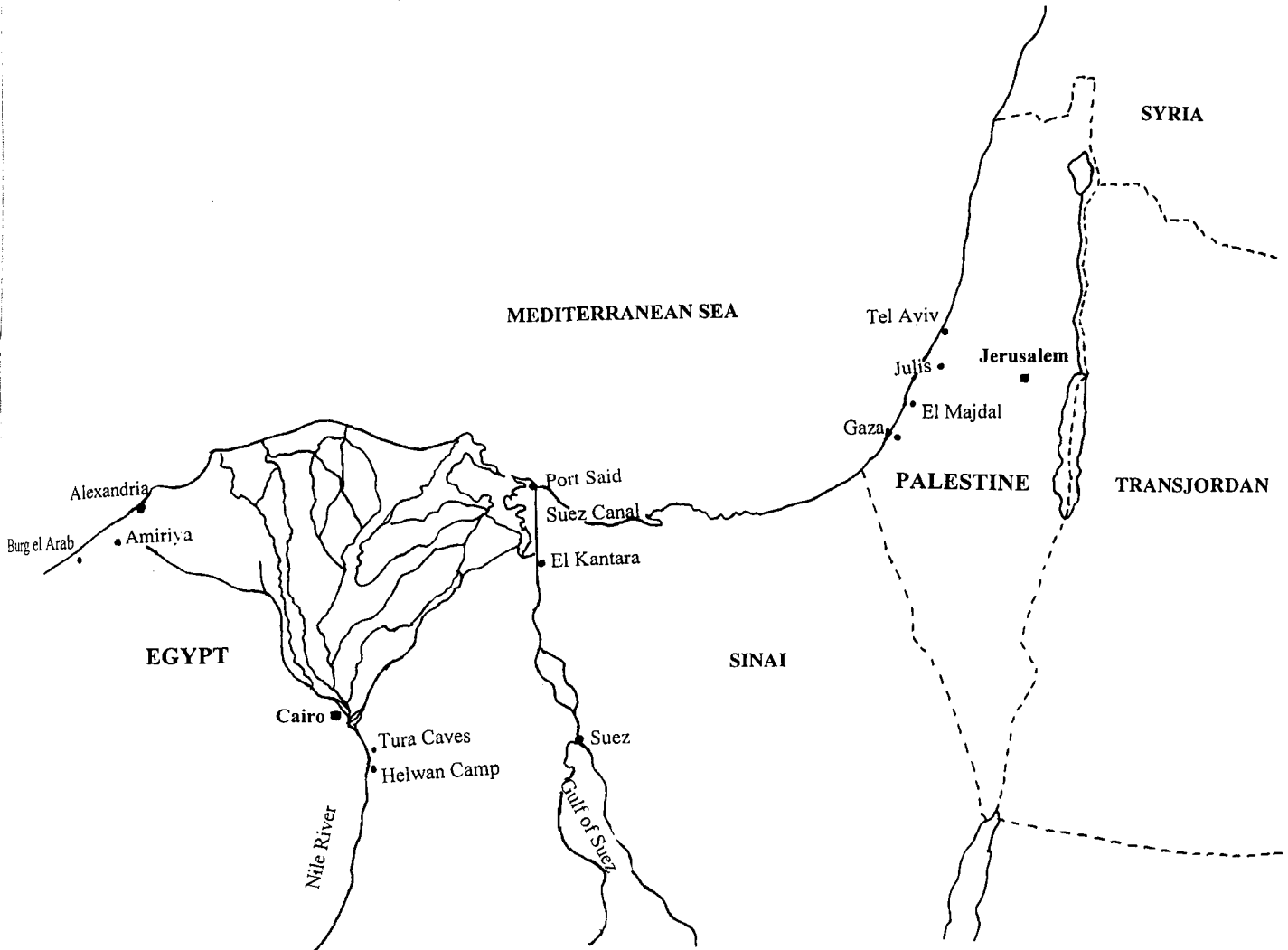
³¹ *ibid*

³² Ernest Max Sawyer, *Service Record*, Central Army Records Office NX 1488. Hereafter CARO

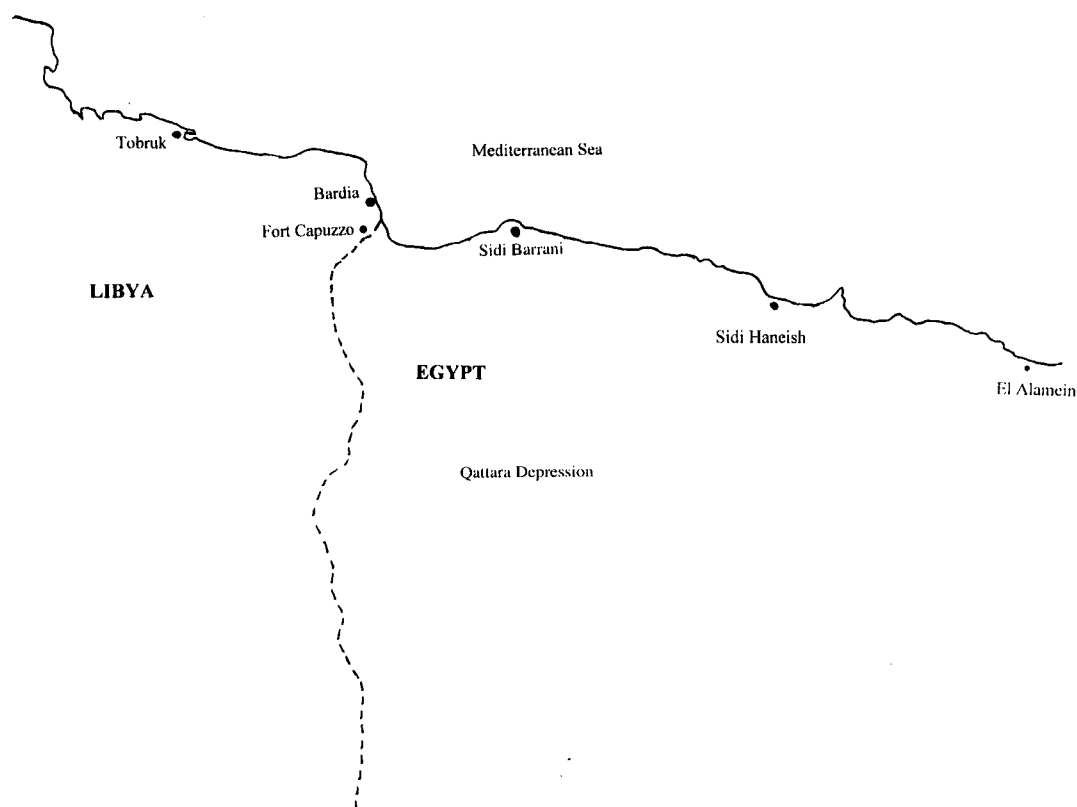
³³ JS

³⁴ HB

Map 4: EGYPT-PALESTINE 1940



Map 5: THE WESTERN DESERT 1940-1941



In Europe the conflict was becoming known as the “phoney war”, and there was a concern voiced by some Australians that it “wasn’t going to last long.”³⁵ Sawyer and his companions spent six months in battle preparation. Based at Julis near Tel Aviv, the 2/2nd trained in the desert landscapes of the Hebron Hills throughout April. In that month the Bren gun was introduced, replacing the bulky and heavy Lewis gun.³⁶ Mussolini declared war on France and thus Britain on 10 June 1940. The situation in Palestine changed.

We were now close to the very close to the Front line and we began to be raided from the air. The whole country was blacked out at night with only the faintest lights allowed on travelling vehicles. Tents, formerly in neat lines were now scattered over a wide area, camouflaged with mud and dug in.³⁷

³⁵ JS

³⁶ Roberts, *op cit*, 19.

³⁷ Arch McLellan in Wicks, *op cit*, 35.

The 2/2nd was transferred to Helwan Camp, 24 km south of Cairo on 2 September just prior to the Italian offensive against Egypt which began on 13 September. In Cairo, excitement had run high among nationalist anti-British Egyptians for most of 1940. The prospect of invasion by Italy positively cheered men such as the young Anwar Sadat, and Aziz el Masri Pasha “who hated the British and admired the Germans.”³⁸ Sawyer and C Company were assigned to the Tura Caves to guard ammunition dumps. Meanwhile, Anthony Eden made another visit to the Australian troops, earning a caustic comment in the diary of Major H C D Marshall: “I hate these affairs which are so stupid, unnecessary and boring and the preparations are in reverse ratio to the time he spends looking.”³⁹ Australian soldiers preferred to “get on with the job” rather than polish boots in order to please politicians.

In October 1940 the 2/2nd were moved again, this time to Ikingi Maryut (Amiriya), 25 km from Alexandria. “Amiriya was a dirty, rocky, deserted piece of ground perhaps four or five miles from the sea as the crow flies. Apart from a few lonely buildings it had no amenities whatsoever and was on the direct flight path of the Italian Bombers who made regular sorties against Alexandria.”⁴⁰ Max spent his time guarding aerodromes, camps, and other installations at Burg el Arab, Bahig and Gharbinivat. Frequent Italian air attacks gave Max and his comrades an early taste of war. Conditions were primitive, and as winter drew near, the biting cold added to the misery caused by *khamisin*, sandstorms that frequently whipped across the desert. However morale was maintained with the expectation that a confrontation with the Italians was imminent.

At the end of November 1940, Lieutenant Colonel Wootten was promoted to the Reinforcement Depot and Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Chilton filled his position.⁴¹ It was Chilton who ordered the 2/2nd into battle readiness in December. Heading towards Bardia by train, the 2/2nd arrived at Sidi Haneish on 11 December reaching the Front on 19 December. Desert warfare brought with it the added difficulty of

³⁸ Cooper, op cit, 46-56.

³⁹ AWM 54 255/4/12 Diary of Major HCD Marshall, 63.

⁴⁰ Roberts, op cit, 27.

⁴¹ Bartar, op cit, 44.

water scarcity. Each man was given two pints of water a day for all his needs.⁴² Conditions were made worse with bitter cold and freezing desert storms.

Max had his first experience of battle on 3 January 1941 in the attack and capture of Bardia. Once the town had fallen on 5 January, the 2/2nd was ordered to head to Tobruk, which was seized in twenty three hours on 17 January with some 70 000 Italians taken prisoner. The effect on the young soldiers was a mix of exhilaration at victory, and the trauma of witnessing the deaths of comrades.⁴³ Johnston describes in general terms the young soldiers' first taste of war; it could well apply to Max.

All around him the soldier saw the inadequacy of others' efforts to dodge bombs, bullets and shells while simultaneously fulfilling their tactical role. The novice might be protected by his naivety about war, as Private Hackshaw's account of Bardia shows. "When we were moving forward we saw our first dead men, a couple of them had been left where they were with blankets over them. It was a fairly cold morning, and someone said in all innocence 'I bet they're cold sleeping out there.'"⁴⁴

Gerster adds to this observation by claiming the Australian soldiers felt a certain relief that they had come through their first battle campaign, and "had emerged from under the shadow of their fathers' reputation and had begun to build one of their own..."⁴⁵ Max sent his grandmother, Alice Gore Sawyer, a postcard from Bardia with the greeting: "Dear Grandma, just a little souvenir from Bardia, Libya. Love from your grandson."⁴⁶

Debate has surrounded the victories of January 1941, with some claiming Italian demoralisation as a greater factor in the battle than Australian courage and tenacity. Grey contends that:

⁴² JS

⁴³ Bartar, op cit, 59-66.

⁴⁴ Johnston, op cit, 18.

⁴⁵ Robin Gerster, *Big Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*, 178.

⁴⁶ EMS to Alice Gore Sawyer, January 1941.

These early actions were significant for other reasons. Success was important psychologically, for it confirmed in the minds of the troops that they were worthy successors to the old AIF, and had passed the test which they had set themselves.⁴⁷

In any case, the battles of the Libyan Desert were hard-won, if for nothing else than the environment – hot days, freezing nights, scarce water supplies and the omnipresent sand. There was no time to grieve for the fallen; the men were ordered to keep going.

You know when the Battle is raging and you are advancing and there is dead and dying all around you, you grit your teeth and don't stop. You know the stretcher-bearers are not far behind and you try to close your mind to the awful wounds, anguish and terrified cries and carry on, right now it gets to you!⁴⁸

January 1941 shattered any pre-conceived notions and ideas of war being “a sporting contest.”⁴⁹ Sawyer and his mates had formed solid bonds of interdependency, a major support both during and after battle.⁵⁰ Sobered by the experiences of three weeks battle they returned to Alexandria, where they received a visit from Prime Minister Menzies.⁵¹

The few photographs of Sawyer from the war years show a handsome young man, physically fit and healthy. One photo was taken somewhere in the desert, possibly in Palestine in 1940. Sitting smoking on sandbags, Max runs his hand through his hair looking out across the desert. The photo is titled “90 miles from nowhere.” Better than any letter, this photo depicts the sense of loneliness and homesickness felt by

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Grey, op cit, 153.

⁴⁸ Roberts, op cit, 44.

⁴⁹ Barta, op cit, 77.

⁵⁰ Johnston, op cit, 87-88.

⁵¹ WD 08.02.1941.

Max and many other Australians. Irregular mail deliveries and lack of news from home were constant trials for the men.⁵²

During 1940 Hitler had conquered Western Europe, kept Britain at bay despite the failure of Operation Sea Lion, and already instituted brutal measures against the civilian population of Poland, especially the Jews. Italy, wishing to prove herself militarily, had invaded Greece on 29 October 1940 from Albania. Mussolini's hopes for a quick victory were shattered by some heroic Greek resistance: although 300 000 Italian troops with 500 tanks and 300 aircraft outnumbered the Greeks 4 to 1. Fearing a threat to plans already in motion for Operation Barbarossa, Hitler moved to pacify the Balkans and Greece. Britain planned an Allied expeditionary force to assist the Greeks and attempt to protect access across the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and Palestine.

By March 1941, it was clear that Hitler would most likely invade Greece. To prevent the collapse of Greece, an order was given by Churchill to move Allied troops from Egypt to Greece. Athens appealed for nine divisions with air support, but Sir Archibald Wavell had too few troops from which to create an army to defend Greece. "In total [Wavell] counted only just more than 11 divisions" and with this he was expected to defend Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and supply troops for Greece.⁵³ The German force preparing for Greece was the Twelfth Army under Field Marshall Wilhelm von List. Under his command were the XI, XIV, XVIII, XXX, XL and L Army Corps, the 6th Infantry Division, two Mountain Divisions, four Panzer Divisions, the *SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, and the 125th Infantry Regiment.⁵⁴ Supporting the ground troops was a combined German-Italian airforce of over 1000 planes.⁵⁵

The Greek plan of defence originally rested on the Metaxas-Macedonian line stretching across the far north east of the country, which the Germans considered little

⁵² Collection of Beryl Sawyer.

⁵³ John Laffin, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 15.

⁵⁴ Ringel and Sturm, "Supplement to the Study 'The Balkan Campaign'" in *World War II German Military Studies*, Volume 13 Part IV.

⁵⁵ Green, *op cit*, 84.

more than “a counterfeit of the Maginot Line”, hardly a serious threat.⁵⁶ However, since Yugoslavia could not be relied upon to join with Greece, a second position was prepared at the Aliakmon-Olympus line, some 50-70 km southwest of Salonika.

The Aliakmon Line, high above the plain of Salonika, was a powerful position with only restricted lines of approach available to the enemy. But many troops would be needed to hold it; moreover, the northern flank could be turned if the Germans advance through Yugoslavia and into Greece through the Monastir Gap and this behind the Aliakmon Line. The Greeks expected the Yugoslavs to fight if invaded, and hoped that the Wehrmacht's entry into Greece would be slow and painful.⁵⁷

No matter how promising the natural defences of Greece were, there was no denying that the material needed to engage in a modern war was lacking; military equipment was inferior or close to obsolete, railways were of poor quality, coal was in short supply, and roads necessary to speed troops into battle were often little more than mule tracks. Indeed, the main road from Larissa to the Aliakmon Line “was roughly 200 kilometres over switchback mountain roads, most of which were unpaved, icy metallic nightmares.”⁵⁸ Menzies met with Churchill and the War Cabinet in London in 24 February 1941 and gave a reluctant “Yes” to the AIF’s involvement in what he saw as a significant risk with no surety of a successful campaign.⁵⁹ Menzies claimed that his primary purpose in meeting Churchill was to obtain guarantees for the strengthening of Singapore.⁶⁰

Australian troops were suddenly ordered to barracks in Alexandria on 17 March 1941. No secret was made of the order to prepare for departure. While the troops may not have known their destination, the local people had no doubts. “It is a well-known fact that if one wants to know where he is bound for, all you have to do is to ask a wog

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁷ Laffin, *op cit.*, 17.

⁵⁸ Robin Higham, “British Intervention in Greece 1940-1941: The Anatomy of a Grand Deception”, in *Balkan Studies*, 23.118.

⁵⁹ D F Woodward, “Australian Diplomacy With Regard to the Greek Campaign, February-March 1941”, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 24, 218-219.

⁶⁰ Robert Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, 20.

about a week before you leave.”⁶¹ The 2/2nd sailed for Greece on 18 March aboard the *SS Bankura*, whose captain had been expecting a cargo of mules, not soldiers!⁶² The *Bankura* was “a dejected and untidy vessel of about 7000 tons...late of the Gulf run, Basra to Bombay.”⁶³ Aboard ship, the men were briefed in vague terms about the campaign as well as being warned about the dangers of Greek liquor, prostitutes, and fifth columnists. Despite being attacked by Italian fighters, the ship reached its “secret destination”, Pireaus, at 1620 hours on 22 March.⁶⁴ Observing the disembarkation of the Australian troops were members of the German Legation who openly made notes about arriving troops. Germany was still not officially at war with Greece.

The contrast between dry and sandy Egypt and fertile, tree-shrouded Greece left many of the Australians homesick.

As their ships steamed into the gulf towards Pireaus the shores seemed to the New South Welshmen strangely like home - the hard light, the grey-green trees clothing steep hills and the clear water evoked memories of Australian ports. It was stranger still to find themselves among a friendly people, who cheered them and threw flowers as their trucks drove along the streets to the staging camp at Daphni. For the first time since they reached the Middle East, these men were on the soil of a people who genuinely welcomed them, and in a land as green and pleasant as their own.⁶⁵

Waking on the following morning, the Battalion diarist wrote: “Battalion awoke 23rd to find itself in a wood that which might have come out of ‘A Midsummer's Night Dream.’ After months of Amiriya, Bagoosh, Bardia and Tobruk it was a great pleasure to be under green pines, on green grass and with the prospect of leave in Athens.”⁶⁶ After more warnings about venereal disease, “Liberal leaves” were granted, and the Australians headed off to Athens. Just as Palestine was a new world

⁶¹ Vic Solomon in Wicks, op cit, 90.

⁶² WD 18.03.1941.

⁶³ Roberts, op cit, 101.

⁶⁴ WD 22.03.1941.

⁶⁵ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete, Syria in Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Series One, Army. 31.

⁶⁶ WD 23.03.1941.

for Max, so too was Greece. The pictures of Australian soldiers standing atop the Acropolis before the Parthenon highlight the meeting of two very different cultures.

Map 6: GREECE — MARCH-APRIL 1941



Despite objections from Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey and the Australian Defence Department secretary Sir Frederick Shedden, Australian troops were to be placed under the British Command of Wavell. Known as “W Force” and codenamed “Lustre”, the Expeditionary Force was made up of the AIF 6th Division under Major General Iven MacKay, the New Zealand Division under Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg, and the British 1st Armoured Brigade under Brigadier H V S Charrington. Blamey was appointed Commander of the Australians and New Zealanders under the designation of the First Australian Corps.

From Athens, on March 26 and 27, the 2/2nd was ordered to proceed north with New Zealand troops. “Crammed into freight wagons like sheep” the soldiers travelled by train through the Greek countryside.⁶⁷ The weather was cold and snow was still falling on the mountains. On April 2, the 2/2nd arrived at Servia and on April 4 were in position at Veria Pass. Alongside the Australians and New Zealanders were not the expected well-trained troops from Macedonia, but poor quality reservist soldiers who were ill-equipped to face the Germans.⁶⁸ Charrington described the Greek 19th Motorised Division as “just over 2 000 untrained and recently enlisted garage hands.”⁶⁹ Such was the appalling state of many Greek units that, instead of guns, they had piles of stones ready to push down on advancing Germans. Blamey’s special Order of the Day attempted to build confidence.

In Australia we know little of this valiant nation. I am sure that as you get to know the Greeks, the magnificent courage of their resistance will impress you more and more.⁷⁰

For most Australians, their admiration of the Greek’s courage was dimmed by the sober truth of their military inferiority.⁷¹ Nonetheless, the general sentiment was that the Greeks “lacked arms but not guts”, a sentiment later shared by the German troops.⁷² Two days later on 6 April, Germany invaded Greece from Yugoslavia.

⁶⁷ WD 28.03.1941; Cf. Bartar, op cit, 83.

⁶⁸ WD 06.04.1941.

⁶⁹ Laffin, op cit, 20.

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ JS

For the Allies, the war was becoming an epic disaster. In North Africa, Rommel had reversed the earlier victories and was charging across Libya towards Tobruk with his eyes firmly fixed on Egypt. Germany had all but crushed Yugoslavia, and looked set to do the same in Greece.⁷³ The 2/2nd were in the Front line at the Veria Pass, untrained and unprepared for a mountain war, with many men seeing snow for the first time.⁷⁴ In this difficult terrain, with limited supplies and overstretched supply and communication lines, the Battalion faced the German 9th Panzer Division and the *SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. The German attack was so swift that the men defending Veria Pass were ordered to evacuate immediately and destroy anything that could not be carried. The ensuing destruction resulted in Veria Pass being nicknamed "Panic Mountain."⁷⁵ Outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, the 2/2nd was ordered to withdraw to the Aliakmon Line. On 9 April the men retreated. As they marched out of Veria, snow fell and news arrived detailing the fall of Macedonia.⁷⁶

Thessalonika surrendered on 8 April. The remainder of the Greek armies was collapsing rapidly and the Allied forces were beginning to fall back with increasing disorder. Poor weather made a *blitzkrieg* difficult, and gave the 2/2nd time to withdraw to the Aliakmon Line. Pack mules carried equipment and weapons across the rugged hill country.⁷⁷ Heading towards Mount Olympus the 2/2nd battled heavy snow.⁷⁸ The conditions the men endured were in a total contrast to the deserts of North Africa. "During the whole of the period here, the men suffered much from fatigue, wet and cold, and lack of proper hot meals. Apart from getting up supplies, there was much work in preparing positions, patrolling and c.[sic] However, the morale and cheerfulness of all ranks was superb."⁷⁹

On Good Friday 11 April the order was given to destroy all surplus equipment except blankets and a limited amount of ammunition. Lieutenant Ralph Holroyd gave orders to cook up all the rations and give the men a solid meal. While waiting for the order

⁷² Barrett, op cit, 305; Ringel and Sturm, op cit, 11.

⁷³ Martin Gilbert, *Second World War*, 165, 169. Hereafter Gilbert 1989.

⁷⁴ Higham, op cit, 119; I S O Playfair, "The Germans come to the help of their Ally", Volume II of *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, 84.

⁷⁵ Green, op cit, 92.

⁷⁶ Batar, op cit, 86.

⁷⁷ WD 07.04.1941.

⁷⁸ WD 11.04.1941.

⁷⁹ WD 08-12.04.1941.

to withdraw, Max Sawyer, Jack Bailey, Bill Donnelly and Ted Edwards started a snow fight. “What fun we had. There were the Huns trying to demoralise us.”⁸⁰ After the snow fight came the news that the German advance necessitated an evacuation to Velvendos. The march was an “epic of endurance” according to the CO of the Battalion, Chilton.

It had been a gruelling march even for men hardened by months of severe campaigning and they themselves were surprised they had been able to endure it. In spite of fatigue, heavy going in mud and snow, and ice covered slopes so steep that men and donkeys slipped and fell, no equipment had been lost and there were few stragglers...⁸¹

The 2/2nd passed the rearguard position of Leventes by 0600 hours on 13 April and crossed the Aliakmon River by noon using a punt. After the last troops crossed, the punt was sunk. It was not until mid-afternoon of 13 April that the 2/2nd reached Velvendos and safety. It had taken two days to negotiate the 34 miles between Veria and Velvendos.⁸²

Between 13 and 15 April the 2/2nd, along with the 2/3rd and the 6th New Zealand Brigade, fought off German attacks at Servia Pass near the village of Moshkhokhori. The fighting took place in pine forests that grew alongside the Aliakmon River. The 2/2nd destroyed bridges and kept ahead of the Germans, the poor communications between British and Greek commanders had grown worse. Allied troops on the Front line were often without clear instructions, and as the German advance swung west towards Grevena the military situation became grave. The Germans planned to take Grevena, thus attempting to take the town of Larissa by sweeping down the valley. The 2/2nd and other Allied troops in the mountains would be cut off from the Athens road.⁸³ B, C, and HQ Companies were sent to Moshkhokhori, presumably as part of the defence plans. On 12 April Blamey renamed the 1st Australia Corps, the Anzac

⁸⁰ RSM Walters in Bartar, op.cit 86-87.

⁸¹ Long, op cit, 74; WD 13.04.1941.

⁸² WD, ibid

⁸³ Long, op cit, 79.

corps in recognition of the greatly admired New Zealanders and as a boost to morale.⁸⁴

Increasing pressure was applied to the Anzac Corps as the Germans captured Kilsoura Pass. Luftwaffe strafing harassed retreating troops whose evacuation was now hampered by the thousands of fleeing Greek troops. On 15 April General Wilson ordered a “retirement” to Thermopylae, thus withdrawing all Allied troops from Greece north of the Peloponese except the peninsula between Lamia and Athens. For many the “retirement” to Thermopylae meant covering close to 100 miles.⁸⁵ At the time of General Wilson’s order, barely one half of the Allied forces had arrived in Greece.

The 2/2nd took up its position at the village of Moshkhokori. Hungry and tired, constantly wet because of the snow and unremitting cold, the men then moved to Hill 1628, south east of the village. Heading towards them were the vastly superior German forces, who kept up a heavy barrage on Australian positions.⁸⁶ One hundred and fifty tanks, five infantry battalions, and three and a half artillery regiments accompanied the 6th Mountain Division, the 3rd Armoured Regiment, and the 112th Reconnaissance Unit; the 2/2nd and the other Anzac forces were hopelessly outnumbered.⁸⁷ Communication for the Australians was via mule since there was a shortage of telephone cable. The evacuation order given by General Wilson arrived during the day on 15 April the same day as nearly 400 Germans from the 9th Panzer Division were captured by New Zealand troops.

A day later, the Germans attacked Servia Pass. To the west, the *SS Liebstandarte* took Kastoria and the Grevena road thus cutting communications between the retreating Greek armies in Central Greece and the Greek forces retreating from eastern Albania. Yugoslavia’s surrender on 17 April meant more German troops could be dispatched to Greece. For the men of the 2/2nd the withdrawal had become more like a rout. Brigadier Allenby ordered the 2/2nd to move from Moshkhokori towards Larissa and hold the Pinios Gorge in order to allow the evacuation of Allied

⁸⁴ Laffin, op cit, 29-30.

⁸⁵ Playfair, op cit, 90.

⁸⁶ WD 15.04.1941.

troops from eastern Greece. The 2/2nd took up positions overlooking the Pinios River in the Tempe Gorge.⁸⁸ Once established in the Gorge, the task set the 2/2nd was to prevent German tanks entering the Gorge.

“Tempe Gorge, dotted with ‘beautiful trees and millions of wildflowers’, did not impress commanders as a suitable place of battle.”⁸⁹ It was totally unsuitable for modern mechanised warfare. From the slopes of the Gorge the men had grandstand-like views of the river and the road along which the Germans would come. Weapon pits were dug, but instead of land mines, troops used naval depth charges. German troops were reported only five miles away in the village of Gonnos to the west and had also been seen to the east. The Australians faced encirclement. Meanwhile, Servia had been completely evacuated and Churchill had approved the order for the abandonment of Greece and a withdrawal to Crete. Papagos, the Commander in Chief of the Greek Army had already asked the Allied leadership, on 16 April, to withdraw from Greece “in order to save the country from devastation.”⁹⁰ A temporary defence line was to be established at Thermopylae, well south of Tempe.⁹¹

Increasing German artillery barrages throughout 18 April accompanied by the forced retreat of New Zealand troops by German tanks from the 2nd Panzer Division supported by the 6th Mountain Division entering the Gorge, meant that the position of the 2/2nd was extremely vulnerable. The German advance had been slowed through blocking the railway tunnel with “collided and blown up railway cars.”⁹² The Germans had only been slowed down; their sheer weight of numbers meant that the delay would only be temporary.

By 1400 the full weight of the main German attack was being felt as we could see the two co-ordinated drives, one down the gorge and the other a three pronged drive across the river, with mortars and machine guns and tanks and waves of dive bombers. The first platoon to be overrun by the tanks on the right was Harry Lovett’s of C Company

⁸⁷ Long, op cit, 126.

⁸⁸ WD 16-18.04.1941.

⁸⁹ Bartar, op cit, 90.

⁹⁰ Playfair, op cit, 89.

⁹¹ Long, op cit, 80.

and he himself was wounded and later taken prisoner. By late afternoon C Company was being attacked from the front and from both flanks by tanks and infantry and at 1730 Captain Buckely sent a runner to inform the C/O [Chilton] that he was withdrawing his Company to the high ground towards the south east.⁹³

It became clear by evening that the Battalion along with the 21st New Zealand was cut off. The trapped men continued to fight tanks with rifles and light machine guns.⁹⁴

A rumour swept through the Australian forces that Larissa had fallen. In fact the town was still held by Allied troops. Nonetheless, before the rumour could be verified, the 2/2nd attempted to break out towards Volos and the coast, having achieved, albeit at great cost, the task of providing time for the rest of the Anzac force to complete their evacuation. What could not be ignored was that the battle of Tempe Gorge was a defeat that left the 2/2nd severely mauled.

Max, with his comrades in Platoon 15 of C Company, was “in the very tip of the Gorge, the furthest up without crossing the river.”⁹⁵ The platoon was ordered to hold the high ground overlooking the road that wound its way through the Gorge. In place, the Australians expected to be attacked by German Infantry. Richard Roberts recounted the ensuing debacle in his diary.

McGinley draws my attention to a new and distant sound? Engines, certainly the engines of tanks and equally certain they are not ours. The noise increases and clearly they are coming along the Gorge Road from the direction of Tempe, obviously they have broken through the NZers!⁹⁶

Overwhelmed by the superior German forces, they tried to hold out for as long as possible while the German tanks pushed their way into the Gorge. Some believed the

⁹² Ringel and Sturm, op cit, 35.

⁹³ Wicks, op cit, 98.

⁹⁴ Long, op cit, 122.

⁹⁵ HB

⁹⁶ Roberts, op cit, 134.

battalion would have had a chance if they had been provided with air cover, but even so the sheer weight of German numbers proved to be too great.⁹⁷ When the order to retreat came, Max and his companions were maintaining their fire — small arms against tanks.⁹⁸ Jack Sawby, who had been wounded, was taken to a Field Ambulance station for evacuation. He recalled that as he was taken away Max gave him a cigarette, before returning to the fight. Private Ted Edwards, who had enlisted with Max in 1939, recalled the last time he saw his friend.

The last I saw of Max, he was in a bit of a hole fighting like the grand fighter he always was. A Jerry tank ran practically up to us. At the time I was about 50 yards ahead of [the tank]. We did not see them again. Gee, it was a grand sight, seeing them give it to Jerry - Max and another chap in one hole, two others in another hole and the corporal sitting on the side of the hill with them. [Max] had no shirt on, and they were pasting Jerry! Max certainly enjoyed fighting and it was grand to see him in action in Libya; it was even better to see him in Greece.⁹⁹

As the intensity of the battle increased, so the chances of escape diminished. Surrounded by constant shelling and air attacks by Stuka dive-bombers, the men of 15 Platoon C Company held out for as long as they could. Max was with Clarrie Smith and Lieutenant Holyroyd, the platoon commander. Holyroyd had been wounded in the ankle while returning from Company HQ. He was stranded and had beckoned for help. Responding to Holyroyd's call, Max and several others took the risk that eventuated in their capture by the Germans. Clarrie Smith remembered the details of their capture with great clarity:

...we could see him down there, we were up on a hill and there were four or five of us up there [including Max] and he beckoned us down and we came down and of course we were running right into the [German] troops and another bloke got shot through the mouth and

⁹⁷ JS; Playfair, op cit, 92.

⁹⁸ LM

⁹⁹ *Manning River Times* 18.10.1941.

anyhow our officer said “Drop the rifles because we can’t get away from here from the enemy.” He spoke fluent German, Holyroyd. He was a Kodak man and had worked in Berlin for years and he said, “They’re all around.” ...the bullets were buzzing around even then.¹⁰⁰

After laying down their rifles and emptying their pockets, the captured men were taken behind the lines, across the river on the other side of the Gorge to a holding area. Max was nineteen days short of his twenty-first birthday. Max and another soldier carried the man who had been shot through the mouth. A short way along the road,

there was a platoon truck there and Maxy said to them, the Lieutenant, he said, asked them if it would be alright if we went in the platoon truck if it would start. He could drive it. And the bloke in charge said yes and anyhow it started first go and we got in the truck then, and with guards of course. As we got up the road we picked up some New Zealanders, various others and their guards. We got to the river[Pinios] and crossed it on rubber pontoons and spent the night under a house like goats...and the next morning at about half past six we were out in the water helping build a bridge, helping the Germans build a bridge.¹⁰¹

After spending the day working at rebuilding the bridge, Max and his fellow prisoners were trucked to Larissa, which had fallen to the Germans on 18 April, and spent two days in a vacant block between two warehouses. The first guards the Australians met were Austrians, who were regarded as good men. “As a general thing, the ones who treated the prisoners best were the best soldiers. The paratroopers, the Austrians and Bavarian Alpine troops, they treated the prisoners best.”¹⁰² One of the Austrian officers gave the men “paper and pencils and envelopes to write home. And he was going to Berlin and he said he would deliver it...[he] kept his word.”¹⁰³ For many on

¹⁰⁰ CS

¹⁰¹ ibid

¹⁰² AW

¹⁰³ CS

the German side, the Australians were the first Empire troops they had encountered. One *SS Leibstandarte* soldier commented

...some of the prisoners coming down were mercenaries [*Soeldner*] from Australia. They do not behave like the cold English, except in their arrogance and this is more external. They do not seem to be as well disciplined as the English nor do they wear their uniform as a soldier should. They were complaining of the cold, for they had just arrived here from Egypt.¹⁰⁴

On 23 April Greece surrendered. Churchill's hope that the Thermopylae line could be held for two to three weeks came to nought. The collapse in Greece became a debacle; all that remained was to get as many Allied soldiers as possible out of Greece. Major Edwards established a "straggler's post" between Amfiklia and Levadia. From there the regrouped remnants of the battalion made their way south through Corinth towards Kalamata, where they boarded the *Dilwarra* on 26/27 April. The Greek Campaign was over in less than six weeks. 2030 Australians became prisoners of war, while some 320 had been killed and 494 wounded. Militarily speaking, the operation had been an unequal competition and had ended in tragedy.

The Australian political and military involvement in the campaign is a story of political inexperience, military misappreciation and reticence, preoccupation with matters closer to home, dependence on British intelligence and decision making and a lack of effective, timely communication.¹⁰⁵

The irony of the Anzac Day anniversary coinciding with the 2/2nd's fight to survive was not lost on Blamey. "And so on Friday, April 25, passed by and it seemed to us poor wanderers to be rather a travesty of Anzac Day, the second Anzac Corps chased out of Greece after a fortnight's fighting."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ James Lucas and Matthew Cooper, *Hitler's Elite: Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*, 85.

¹⁰⁵ Jamie Cullens, "A Slight Misunderstanding: Politicians, Commanders and Greece, 1941", in *Australian Defence Force Journal*, 88.51.

Australians learnt of the scope of the Greek disaster a few weeks later. However, it took a longer time before families back home knew where their sons, brothers and fathers were. For Ernest Sawyer the wait was a torment.¹⁰⁷ From February 1941, lists of captured and wounded servicemen were not to be published prior to Government approval. A “gentlemen’s agreement” had been reached between the editors of Australia’s major newspapers and the Office of the Chief Censor, whereby “progressive totals of AIF casualties must not be published.”¹⁰⁸ The reason for the “agreement” was a mix of sensitivity for the families of the missing men, and a strong desire not to imperil homefront morale with constant reports of casualties. Further, the editors agreed not to publish personal details, such as addresses and next of kin. An incident in Perth in late 1940, in which a widow of a soldier who had died in North Africa was abused by an anonymous letter writer for not stopping him from going to war, prompted a tighter control over the flow of information.¹⁰⁹

Max’s service record shows that he was registered as “missing” from 19 April, although, because of the shambles in Greece, and later in Crete, 2/2nd lists were not finalised until 30 May.¹¹⁰ Reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* throughout May 1941 told in tones of ever growing solemnity of the Greek campaign. On 24 May the *Herald* reported that the Minister of the Army, Mr Spender, had received a report from Lieutenant General Blamey officially estimating AIF losses in Greece to be 3983, including the sick and wounded.¹¹¹ The *Herald* assured its readers two days later that “names of Australian POWs in Greece [were] expected soon.”¹¹² It was not until late September that Max’s whereabouts were finally confirmed. Under the heading “AIF Losses: Army and Red Cross Lists issued by the Department on 19 September”, the paper went on to list Australians held in German POW camps. Among them appeared the name of Max Sawyer, “previously reported missing, now POW.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ Blamey in Bartar, op cit, 100.

¹⁰⁷ ES

¹⁰⁸ AA Canberra 300.28 Part 1.

¹⁰⁹ ibid

¹¹⁰ CARO

¹¹¹ *SMH* 24.05.1941.

¹¹² *SMH* 26.05.1941.

¹¹³ *SMH* 20.09.1941.

Chapter Six: Kriegsgefangener 7469, April 1941 - April 1943

On 30 May 1941, Max was officially registered as “missing.”¹ The *Northern Champion* published a short statement on 11 June; “The latest casualty list contains the names of several men from the district ...Pvte E M Sawyer, Mondrook...”² In November, the paper reported the visit of Captain Euesden, who had fought in the Greek campaign and who made particular mention of Private Max Sawyer.

At present spending a holiday in Taree is Captain Euesden who returned to Australia six weeks ago after service in Libya, Greece and Crete...On Tuesday night he attended a patriotic function at Tinonee, and when he met Mr E W Sawyer (President of the Tinonee and District Patriotic and War Fund) he was able to impart the information that he had knowledge of Mr Sawyer’s son, Pte Max Sawyer who is now a prisoner of war. Captain Euesden stated, that, although he was not in Max’s unit, he was aware that he had a fine reputation as a soldier and he knew that he was twice mentioned in despatches. He expressed pleasure in meeting the father of such a fine soldier.³

No record of Sawyer was found in the Dispatch records of the 2/2nd War Diary. This may mean that Sawyer was commended by his Commanding Officer for performing well in battle, but not necessarily mentioned in the official despatches. Evidently this was not uncommon.⁴

After capture Max was taken to the transit camp at Salonika. This was the first stage of the journey into captivity, and into the Reich. Allied troops captured in Greece and Crete numbered nearly 27 000. From staging camps such as Corinth, the Germans kept the men at Salonika prior to transports into Germany.

Durchgangslager 183, Salonika, was a “foul place.” It had been a Greek Army barracks built during the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s. The camp was

¹ CARO NX1488

² NC 11.06.1941.

³ NC 01.11.1941.

⁴ Peter Skulless, *Fred: An Australian Hero*, 165.

primitive, overcrowded and unhealthy. For the Australians, still in shock over capture, Salonika became another blow, as many of the basic civilities disappeared in the struggle to stay clean and sane.⁵ Salonika was

An old fort with walls, roof and floor, but no windows...We still received our cup of muddy lentil soup and sometimes black bread, enough to keep us alive and that's all. Chaps like myself who weighed 12 stone went down to 7 stone in a matter of weeks. After a sleepless night with lice, bugs and dysentery and mess everywhere, the Germans guards would come soon after daylight and get us outside to count us. Then the delousing would start, hundreds of chaps stripped off trying to get the lice out of their clothes. On most days we stripped to the raw and washed our clothes in a horse trough, but it was impossible to get rid of the lice.⁶

The camp's condition had deteriorated badly and the health of the prisoners was constantly at risk, mostly from malaria.⁷ Drainage and basic sanitation was in a poor state. "Millions of flies swarmed around the latrines and cookhouses and formed ugly black heaps where refuse was dropped. Scores of mangy cats slunk among the barrack rooms."⁸

Salonika provided the captured men with a foretaste of prison life. Constant tedium was punctuated by *Appel* (roll call) twice a day, or sometimes more frequently, they were subjected to terrible overcrowding, little medical treatment, and the constant irritation of typhus bearing lice made life close to unbearable. The worst torment came from the near-starvation for men already weakened from inadequate nourishment. Charles Robinson, a prisoner in Salonika between July and August 1941 recalled that

⁵ Michael Clarke, *My War*, 392.

⁶ Wick, *op cit*, 151-152.

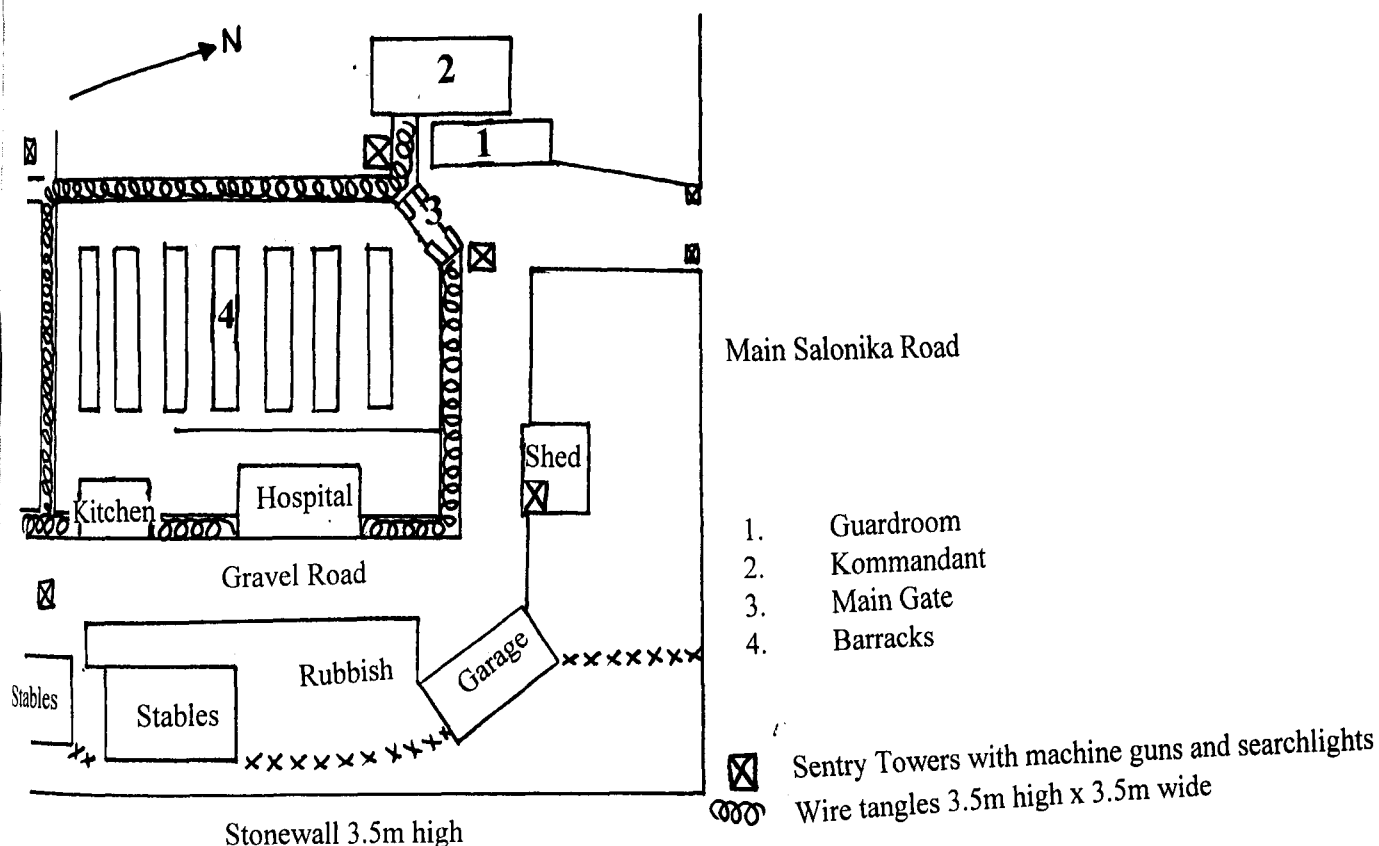
⁷ Wilson Myatt, 29.07.1995. Hereafter WM.

⁸ W.B. Thomas, *Dare To Be Free*, 85-86.

on the skeletal rations we were receiving men died in the first week and each week after that the toll increased dramatically. Our morning ration consisted of a ladle of ersatz coffee or juniper tea, and half an Italian army biscuit, the size and hardness of a large dog biscuit. It needed soaking before it was soft enough to bite. At midday half a litre of gritty watery rice or barley was provided, and the evening meal comprised half a litre of water in which broken biscuit had been boiled.⁹

Robinson's description of the effects of starvation and the subsequent physical reactions portray graphically the degradation the prisoners experienced during the period he described as the "softening up."

Map 7: DURCHGANGLAGER 183 SALONIKA



⁹ Charles Robinson, *Journey to Captivity*, 102.

For Max Sawyer, used to open spaces and roaming at will, life in Salonika must have been hellish.¹⁰ The physical deprivations were secondary to the enormous psychological strain many soldiers endured after capture. "Every man who was captured went through a traumatic ordeal, which was most personal...the only common feeling was one of surprise that he should be 'in the bag' at all."¹¹ Added to the depression of capture was often a commixture of guilt and anger as the prisoners pondered the reasons for their capture. Rolf makes the point that for sailors and airmen the situations of capture lay in the area of survival instinct, whether it was escaping a sinking ship or a crippled aircraft. Capture was usually equated with rescue. For the soldier, the distance between himself and "the enemy" was considerably less. The order to "lay down your arms" had an immediacy that the order to "abandon ship" or "all out" did not.¹²

After several days, the Germans issued the men with a brown postcard that carried the simple printed message:

I am a prisoner of war and in good health. In the next letter I will give you my new address. It is useless to write before receiving the new address. With best wishes...¹³

The men wrote their names, ranks and "AIF" below the printed message and then wrote the forwarding address on the front. Max sent his card sometime in late April or May 1941. It arrived at the Geneva Headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross on 19 August 1941 before being passed on to London and then to Australia where it arrived in Tinonee in mid-October.¹⁴

In Salonika, Sawyer and the other Australians came into regular contact with Germans. Many of the German troops were young men, of similar age to Sawyer, who had been thoroughly schooled in National Socialist doctrines of *Herrenvolk* and anti-English propaganda. Most had been conscripted into the Wehrmacht in the

¹⁰ BS

¹¹ David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, 3.

¹² *ibid*, 6-7.

¹³ Cited in Clarke, *op cit*, 393.

¹⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, RB 15054. Hereafter ICRC. Cf also *Manning*

autumn after their eighteenth birthday and were expected to complete two years compulsory military service before returning to civilian careers. Therefore the vast majority of conscripts who served in the campaigns of 1939, 1940 and 1941 were young men in their early twenties, who had been called up in the drafts of 1936-1939, and who totally immersed in the *Kultur* of National Socialism.¹⁵ Stories of brutal treatment, indiscriminate beatings and even deliberate murders support Omer Bartov's thesis that the Wehrmacht was an effective vehicle of National Socialist ideology.

Most of the men who served as the Wehrmacht's combat troops during the Second World War, were either children or teenagers when Hitler came to power in 1933...Thus the fighting spear head of the Third Reich spent the formative years of their youth under National Socialism.¹⁶

The inability to understand the *Weltanschauung* of their captors proved perplexing for the prisoners. The "Hun" was a mystery, even though there are stories told of friendly encounters with some German military personnel.¹⁷ Nazi attitudes and war aims mystified Australian prisoners of war. Ideas such as *Herrenrasse*, *Untermenschen* and the "eternal Jew" were totally foreign, as were any ideas to do with mass killings of Jews and Russians.

Bartov illustrates the "striking inversion of reality" which allowed the German soldier to see Germany surrounded by enemies who, led by the international Jewish conspiracy, had as their sole purpose the annihilation of the *Deutschenvolk*.¹⁸ The saviour of the *Volk*, sent by God, was the Führer:

His genius, in which the whole strength of Germandom is embodied with ancient powers has animated the souls of 80 000 000 Germans, has filled them with strength and will, with storm and stress of a renewed young people; and himself the first soldier of Germany, he

River Times 25.10.1941.

¹⁵ Detwiler, op cit, MS T101 Annex 5.

¹⁶ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 108.

¹⁷ LM

¹⁸ Bartov, op cit, 106.

has entered the name of the German soldier into the book of immortality. All this we were allowed to experience.¹⁹

It is not surprising therefore, to read of acts of brutality. However, the distorted Nazi *Weltanschauung* and its impact on the Wehrmacht appeared to have remained an unstudied area for Australian and Western military historians, a point that will be discussed later.

It is likely Max remained in Salonika through May and June 1941. The months were spent in the daily tedium of waiting for the next move. Prisoners were given no information about their eventual destination; “No one would have told us anyway” remembered one veteran.²⁰ When the order to entrain was given the prisoners were handed “four or five biscuits” and were advised by their guards “Don’t eat them all at once, because they have to last you until you get where you’re going.”²¹

From 10 June 1941, the Germans began moving prisoners from Salonika, by train, into the Reich. Conditions in the wagons were deplorable. The floors of the cattle trucks were fouled with animal manure and straw. “After twenty four hours maggots emerged from the straw. You could find them on any part of your body.”²² Once aboard, the journey itself was a major trial. A prisoner transport would consist of approximately twenty trucks and about one thousand men. Each carriage held between forty and sixty men. Herded into cattle trucks the prisoners were given rations for three to four days. This had to last them for anything up to ten days. Once every twenty four hours the doors were slid back to allow the prisoners time to relieve themselves. At other times the men used a hole cut in the floor of the wagon. The two barred windows allowed some light and a minimum of fresh air to cut through the putrid atmosphere of the carriage. Sleep was nigh impossible and cries for help were met with replies of *Befehl ist Befehl* from the guards.²³

¹⁹ *Mitteilungen für die Truppe*, 10.06.1940, in Bartov, 123.

²⁰ H

²¹ LM

²² Alf Stone, in Clarke, op cit, 39.

²³ Wick, op cit, 153 “Orders are Orders.”

At various points during the journey the Red Cross was sometimes allowed to give assistance. The Serbian Red Cross was remembered with admiration. At Belgrade the Red Cross workers offered the men apricots and “they had buckets of water and dippers there to give us water, and the flaming Huns wouldn't let them.”²⁴ The greatest suffering on the train journey was the lack of water. Men sweltered in the summer heat and many suffered serious dehydration.

The prisoners from the 2/2nd were divided up between several *Stammlager*. Some were sent to *Stalag* VIII B at Lamsdorf in Lower Silesia close to the border of the *Gouvernementgeneral*. The remainders were sent to *Stalags* in Germany and Austria. Max Sawyer was sent to *Stammlager* XVIII D Marburg, on the Slovenian-Austrian border. Marburg was the Germanised name of Maribor. Marburg lay in Slovenia, which was divided between Italy and Germany in the wake of the Balkan Campaign on 21 April. Although the area was not ethnically German, association with Hapsburg monarchy was judged sufficient reason to justify the annexation of Slovenia, and Marburg was now part of Lower Styria, part of the Gau Styria.²⁵ The German area was incorporated into the Greater Reich.²⁶ The *Stalag* came under the authority of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), who delegated power to the *Chef des Kriegsgefangenenwesens*. Individual camps were administered through the local *Wehrkreise* and were staffed by members of the *Wehrkreiskommando* or *Ersatzheer*.²⁷

Theoretically, the *Kommandants* of the *Stammlager* were trained to administer their *Stalags*, but because of constant interference from outside the Wehrmacht, the competence of the *Kommandant*, and indeed the role of the *Chef des Kriegsgefangenenwesens*, was continually compromised.²⁸ The popular idea that the Wehrmacht jealously guarded their prison system and were loathe to allow any

²⁴ LM

²⁵ Tim Kirk, “The Limits of German Dominion: Resistance to the Nazi Annexation of Slovenia”, in *Slavonic and East European Review*, 69.646.

²⁶ Jonathon Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941-1943*, 24-25.

²⁷ Rolf, op cit, 28-29 The numbering of the *Stalags* often causes confusion. Each *Stalag* was under the jurisdiction of the local *Wehrkreise* and so bore the *Wehrkreise* number followed by a letter denoting the individual *Stalags* in the *Wehrkreise*. *Stalag* XVIII D, was Marburg *Stammlager* in *Wehrkreise* XVIII (Styria). *Stalag* XVIII A was Wolfsberg Camp. A “Z” following a *Stalag* number meant that the camp was a *Zweiglager*, a “branch camp” of the main *Stalag*. Therefore *Stalag* XVIII A/Z referred to Spittal am Drau, a branch camp of *Stalag* XVIII A Wolfsberg.

²⁸ Detwiler, op cit, MS T-101 Annex 6.2,3, 6-7.

latitude to other groups who expressed interest in the prisoners, especially the SS, must be kept in perspective, as there are many instances where this was not the case.²⁹ The most outstanding example of the Wehrmacht abdicating responsibility for prisoners of war occurred in September 1941. Under an agreement reached between General Walther von Brauchitsch and *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler, “the SS was to take charge of a total of 325 000 Soviet prisoners from the *Stammlager*.”³⁰ In fact, there is a great amount of evidence that points to the Wehrmacht being as brutal and callous in their treatment of prisoners of war as were any units of the SS.³¹ One must read the German sources carefully, as the temptation to self justification is often too difficult to resist. We must also read the accounts by former prisoners with great care, as there was a wide variety of prisoner experiences, and popular imagination is often dulled and distorted through the romanticisation of *Stalag* life in film and television, eg *Hogan’s Heroes* and *The Great Escape*.

Marburg was barely superior to Salonika. A Red Cross and US Embassy inspection described the *Stalag* condition as “deplorable.”³² The few buildings were squalid and swarmed with vermin. Newly arrived prisoners were accommodated in tents and slept on the ground until new buildings were built. Food at Marburg was meagre and typical of *Stalag* food - *ersatz* coffee generally made from acorns, watery cabbage or potato soup, with the occasional piece of horseflesh, black bread and tiny rations of jam or margarine. Feeding prisoners was not an important priority for a country at war and conditioned to propaganda about “the enemy.”³³

A Red Cross inspection of *Stalag XVIII A* Wolfsberg gives a clearer picture of conditions in the *Stammlager* on 24 October 1941.³⁴ Of 22 567 prisoners, British and Imperial soldiers numbered 5148. About 800 were Australian, and a further 800 were New Zealanders which included 23 Maoris. Whilst conditions may have varied from *Stalag* to *Stalag*, the comments made by the Red Cross for Wolfsberg are close to comments made about Marburg by former prisoners. Quarters were cramped, some

²⁹ David Wild to POS 19.09.1995. Cf *International Military Tribunal Nuremberg 1945-1946*, 3.505-511; 6.371, 375. Hereafter IMT.

³⁰ Josef Marszatek, *Majdanek: The Concentration Camp in Lublin*, 21.

³¹ IMT 4.261; 7.389-391.

³² W. Wynne-Mason, *Prisoners of War in Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945*, 132-133.

³³ WM

barracks housing up to 300 men. Men complained of the cold and the lack of suitable lighting, especially at night. 230 men were expected to use 21 taps for washing. A weekly shower bath allowed for a more complete wash. The outside latrine was simply judged as “unhygienic.”³⁵

Food was poor, and “the camp commandant, thinking that the British [and Australian] prisoners receive too many parcels, decided to reduce their food ration. We do not consider that one parcel per man per week should be regarded as part of the regular ration.”³⁶ Likewise, clothing was difficult to acquire, despite “a big reserve of uniforms.”³⁷ The men lacked warm underwear, socks, gloves and properly maintained boots.³⁸ Hospital conditions were poor and made more so by obstinacy on the part of the German medical officer. A member of the British medical staff, Isadore Rosenberg, POW 5571, “was not recognised as a member of the medical personnel under the pretext that he is a Jew, and was sent to a labour detachment.”³⁹ Nonetheless, the Red Cross concluded, “Although there are some things to be improved in this camp, the general impression is good.”⁴⁰

Upon arrival at Marburg in late June 1941, Max and his fellow prisoners were lined up and marched from a holding camp next to the railway to the *Stalag* that lay a half-hour walk outside the town.⁴¹ The men were exhausted from the journey, but the most annoying things were the lice. “There we were lousy as bloody drovers’ dogs with lice.”⁴² They were ordered to strip for delousing. Since lice were found in body hair, all hair was shaved. The men were then put through the delousing itself, washed with a disinfectant and pesticide that one former POW described as smelling like “carbolic soap, only much worse.”⁴³ Meanwhile, the mens’ uniforms were put through their own delousing procedure. When each man had been “washed” he claimed his uniform. The uniforms of many of the Australians were becoming

³⁴ AWM 54/779/4/21 “Australian Prisoners of War in Europe, *Stalag XVIII A*”.

³⁵ *ibid*, 1

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*, 2.

³⁹ *ibid*, 4.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 5.

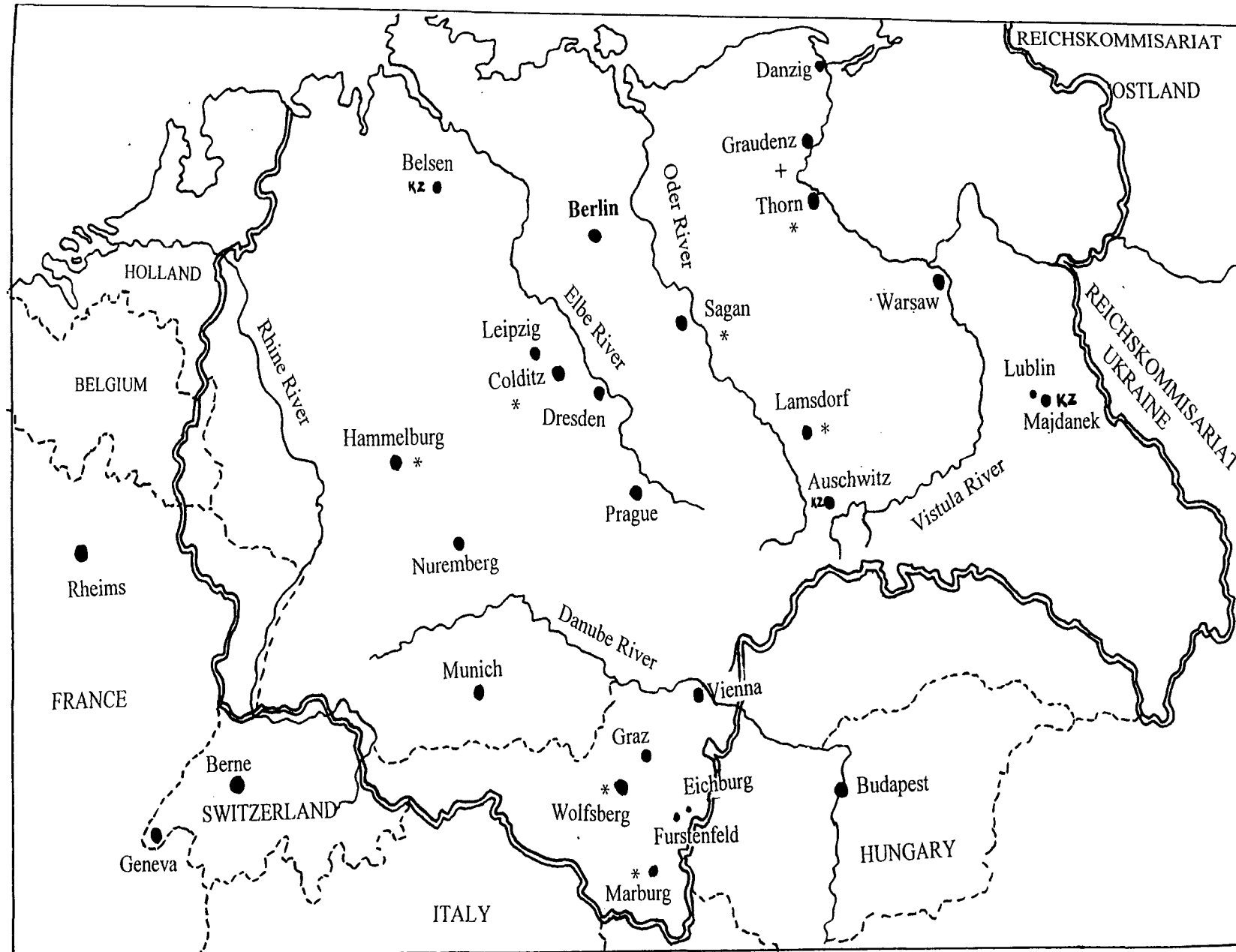
⁴¹ Barney Roberts, *A Kind of Cattle*, 54.

⁴² CS

⁴³ AW

threadbare and their boots were also in need of repair. Until new uniforms arrived via the Red Cross, the men had to make do as best they could. Most had not had a change of clothing since March, over three month previous. The delousing process was only a temporary relief from lice, since the steaming only killed the adult lice, not the eggs. Within days, uniforms were again infested. Health standards varied according to different camps and their respective *Kommandants*. Maintaining health was a main part of passive resistance and the daily battle against lice, dysentery, typhus and a host of related diseases became integral to discipline and morale.

Greater German Reich



Map 8: OCCUPIED EUROPE 1941

* Stammlager + Straflager KZ Konzentrationslager || Borders of the Greater German Reich

From the delousing room the prisoners were taken to the showers and then to the Camp Administration for fingerprinting and photographing. These details, along with a physical description, civilian occupation and home address were affixed to a *Personalkarte*.⁴⁴ The final seal of this “rite of passage” into the *Stammlager* was the issuing of the *Kriegsgefangener* number on a metal identity disc. Sawyer’s number was 7469. Processed, the prisoners were divided into *Arbeitskommados* (work commando) and given specific tasks around the *Stalag*. Max was, for some time, allocated work in the *Stalag* kitchen. The chronic overcrowding made hunger a constant companion, so a job in the kitchen was to be highly prized.

...he said he worked for a while in the kitchen and they had all these cabbages...and the potatoes, but they [the enlisted men] didn’t get them...that was for the officers, they’d get the peels and they’d get a few scraps of something. The cabbage stalks and that kind of thing. But, he said, you know, they’d sneak a bit and eat it when they were preparing it. And, he said, of course they always went for the inside heart...he said in later life he realised that he should have been eating the green outside leaves...but they were in desperate straits...⁴⁵

For those men who worked in the kitchen, the scraps of vegetable they were able to steal for themselves and their comrades, often kept a fine resistance to scurvy and other related diseases.

At several intervals in the “processing” the *Stalag* staff asked if the prisoner was a Jew. Several former prisoners related that the Germans only asked one question of them; “Are you a Jew?” Men were forced to drop their trousers if the Germans were not convinced.⁴⁶ Many Australian men were circumcised, according to the common medical practice of the day. According to former prisoners, the Germans failed to understand how Australian men who were not Jewish could be circumcised. It was a source of great perplexity, and for some men led to a form of harassment from *Stalag*

⁴⁴ Rolf, op cit, 32.

⁴⁵ BS

⁴⁶ CS The only written source found which describes a similar situation can be found in Robinson, *Journey to Captivity*, op cit, 99.

officials who were determined to locate Jews among the Australians.⁴⁷ In some instances, circumcised men were taken away and not heard of again. Bearing a “Jewish” sounding name was deemed identification enough to warrant German attention.⁴⁸ Jewish soldiers, if found “were taken away.”⁴⁹ Max appears to have been singled out by the Germans because of his swarthy complexion, thick dark hair and the fact that he was circumcised, but Max appears to have been saved for the time being because of his name. Wilson Myatt remembered the Germans hunting a particular man, “shouting, ‘602 Eisenburg, where are you’ - that’s a Jewish name. They grabbed him. I never saw him again.”⁵⁰

Later, after the war, Sawyer would say that the Germans were convinced he was Jewish, and no amount of explanation to the contrary would convince them.⁵¹ A photograph of his niece, sent to him by his sister Enid, had the last letter of “Max” torn off, for fear that the Germans would use that as evidence of his Jewishness.⁵²

The question of Wehrmacht treatment of Jewish prisoners of war in the Western Allied armies, (Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States) has generally assumed that the Jewish men were left relatively unharmed. Hilberg asserts

To be sure the German regulations against Jews prisoners of war from the Western armies were in no way comparable to the drastic measures which were applied to the Jewish prisoners from the Red Army. The only western Jewish prisons (sic) subject to shooting were the emigrants from the Reich, who were shot immediately upon ascertainment of their identity at the army prison collecting points (*Armeegefangenensammelstellen*), that is, prior to the transfer of the prisoners to permanent *Stalags*. The former Reich Jews were caught in this procedure, but the main body of Jewish prisoners enjoyed relative immunity...there was to be no marking of the Jews...⁵³

⁴⁷ AW, LM, JS

⁴⁸ Richard Breitman, *Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution*, 180.

⁴⁹ CS

⁵⁰ WM

⁵¹ BS, MB, WM

⁵² ES

⁵³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 2.400-401.

Several Jewish soldiers interned with Max in Marburg were taken away after it had been discovered that they were former Reich citizens who had left Germany and immigrated to Palestine. They were “never seen again.”⁵⁴ A report by the Red Cross on conditions at *Stalag XVIII A* Wolfsberg mentioned that all Jewish prisoners had “been sent to *Stalag VIII B*”, Lamsdorf, in Lower Eastern Silesia.⁵⁵ There is reason to suspect that the Jewish prisoners were also sent to a special *Stalag* for Jewish prisoners at Chelm near Lublin. However, it has been near impossible to find information about this camp in particular outside of passing references.⁵⁶

While this may have been the normative experience, the accounts of several Australian veterans are quite different. They assert that the Germans went on “Jew hunts” in the *Stalag* and held special *Appels* in order to “flush out” Jewish prisoners. The link between Jews and Bolshevism had become part of German military culture well before the invasion of the Soviet Union, indeed the Jew as the bearer of Bolshevism was an integral part of Nazi propaganda.⁵⁷ Former prisoners recounted a story of a “Jew hunt” in 1995; still bristling at what they saw was a travesty of justice and an example of German fanaticism. Their reactions, over fifty years later, confirmed the thesis that most, if not all, Australian prisoners of war held in Germany knew nothing of Nazi ideology and rabid antisemitism. Nonetheless, there is amongst the memories of the veterans, some traces of “cultural antisemitism”, an unreflected ideology of prejudice towards Jews. The violence meted out to the Jews had to have at least some origin with the Jews themselves, or as one veteran explained, “A lot of them asked for it too.”⁵⁸ The “blame the victim” mentality appears to have been employed by some non-Jewish prisoners in an attempt to explain what they saw happening to the Jewish prisoners. To these men, the incident recounted below was meaningless, since the two Jewish soldiers had “done nothing wrong.” This naivety was as palpable in 1995 as it must have been in 1941.

⁵⁴ LM

⁵⁵ AWM 54/779/4/21, op cit, 4.

⁵⁶ FHJM to POS 13.02.1996.

⁵⁷ Breitman, op cit, 149,171.

⁵⁸ WM

During one *Appel*, the Marburg *Stalag Kommandant* ordered all Jews among the Allied prisoners to step forward. The *Kommandant* went on to say of the Jewish soldiers “If they didn’t [come forward] and we find them, they’ll be shot.”⁵⁹

And a bloke walked out and this bloke, this German and he was raving and the translator told us what it was. And [the *Kommandant*] met him half way out between us and the big building and he kicked him all the way out; he kicked him in the crutch and the stomach and he was on the ground and he was kicked and the blokes yelled at him, everybody yelled, but you couldn’t do anything. And when they stood him up again and they said “There’s more, we know there’s some more” and another bloke, only a young bloke walked out...he got the same treatment and [the *Kommandant*] was actually frothing at the mouth, this Hun.⁶⁰

While this incident may not have been typical of the majority of *Stalags*, it nonetheless demonstrates a high level of antisemitism within the *Stalags*. This is not unusual, since, as Bartov observed above, the camp administration along with the regular Wehrmacht had been thoroughly imbued with National Socialism.⁶¹

After this *Appel*, Allan Williams remembered returning to his barracks where he found a group of Palestinian Jews “dark as any of these Lebanese you see here, and they were sitting on a bunk and they were scared stiff.” He approached the senior NCO who was responsible for that particular block, a New Zealand Sergeant, and asked for help in hiding the Jewish soldiers. The New Zealander referred the matter to Sergeant Major Jim Diamond, “Diamond Jim”, who arranged for some of the Maori soldiers to exchange pay books and their colour patches. The Jewish soldiers were evidently so nervous and understandably frightened that they “nearly passed out when they were recognised as Jews.”⁶² Williams continues the story:

the Maori battalion [colour patch] was a round circle with a little ‘v’

⁵⁹ AW

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ Bartov, *op cit*, 106

cut out of it, and he [Diamond Jim] brought these coloured patches over and put them on them. When they got away from there they were treated alright as far as I know.

Other soldiers successfully helped other Jewish soldiers “disappear” under new identities.⁶³

Marburg was also swollen with huge numbers of Russian prisoners captured during the opening weeks of Barbarossa in June and July 1941. While the Germans generally observed the Geneva Convention with the prisoners from the West, (with the exception of Jews), they did not extend such consideration to the Russians. Russia had not signed the 1929 Geneva Protocol that contained the Prisoner of War Convention. The Nazi leadership used that as a convenient way of “legalising” the brutal treatment of Soviet prisoners.⁶⁴ Claiming Germany was under no obligation to observe the Convention with regard to Russia, Hitler had ordered a racial war of untrammelled savagery, “a crusade to extirpate ‘Judeobolshevism.’”⁶⁵ The so-called *Commissar Order* of 6 June 1941 formed the basis of “legal” terror against the Soviet Union. Hitler warned his Generals that the Red Army was “inhuman” and would not abide by the laws of war, therefore harsh and extreme measures were to be employed.⁶⁶ The Wehrmacht actively participated in the killing of Soviet prisoners of war; “...from the very start of the campaign the German Army leadership had commenced liquidation measures...” Heydrich had reached an agreement on 16 July with Chief of German Armed Forces Office, Reinecke, that Jewish soldiers in the Red Army were to be “liquidated.”⁶⁷ The OKW did not object, and evidence points to an active participation “between the military and the *Einsatzgruppen*, added to the thesis that the military leadership had more or less unreservedly agreed to conduct an ideologically determined war of annihilation in the East.”⁶⁸ On 13 November 1941, the General Staff commented that no provision was to be made for Soviet prisoners of

⁶² AW

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-1945*, 57, 206.

⁶⁵ Arno Mayer, *Why did the Heavens not Darken?*, 200.

⁶⁶ *Commissar Order*, 06.06.1941, in Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman and Abraham Margaliot, *Documents of the Holocaust*, 376-377.

⁶⁷ Hilberg, *op cit*, 2.219-224.

war: "Nonworking POWs in the Prisoner Camps will have to starve."⁶⁹ So great was the attrition rate amongst the Soviet prisoners that the Gestapo expressed its concern that, although the Wehrmacht was responsible for the transportation of prisoners to the *Stammlager*, the number of deaths would lead the local populations to blame the SS!⁷⁰ Sawyer and the other prisoners witnessed countless acts of barbarism against the Russians, acts that were not surprising since the Wehrmacht had been told repeatedly that Russians were animals, not soldiers.⁷¹

Central to prisoner of war life was the role of the Red Cross. Communication between prisoners and their families was a complicated procedure. The sending and receiving of letters and parcels, the most common work of the Red Cross, had about it the nature of a major exercise. Something of the loneliness and homesickness that the 21 year-old Sawyer must have felt is expressed in one of the few letters he wrote to his family to have survived.

Dear Dad and family, a few lines to let you know I'm still OK and hoping it finds you all the same. I have only one letter from you yet. I never fail to call and see if there is a letter for me. Letters and the end of the war are the two main things prisoners of war look forward to. I write every Sunday. I hope they are getting through OK. I may have wrote (sic) something I shouldn't have done. I don't know. Chins up. Love to all from Max.⁷²

POW mail took a long and circuitous route to reach its destination. Belligerent powers sought the services of a third neutral power that would act as an intermediary between hostile governments. Germany used Switzerland while Britain used the United States until December 1941. After America entered the war, Britain too, used Switzerland. The third country was known as the "protecting power." Prisoner mail,

⁶⁸ Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, 182.

⁶⁹ "Records of the Discussion of the General Staff 13.11.1941 concerning the War with the Soviet Union", in *Arbeit und Vernichtung, Das Konzentrationslager Neuengamme*, 82.

⁷⁰ "Chief of the SD and Sipo, Heinrich Müller, 9.11.1941, re: Transport to the KZ of Soviet POWs", *ibid*, 84.

⁷¹ WM, ES, AW, Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*, 186; Roberts, *op.cit.*, 57; Schulte, *ibid*, 193; "Do you know the enemy?" Cited in Schulte, *ibid*, 317-318.

⁷² EMS to EWS 08.02.1942.

having been censored by the *Stalag* censor, was sent to the Red Cross legations that would then send it on to Geneva. When the mail reached Switzerland it would be dispatched through Red Cross couriers to the respective countries. Once in the country of destination, the Swiss diplomat would present the letters to the appropriate government officials. Again, the letters would be read before sending them to the addressee. Prisoner mail addressed to Australia was sent to England. The International Red Cross supervised prisoner mail from its headquarters in Geneva, sending up to 60 000 messages a day.⁷³

The letter written by Max on 8 February 1942 was sent from Marburg through the Red Cross to Geneva. The Red Cross noted its arrival on 22 February 1942, and despatched it to London via Lisbon, the only available neutral port in Europe.⁷⁴ From London the letter, now redirected to Australia, went aboard a neutral ship, usually Portuguese, and after safe passage had been assured by all the belligerent powers, the ship sailed from Lisbon, around Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea, through the Suez Canal and then on to Australia. The Red Cross ships had to be specially marked with the Red Cross on white background, and be illuminated at night.⁷⁵ The letter written by Max in February took eight months to reach Australia before it arrived in Tinonee on 19 September 1942.⁷⁶ The letter bore Max's name, prison number and address:

Lager - Bezeichnung

M. - Stammlager 306

Deutschland⁷⁷

Mail was sent *gebührenfrei* (free of charge), and despite the length of time taken for the letter to reach its destination, the mail provided a vital link for the prisoner and their family. Max wrote as often as he could, usually weekly.

Ernest Sawyer also wrote weekly from Tinonee. Many of his letters have survived; testimony to their importance to Max and the connection with his family and home. Family members could write to their relatives in prisoner of war camps “free of

⁷³ Patsy Adam-Smith, *Prisoners of War*, 476.

⁷⁴ ICRC Gen/Arch 96/123; Adam-Smith, *ibid*, 477.

⁷⁵ Adam-Smith, *ibid*, 477-478.

⁷⁶ EWS to EMS 20.09.1942.

⁷⁷ *ibid*

postage.”⁷⁸ Letters could only be one page of standard size notepaper, “must relate only to personal matters, and must not be sealed.”⁷⁹ Instructions on parcels were also given in great detail.⁸⁰ “No parcel was individually addressed. Personal clothing parcels could be sent only by next-of-kin every three months and could contain only clothing and chocolate. These packets were addressed to an individual prisoner or internee.”⁸¹ Letters and parcels were sent from Tinonee to the Central Red Cross Bureau in Spring Street, Melbourne.⁸² From Melbourne the Red Cross transported its cargo of letters, parcels, new uniforms, books, instruments, and a veritable catalogue of goods, all in bags and crates supplied by the Post Master General’s office, on the return journey to Europe, and the warehouses of the Red Cross in Lisbon. Once the goods had arrived in Lisbon they were loaded onto another ship bound for Marseille, or sometimes Genoa, where they would be sent to the principal warehousing centre of the Red Cross at Vallorbe, on the Swiss-French border. Here the letters and parcels were sorted and prepared for dispatch to hundreds of destinations around occupied Europe.⁸³

Ernest Sawyer’s letters betray a father’s anxiety for, and pride in, his only son.

Your last letters received a few days ago, dated February and May [1942] have made my old heart ache...I have often told you in previous letters how proud of you I am, but in case you have never received them, I tell you again, that your old mates Jack Bailey, Roy Walters and Ted Edwards have each told me you were outstanding in action and should have received a high decoration.⁸⁴

Every letter contained news about family members and local people known to Max, and at every close, the hope that “one of these days you’ll be landing on the shore of your homeland again.”⁸⁵ A letter regarding the sending of a food parcel contained a

⁷⁸ NC 10.09.1941

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ NC 28.01; 25.02.1941.

⁸¹ Leon Stubbings, *Look what you started Henry!*, 301.

⁸² NC 10.09.1941.

⁸³ Adam-Smith, *op cit*, 477-479.

⁸⁴ EWS to EMS 20.09.1942.

⁸⁵ EWS to EMS 15.03.1943.

fatherly reminder to Max to be sure to write a “thank you” card.⁸⁶ Letters also expressed the concern that mail did not get through at times. Max sent cards to a number of relatives in February 1943, including one to his grandmother, Deliah Wynter, who had died in December 1941. Ernest Sawyer had written of her death in September 1942, and in July 1943 wrote to his son, “I have mentioned her death in several letters so there must have been quite a lot of my letters you did not receive.”⁸⁷ At the end of the war, Sawyer received a bundle of letters from Australia, which had not been delivered to him for unexplained reasons.⁸⁸

In January 1942 the Australian POW Relatives Association commenced publication of a regular newsletter. Letters received by families of POWs were sometimes forwarded so that others who had not heard from their sons, brothers or fathers could get some idea of conditions in the *Stalags*. Published letters from *Stalag XVIII A* spoke of daily life in unsurprisingly positive tones, making particular mention of the Red Cross parcels and the hope that more letters will arrive from Australia.⁸⁹ Another letter spoke of the beautiful Austrian countryside with its “small farms and some heavily timbered land...”⁹⁰

During the summer of 1941, the prisoners gradually adjusted to a routine that involved morning and evening *Appel*, some work in and around the *Stalag*, the writing and receiving of mail, Red Cross parcels, and the creation of ways to avoid the constant boredom. Marburg had a prisoner population of about 5000 Allied soldiers.⁹¹ Conditions were primitive but not unbearable.

[We ate] horsemeat stews. Some of the blokes wouldn't eat it....We had double bunks...plenty of room. I was in a gaol there - they turned that into a sleeping room...I think [Max] was in that one. We had bunks in these cells...⁹²

⁸⁶ EWS to EMS 13.06.1943.

⁸⁷ EWS to EMS 18.07.1943.

⁸⁸ BS

⁸⁹ *Newsletter of the Australian POW Relatives Association*, 21.09.1941 Hereafter APOWRA.

⁹⁰ APOWRA 10.08.1941.

⁹¹ WM

⁹² WM

Friendships formed among the men were an important part of maintaining morale. Max soon teamed up with Wilson Myatt, a corporal in the 2nd Reserve Motorised Transport Company, who had been captured on Crete in May 1941.⁹³ Sawyer and Myatt remained together until January 1943.

Occasionally the broader plans of the Reich impinged on the men. At some point in late summer, possibly September, a train arrived at Marburg station. Prisoners, amongst them Wilson Myatt and Max Sawyer, were taken to the station to help with the emptying of the “cargo.” The “cargo” to be emptied from the train were the dead bodies that lay amongst those still alive. Given a ration of beer as an incentive to work, the men were ordered to bury the dead. Shortly afterwards, the Germans ordered the grave re-opened, as it was believed that gold had been inadvertently buried with the bodies.

Oh it was terrible. And they started digging the grave up, did the Germans, and getting the bodies and taking the rings off of them and the gold teeth out of them...Oh the stink! Oh my God! They stunk rotten...I told the blokes “Don’t tell them you’re Jewish. Tell them you’re anything!”⁹⁴

Myatt believed the people were Jewish civilians, despite German claims that the people were soldiers. “They said they were soldiers. They weren’t soldiers. They were only civilians...they didn’t have any uniforms on.”⁹⁵

Attempting to identify who these people were has proved problematic. Myatt believed they were Jewish Ukrainians. However, since he had no knowledge of Ukrainian, and could have confused Ukrainian, or Yiddish, with any number of East European languages, it is doubtful if the true identity of these people can be reached with any degree of certitude. It is unlikely that the train was a transport of Ukrainian forced labourers heading towards Germany. Plans for the deportation of tens of

⁹³ WM; ICRC, Gen/Arch 96/123, Card to family 22.02.1941.

⁹⁴ WM

⁹⁵ *ibid*

thousands of forced labourers were not put into effect until March 1942.⁹⁶ Another explanation lies in the development of plans for the implementation of “The Final Solution.” Browning argues that in the euphoria that followed the initial advances of “Barbarossa”, Hitler gave approval for the beginnings of a more radical approach to the “Jewish Question” as well as to the creation of the “Garden of Eden” for the German people “in the East.”

In mid-July, convinced that the military campaign was nearly over and victory was at hand, an elated Hitler gave the signal to carry out accelerated pacification and racial “cleansing” of Germany’s new “Garden of Eden.” What had hitherto been seen as a future task was now to be implemented immediately. Himmler responded with a massive build up of killing forces behind the lines. Moreover, he travelled through much of the eastern territory...⁹⁷

It is possible then that the transport Myatt and Sawyer witnessed was a part of the plan for the racial reorganisation of Eastern Europe. Marburg, in Slovenia, lying close to the Croatian puppet-state and the *Gouvernementgeneral*, had been made an inalienable part of the Reich on 25 April 1941.⁹⁸ Hitler had already spoken of the need to clear the *AltReich*, *Ostmark* and the *Reichprotektorat* of Jews and other undesirables, and had approved plans for a massive program of expulsion in the annexed territories.⁹⁹

In July 1941 Himmler, ever obedient to the Führer’s will, was, directing *Einsatzgruppen* and Police Battalions behind the Wehrmacht, to instigate the removal of inferior racial elements.¹⁰⁰ In early October Heydrich, Himmler’s ambitious protege, passed on Hitler’s expressed wish that the Jews “be removed from German space by the end of the year [1941], if possible.”¹⁰¹ The first transports of Jews from

⁹⁶ Clark, op cit, 316; Gita Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, 310; Louis Synder, *Encyclopedia of the Third Reich*, 306.

⁹⁷ Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide*, 111.

⁹⁸ Steinberg, op cit, 24-25.

⁹⁹ Browning, op cit, 104-105, 115.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 106-108.

¹⁰¹ Breitman, op cit, 214.

Greater Germany began moving in mid-October, mostly to Lodz or Riga.¹⁰² Another possibility to explain the identity of the “transport” is that the people were either Croatian or Slovenian Jews being deported north through *Ostmark*, and thence onto the ghettos of the *Gouvernementgeneral* or German, Austrian, Czech and Polish Jews who had fled from the Nazis.¹⁰³ However this is not altogether likely as transports from Croatia and Slovenia into the *Gouvernementgeneral* were rare because “the most essential, central problems in this respect [the “Final Solution”] have already been brought to a solution there.”¹⁰⁴ An obvious answer could well be that the transport was of local Marburg district Jews who were being sent to Lodz for “resettlement” in accord with Reich policy.¹⁰⁵

While the bodies may well have been Jewish, there remains one other possible explanation. Slovenia was the only part of the Reich to harbour *banden*, “gangs” or partisans, who harried and disrupted the German war effort.¹⁰⁶ Led by local Slovenians and often with the help of former Austrian and Yugoslav communists, the partisans engaged in acts of industrial sabotage, destruction of railways, transport centres and crops.¹⁰⁷ An effective and coordinated partisan movement was under way by the end of July 1941.¹⁰⁸ A prompt for this quick development was the resettlement program undertaken shortly after Slovenia's annexation. Slovenian workers were transported to the Reich, and German settlers were sent to take over their farms. Protecting the farmers led the Germans to apply brutal reprisal *Aktionen* such as the killing of six partisans on 6 October 1941 and the public display of their bodies in the Marburg *platz*; *Aktionen* that were more common in Poland and Russia than the Greater German Reich.¹⁰⁹

A final observation helps determine that the people were almost certainly Jews. Having buried the bodies, Myatt recalled emphatically that the Germans ordered the bodies disinterred so as to strip the corpses of any gold. Himmler had ordered on 23

¹⁰² Peter Padfield, *Himmler Reichsführer SS*, 352.

¹⁰³ Bretiman, op cit, 224; Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, 147 Hereafter Gilbert 1986.

¹⁰⁴ “Wansee Protocol 20.01.1942”, in Arad, op cit, 257.

¹⁰⁵ Cf Hilberg, op cit, 1.212.

¹⁰⁶ Kirk, op cit, 646.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 648,652.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 658.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 653, 659; Roberts, op cit, 70; IMT 7.432.

September 1940 that all gold teeth be removed from the bodies of dead prisoners and sent to the account of the SS's *Wirtschafts und Verwaltungshauptamt* (Economic and Administrative Main Office) with the *Reichsbank* in Berlin.¹¹⁰ No evidence has been found to indicate the same plundering of prisoners of war. Certainly, this procedure was a common "salvage" strategy in the *Konzentrationslager*.¹¹¹

Shortly after this episode, Myatt said that the *Stalag* at Marburg received a visit from *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler.

I tell you who came to the camp while I was there...he was the head of the Gestapo. He had glasses on; a little weasel looking man...Himmler...came to the camp. And they lined us all up and he was walking so as he could sort the Jews out. He was a weasel looking thing...He had real thick glasses, looked like jam jar bottles...that thick.¹¹²

When asked the reason for Himmler's visit, Myatt said he was there "for the victory." It is not entirely clear if Myatt was referring to the expected victory in Russia or the end of the war in Europe. Certainly, Himmler was busy in Eastern Europe throughout July and August 1941. In late July he was in Riga. On 15 August he visited Minsk, where he witnessed a mass shooting and was nearly ill.¹¹³ During the remainder of August and throughout part of September, Himmler travelled about eastern Europe, before heading west, reaching von Ribbentrop's estate near Salzburg in October.¹¹⁴ Certainly, Himmler and Heydrich were exploring ways of implementing the Führer's wish for a "Final Solution." During the heady months between June to September 1941, when the war in Russia looked as though it would be complete within weeks, Himmler occupied himself with a search to find the most effective means of carrying out the task. "Murder was in the air, many avenues were being explored, but little

¹¹⁰ Kogon, op cit, 136.

¹¹¹ Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 189.

¹¹² WM

¹¹³ Browning, op cit, 110; Gilbert 1986.191.

¹¹⁴ Bretiman, op cit, 223; Padfield, op cit, 350.

was settled, other than at least Himmler and Heydrich now knew what they were looking for - a way to kill all the Jews of Europe.”¹¹⁵

It is not impossible that Himmler could have paid a visit to Marburg as a part of a more extensive journey. The lining up of prisoners for the *Reichsführer's* inspection was not uncommon; but there is no way of determining if Himmler was there to “sort the Jews out” literally, since from the testimony given, the *Stalag* administration was already engaged in doing precisely that. Himmler, the “expert” on racial matters, occasionally asked for close inspections of prisoners in order to make an assessment of their racial qualities, and perhaps, “rescue” some pure Aryan blood.¹¹⁶ For most of the prisoners in Marburg, the opportunity of being “rescued” by the *Reichsführer* was not one to be relished.

Throughout the Reich the labour shortage brought about by the war was becoming acute. The National Socialist regime had for years used forced labour in order to accelerate production, but as yet had only applied this to civilian prisoners within the concentration camp system under the avaricious gaze of the SS. Volunteer workers had been a part of the German industrialisation program from as early as 1935 because of a labour shortage created by the reintroduction of conscription.¹¹⁷ After the invasion of Russia a systematic plan of enslavement was devised, whereby the needs of industry and agriculture would be met through the deportation of foreign nationals into Germany.¹¹⁸ On 21 March 1942 Hitler authorised the Plenipotentiary for Labour Allocation, Fritz Saukel, to recruit foreign labour for the Reich's war effort. At the height of German domination in Europe, Hitler's taskmasters had a population of 250 million potential slaves.¹¹⁹ At the end of the summer of 1941, there were some three million foreign workers in the Reich. Three years later the figure had grown to more than 7.5 million.¹²⁰ “Nearly all of them had been rounded up by force, deported to Germany in boxcars, usually without food or water or any sanitary facilities, and there put to work in the factories, fields and mines.” The misery of

¹¹⁵ Browning, op cit, 114.

¹¹⁶ Bretiman, op cit, 158.

¹¹⁷ Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, 215-216; Synder, op cit, 306.

¹¹⁸ Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*, 126.

¹¹⁹ Sereny, op cit, 310; Synder, op cit, 306.

Germany's slaves continued with degrading and brutal treatment, often being left to die for want of food, clothing and shelter.¹²¹

One major exception to this was the large number of Polish prisoners of war who had been working in German farms and factories since the winter of 1939/1940. After the fall of France, British and French prisoners were put to work. Ideological prejudice meant that the hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners were not to be used as slaves, but were to be allowed to starve to death.¹²²

Every *Stalag* had a Labour Office that provided work detachments or *Arbeitskommandos* for local farmers and factory owners. The employer was expected to provide and take care of adequate housing, food and security. For this, the employer received remuneration from the Reich. Generally, the work details comprised about 20 prisoners with two guards who either lived in the main *Stalag* or were quartered in employer-provided accommodation. The working week was usually six days with one rest day, usually (though not always) Sundays. Theoretically the prisoners were to be paid about 60 per cent of the German civilian wage.¹²³ This was more often than not honoured in the breach rather than in the practise.¹²⁴

The prisoners at Marburg were offered the opportunity to work either on farms or in mines. Max Sawyer joined Wilson Myatt in volunteering to go farm working. For Max the opportunity to get out from behind the barbed wire compound was not to be passed up.¹²⁵ For some prisoners the offer of work posed a moral dilemma. "Work" would mean providing a service to the enemy, and understandably many men refused the offer.¹²⁶ Alternatively, "work" provided the chance to create some sense of

¹²⁰ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ipperman, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945*, 297.

¹²¹ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 946.

¹²² Howard Levic, "The Employment of Prisoners of War", in *Military Law Review*, 23.46; Peukert, op cit, 128-129.

¹²³ "International Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 27.07.1929", in *Australian Edition of the Manual of Military Law 1941*, articles 34. Hereafter GC. Farm workers were covered by special rates, receiving 0.70RM daily plus efficiency bonuses of up to an extra 20 per cent. Of this, the prisoner kept one third, the *Stalag* got another third, and the remainder went to the employer "to cover housing and maintenance."

¹²⁴ Rolf, op cit, 64-65.

¹²⁵ BS

¹²⁶ Rolf, op cit, 70.

“normality” out of imprisonment and, for some, the avenue for escape. Under the Geneva Convention of 1929, Article 27 “provides that all prisoners of war, except commissioned officers, may be compelled to work.”¹²⁷ The Convention placed no restrictions on agricultural work, and it was in this area that most prisoners of war were employed from the outbreak of hostilities.

The fact that the product of their labour may eventually be used in the manufacture of a military item or be supplied to and consumed by combat troops being too remote to permit of, or warrant, restrictions.¹²⁸

The only restrictions placed on prisoner employment forbade the use of prisoner of war labour in any operation directly related to the belligerent power’s war effort, particularly arms and munitions work.¹²⁹

Sawyer, Myatt and a number of other prisoners volunteered for a *Landwirtschaft Arbeitskommando*, (farm working party). They were taken from Marburg to the small village of Eichburg, nestled in the South Styrian hills. In the small satellite camp the men maintained a greatly reduced version of *Stalag* life that allowed a latitude of freedom impossible in the main *Stalag*.

Farm work...was considered the best option, since this almost certainly involved more food by legal, or illegal means, and there were stories (not all of them entirely fanciful) of nights spent in bed with the farmer's wife, or even, in some wilder cases, the farmer himself...Generally it was reckoned by prisoners that living closely with a family could only lessen their hardships, and this was especially true of the many, small, scattered farms in Austria...¹³⁰

¹²⁷ GC 27; Levie, op cit, 48.

¹²⁸ *ibid*, 58.

¹²⁹ GC 31.

¹³⁰ Rolf, op.cit 63.

The negative side was the greater delay in receiving letters and Red Cross parcels.¹³¹ Nonetheless, the twenty months Max Sawyer spent in Eichburg, and later Mutzenfeld and Nestlebach, were generally happy and made a deep impression upon him. He would often remark in later years that if he ever left Australia he would go and live in the Austrian countryside.¹³² A letter written by an Australian prisoner working on an Austrian farm reached Australia and was published in the APOWRA Newsletter.

At present I am working on a farm where I have been six weeks. I go out to the farm with a guard in the morning and he calls for me again at night and takes me back to the camp where I sleep. There is plenty to eat on the farm, and the people treat me like one of the family. As a matter of fact, we sit down at the table and all eat out of the one dish in the middle of the table, I have all my meals at the farms, and on Sundays go there for breakfast, do not work, and after dinner bring back my tea to the camp. It is over six months since I have been a POW...¹³³

Max could have just as easily penned the letter. In later Newsletters reports of cleaning cowstalls, chopping wood and working in the snow were printed along with the plea for boots, warm underclothes and chocolate.¹³⁴ Throughout 1942 and 1943 a number of photographs of Australian POWs from Marburg and Wolfsberg were printed. Interestingly there are no photos of the *Arbeitskommandos in situ*.¹³⁵

Between March 1938 and May 1945 Austria was a country divided amongst itself. Now annexed to the Reich, Austria and the Austrians became

the agents of terror as well as its victims; they became the torturers as well as the tortured; they were the props of an evil regime as well as

¹³¹ Wynne-Mason, op cit, 88.

¹³² MB, BS, ES

¹³³ APOWRA 17.10.1941.

¹³⁴ APOWRA 05.11.1941.

¹³⁵ e.g APOWRA 15.08.1942, 16.11.1942, 15.12.1942, 15.01.1943.

those who tried to knock the props away...The duality lasted for seven years and it ran throughout the nation.¹³⁶

Disillusionment set in within hours after the *Anchluss*. Jews felt the force of the Gestapo and SD. Unlike the Jews of Germany, Austrian Jews were stunned and immobilised by a well-trained and experienced police force that exploited the euphoria of the *Anschluss* ruthlessly.¹³⁷ The activities of the Gestapo, SD and other police units were extended to embrace all the enemies of the Reich.¹³⁸

On 15 March 1938, two days after the *Anschluss*, Austria was reduced from nation state to *Reichsgau*, nominally administered by *Reichsstatthalter* Seyss-Inquart. By 23 April effective control of Austria was in the hands of Josef Burkel, former *Gauleiter* of the Saarland. One month later, Hitler divided Austria into seven *Gaue*, following the former Imperial divisions of the Hapsburgs. In June 1939 Hitler abolished the name *Österreich*, replacing it with *Ostmark*. This in turn was replaced by the term *Reichsgau of the Ostmark* in April 1940. Finally the name *Ostmark* was abolished by Führer Decree on 19 January 1942.¹³⁹ Even so, the majority of Austrians complied with the new state of affairs. The presence of the Gestapo and *Konzentrationslager* Mauthausen helped ensure conformity.¹⁴⁰

Gau Styria had the reputation of being a Nazi stronghold well before the *Anschluss*. According to Brook-Shepherd, the Nazi enclaves in Styria were in a “state of undeclared war” throughout the months before March 1938.¹⁴¹ Graz had been the site for pre-*Anschluss* Nazi demonstrations. On 24 February Chancellor Schuschnigg had ordered the Austrian Army to disperse a 65 000-strong Nazi rally outside the town hall in Graz where the Swastika had been raised alongside the Austrian national flag. The city was described as “more like an outpost of Hitler’s ‘Thousand Year Reich’ than an ancient seat of the Hapsburgs...”¹⁴² Under the rule of *Gauleiter* Siegfried Überreither, Styria was subject to *Gleichschaltung*, which meant hardship and

¹³⁶ Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Austrians: A Thousand Year Odyssey*, 334. Hereafter BS1996.

¹³⁷ Cf. Arad, op cit, 90.

¹³⁸ Shirer, op cit, 348.

¹³⁹ BS1996, 334-336.

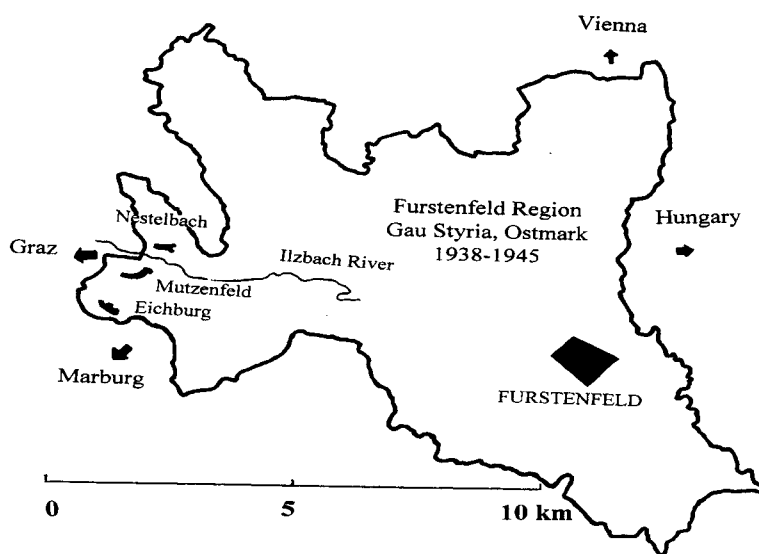
¹⁴⁰ *ibid*, 343,350.

¹⁴¹ Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *Anschluss: The Rape of Austria*, 107.

¹⁴² *ibid*, 105; Shirer, op cit, 333.

persecution for Graz’s 1720 Jews and the scattered hundreds of Jews in the villages of the *Gau*. The nearest Jewish community to Eichburg and Furstenfeld was Gussing, where 74 Jews lived in 1938.¹⁴³ They had, most likely, been “resettled” by late 1941.

Map 9: EICHBURG AND SURROUNDING ENVIRONS



Eichburg, Mutzenfeld and Nestelbach are tiny rural villages in the Styria district of southeastern Austria, very close to the Austro-Hungarian border. “Pretty” describes the region more aptly than “picturesque”, which is more appropriate for eastern Austria.¹⁴⁴ The narrow river Ilzbach flows through the valley in between the open fields of the valley floor, where the crops were planted and the cattle grazed. The villages can be seen in the distance in amongst the heavy forests that cover the hills, and the sounds of farm animals can be heard. Eichburg in 1941 was most likely not much different to what it had been in 1841, a quiet backwater, far from the cities and the politics of the day, be it Hapsburg imperialism or German Nazism. None of the three villages had ever laid claim to any famous son or daughter, nor had any earth-shattering event taken place; they were un presupposing villages that even in 1995 were almost impossible to find.¹⁴⁵ When the prisoners arrived in the summer of 1941 most of the local male population of war service age had already been conscripted and

¹⁴³ Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, 22; Synder, op cit, 109.

¹⁴⁴ MB

¹⁴⁵ ibid

sent to the fronts, leaving behind the elderly, the infirm, the very young and the women.

Gau Styria was a part of *Wehrkreis* XVIII, the second of two military districts formerly of the Austrian *Bundesheer*, taken over by the Wehrmacht. By the time Sawyer arrived in Eichburg, men from Styria were part of the Sixth Army sweeping into Russia, and were among the 40 000 *Ostmarker* killed or captured by the Red Army at Stalingrad.¹⁴⁶

Civilians were instructed to keep away from prisoners of war, foreign workers and concentration camp inmates. An editorial comment from the *Salzburger Volksblatt* of 8 February 1940 was typical of the official attitude towards prisoners of war.

Our national dignity forbids us all intercourse with Polish prisoners, such, for instance, as that recently carried on with some of those engaged in cleaning the streets of the city, when cigarettes were offered them. This is a misplaced charity, which, if persisted in, must create difficulties for the soldiers on guard, whose task, in any case, is not an easy one. If this present warning is not heeded, the delinquents are sure to be punished.¹⁴⁷

Women in particular were enjoined to avoid the dangers of associating with potential defilers of the blood. Those who did have “intimate relations”, or who were even suspected of having done so, were subject to public humiliation, usually by having their heads shaved and being made to wear placards announcing their “crime.”¹⁴⁸ The concern of the Gestapo over German women cavorting with prisoners of war and other enemies of the state prompted many warnings throughout the years of the war, suggesting that “fraternisation” was a major problem. The prisoner of war, the German people were reminded, “was a member of a nation which forced us into a world war and therefore he is an enemy of the nation.”¹⁴⁹ Certainly, the power to

¹⁴⁶ BS1996, 339-340.

¹⁴⁷ *Salzburger Volksblatt* 08.02.1941, in Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order in Poland*, 123. Hereafter PMI.

¹⁴⁸ PMI 126.

¹⁴⁹ “Dresden Gestapo Decree, 16.11.1942”, in Burleigh, op cit, 302. See too Robinson, op cit, 145.

supervise the population decreased the further removed one was from the city, and in the country districts of the Reich, in particular Austria, the exhortations to racial purity were often ignored.¹⁵⁰

Max was sent to work on the Maurer farm near Eichburg. He remained there, and on the neighbouring Rosenburger farm at Mutzenfeld (a couple of kilometres away) until early spring 1943. Anton Maurer, born in 1935, was 7 when Max came to work on the family farm. His memories of Max in 1995 were still vivid. “He was a very happy man, the children loved him, he always had chocolate with him and he used to play cards.”¹⁵¹ Julia Rosenburger, who was 12 in 1941, remembered Max with equal clarity: “I loved Max, he was so handsome and happy, he was like a member of the family.”¹⁵² Anton recalled that Max was very good with children, and would have some of them following him around the farm.¹⁵³

Hay making and grape harvesting were the first tasks in which the men from Marburg were engaged.¹⁵⁴ All the work in the fields was done by hand using sickles, only the threshing was mechanised. Wilson recalled repairing a thresher belonging to one of the families, something he said “I shouldn’t have done it really, but I did. They were so good to me I fixed it for them.” Likewise, Wilson also remembered deliberately wrecking a thresher that belonged to a woman who enjoyed exercising the prerogatives of the *Herrenvolk*. Had he been caught, Wilson could have faced a firing squad.¹⁵⁵ Max and Wilson helped with the wine pressing, working with bullocks to operate the press. On one occasion

we found out they had cider in [the cellar]...and we got into the cider...I got half shot and so did [Max]. I said to Max if we get caught we’re going to be in trouble. He said “I don’t care”, and I said, “Well I don’t either.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ WM; Wolf, op cit, 69.

¹⁵¹ Anton Maurer to MB, Eichburg, 17.11.95.

¹⁵² Julia Rosenburger to MB, Furstenfeld, 17.11.95.

¹⁵³ Gerhard Maurer to MB, Eichburg, 17.11.95.

¹⁵⁴ WM

¹⁵⁵ ibid

¹⁵⁶ WM

Both men developed a deep respect for the Austrians, describing them as “good people” who had little time for the National Socialists, a sentiment that increased curiously with the reversals of Rommel in North Africa beginning in August 1942.¹⁵⁷ The men also came into contact with Hungarian Gypsies who would turn up in the area for market days. Wilson remembered vividly that the Gypsies had “some beautiful girls.” The availability of female company eventually landed both men in serious trouble, but at the beginning flirting and the occasional “fling” seemed to provide a healthy outlet for the months of captivity. Wilson maintained that one of the guards was also interested in some of the local farm girls, and so tended to turn a blind eye to the amorous activities of the prisoners.

Surrounded by the beauty of the hill country, Max took to wandering off on his own for anything up to two or three days at a time. His intention appears not to have leaned towards escape, since that option would have been next to impossible. Without documentation, maps and money, he would not have gone far.¹⁵⁸ Rather, the wandering seems to have been for the simple reason of looking at the country and getting to know the local Austrian farmers, who it appears, were not disconcerted at the presence of an Australian prisoner of war “on the loose.” At the time Max was only just 21, a young man from rural Australia, who was “fed up with being shut up all the time and all this lovely countryside was around him, so he’d knock a few slats off the wall and he’d get out and go off.”¹⁵⁹ On one of his wanderings Max was gone for several days. He stayed with local farmers who feted him, and sent him off with food and wine for the other prisoners. On his way back to Eichburg

he found this little hedgehog...so he decided that he’d have the hedgehog as a companion. And he said it was so prickly because he was trying to carry it, so he ended up taking his belt off and he put it around the hedgehog, so he’d have the hedgehog around this hand, the bucket of wine around this hand and trying to hold up his trousers with his elbows. And he came around the corner, this guard was there with the gun...and [Max] said the whole village was there laughing

¹⁵⁷ WM; BS1996.357; Gilbert 1989.357-358.

¹⁵⁸ Wynn-Mason, op cit, 86.

¹⁵⁹ BS

their heads off and anyhow [Max] said when the guard saw him he opened the door [of the prisoners barrack] burst out laughing...and shoved him in and he said "Next time I'll kill you Maxvelt"...the other fellows told him "that [the guard] was going to kill you for sure Maxy...You've done it once too often and you were going to be shot this time"...¹⁶⁰

It was because of these repeated wanderings that Max earned the nickname "Bye Bye" — a name that travelled back to Australia.¹⁶¹

The quiet idyll of the farms came to an abrupt end in early 1943. Mitzi Gemandl, who worked for the Rosenburgers and had a four-year-old son (in 1942), had evidently developed a "crush" on Max. According to Franz Rosenburger, Julia's brother, at some point in early 1943 Mitzi wrote Max a love letter that was intercepted by the local miller, Bohak. Bohak was already jealous of the attention that Max and the other prisoners enjoyed from the local girls, and this provided him with the opportunity of settling some scores. Bohak sent the letter to the *Gendarmerie* who arrested Max in Nestelbach on the charge of "fraternisation."¹⁶²

This incident is a vivid example of what Allen termed "the atomisation of the community."¹⁶³ "Atomisation" was what *Gleichschaltung* meant on interpersonal levels of human society. Ideally, all elements within a village such as Eichburg would be placed under the watchful eye of National Socialism. "Ultimately all society, in terms of formal human relationships, would cease to exist, or rather would exist in a new framework whereby each individual related not to his fellow men, but only to the state and to the Nazi leader who became the personal embodiment of the state."¹⁶⁴

The effect of this on a small rural community such as Eichburg has to be weighed against the greater resistance to Nazi ideology demonstrated in rural Catholic areas. Nonetheless, *Gleichschaltung* had a deleterious effect on communities, building as it

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*

¹⁶¹ EWS to EMS 15.03.1943; MB.

¹⁶² Franz Rosenburger to MB, Eichburg, 17.11.1995.

¹⁶³ William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a single German Town*, 221

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, 221-222.

did, on mistrust and suspicion.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps the greatest social change effected under National Socialism was the increase in petty victimisation and blackmail. The denouncer, anonymous or known, became a fixture in the social life of the Third Reich.¹⁶⁶

There is no evidence to suggest that Max was ever “involved” with any of the Austrian women. Such can not be said for his companion, Wilson. Some months before, in late 1942, Wilson had been arrested on the same charge. However, in Wilson’s case, the presence of a pregnant Josefa Maurer was evidence enough of the charge. A son, Ernst Weidner, was born in 1943. Josefa was sentenced to a year's imprisonment in Germany for her collaboration.¹⁶⁷ After a solid beating by the local *Gendarmerie*, Wilson was sentenced in Graz to penal servitude in the *Straflager* at Torgau and then in January 1943 he was officially transferred to *Stalag XX A* Thorn.¹⁶⁸ Myatt was actually sent to *Straflager* Graudenz in northern Poland.¹⁶⁹ The police told the local people that they would never see the men again — which was understood as a euphemism for being shot.

Max was taken to Wolfsberg, the principal *Stalag*, and tried before a military court. The local police had most likely beaten him in the same way as Wilson. Sawyer’s service record has Wolfsberg as the place of trial, but has “insubordination” recorded as the charge, not “fraternisation”, which was a more accurate description of the misdemeanour. As a prisoner of war he was the responsibility of the Wehrmacht, and so a military tribunal would have sat in judgement. The charge was serious. Sexual involvement with a German woman was considered a major breach of security and the source of potentially dangerous subversion. Max’s contact with Reich citizens not directly involved in his area of work had already put him in danger. German regulations to prisoners and foreign workers stated categorically:

Infringements of the rule prohibiting all association, especially with German women, will be severely punished...Association with

¹⁶⁵ *ibid*, 223.

¹⁶⁶ Gellately, *op cit*, 137-138, 165-171.

¹⁶⁷ Ernest Weidner to MB, Eichburg, 17.11.1995.

¹⁶⁸ ICRC, 11.01.1943, RB 27626 L192.

¹⁶⁹ WM

prisoners of war is permissible only in so far as it is inevitable in the course of their work. All association going beyond this will be punished with the utmost rigour. This applies in particular to German women.¹⁷⁰

Max's predicament was not made any easier over the doubts of his racial origins. Questions were raised, according to Max in later years, as to whether he was Jewish or not.¹⁷¹ Max remained convinced that many Germans considered him to be a Jew, a point outlined above. If this was the case, then the charge carried the added weight of an infringement of the 1935 *Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour*, which was extended to Austria on 24 May 1938.¹⁷² Under the Nuremberg Law, "extramarital intercourse between Jews and subjects of the state of German or related blood is forbidden." The penalty for violation of the Law was a prison sentence for the male "with or without hard labour."¹⁷³ In fact, if the above scenario is correct, Max's survival lay in his being handled by the Wehrmacht and not the Gestapo or SD. In a memorandum to all Gestapo offices in the Reich on 8 March 1940, Himmler ordered *Rassenschande* offences to be punished by death.¹⁷⁴

There appears to be an inconsistency here. All German police were subject to *Gleichschaltung*, a process that was well under way within weeks of the *Machtergreifung*. The traditional role of the German police at all levels was the maintenance of public security and order. To this was now added the political mission of ensuring loyalty to the "Reich Government of National Revival under the leadership of Adolf Hitler." Criminality was to be determined in the light of National Socialist dogma.¹⁷⁵

Himmler's appointment as Chief of German Police on 17 June 1936 meant the national civilian police force was now under the umbrella security organisation that also covered the Gestapo and SS.¹⁷⁶ All police forces were centralised under the

¹⁷⁰ "The Foreign Worker in Germany", op cit, 1b, AWM 54.779/4/21.

¹⁷¹ MB

¹⁷² Nathan Stoltzfus, (1996) *Resistance of the Heart*, 92.

¹⁷³ "Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour, 15.09.1935", in Arad, op cit, 78-79.

¹⁷⁴ Gellately, op cit, 223.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid*, 37.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, 44.

Gestapo on 20 September 1936. Security in Germany and later throughout the Greater German Reich, in effect meant that the “Gestapo operated not only on regular law, but on ‘special principles and requirements’ which meant it operated as an agent of the Führer’s will, summit of Law in the Reich.”¹⁷⁷ So, when Sawyer was arrested on the basis of Bohak’s charge, he faced an insecure future. Evidently, the local police who may well have also acted as the local Gestapo, delivered Sawyer to the relevant military authorities since he was arrested as a prisoner of war, not an escapee or saboteur.¹⁷⁸

There are no details of the proceedings, except that the charge was established. A *Kriegsgericht*, a circuit military court martial tried prisoners of war, usually with a colonel as the presiding judge. The court-appointed defence counsel would encourage the defendant to plead guilty to whatever the charge might be, in order to appear contrite, and hopefully receive a lighter sentence. Allowance would be made for the prisoner to offer a defence, but it would appear this was not encouraged. Finally, the judge would hand down the sentence. Often the whole procedure would take less than half an hour.¹⁷⁹ Wilson Myatt had been subject to a similar trial earlier in Graz. Wilson had a court-appointed defence lawyer who said quite plainly that the case was very simple; his client was guilty, therefore the trial was over quickly, and Wilson sentenced to three years hard labour in *Strafgefängnis* Torgau.¹⁸⁰

Max was sentenced to the military *Straflager* at Graudenz for three and a half years, after a trial that probably lasted as long as Wilson’s. Max was sentenced on 20 April 1943, *Der Führertag*, Hitler’s birthday. The details recorded on Max’s service and casualty form are brief:

Judicial Proceedings against POW; Date of Trial 20 April 1943.

Place of Trial: Wolfsberg; Charge: Insubordination.

Military Penal Code Para. 92, Sub-para. 1 & 11. figure 1.158

Finding: Guilty; Sentence: 3 years and 6 months¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*, 42; cf. Joachim Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich*, 322. Hereafter Fest 1963.

¹⁷⁸ Gellately, *op cit*, 37; IMT 6.352.

¹⁷⁹ Ramsey, *op cit*, 106-115.

¹⁸⁰ WM

¹⁸¹ CARO

Under the Geneva Convention, prisoners of war “shall be subject to the laws and regulations, and orders in force in the armed forces of the detaining Power.”¹⁸² The Convention goes on to outline the way in which discipline should be applied.

Allied prisoners of war were, therefore, subject to identical prescriptions to those of the Wehrmacht — hardly a cheering fact given the brutal discipline the Wehrmacht exercised. Bartov comments that:

Discipline in the German army was always harsh; but in the Wehrmacht, and especially in the *Ostheer* of 1941-1945, it became positively murderous...a manifestation of the extent to which the regime’s *Weltanschauung* had penetrated the ranks of the army and remoulded its concepts of legality and criminality, morality and justice, discipline and obedience.¹⁸³

Discipline under the Wehrmacht was harsh and brutal. The Convention specifically forbade the transfer of prisoners to “penitentiary establishments”,¹⁸⁴ and demanded basic hygiene, access to reading and writing materials, and daily access to the camp doctor if requested. It appears that Max had been able to write to his father around April-May. A letter from Ernest written in October 1943 speaks with concern “since learning of your altered circumstances.”¹⁸⁵ Letters to and from family members had to be related to solely personal news, so Ernest would have no way of knowing any more than the barest of details about his son’s “predicament.” The letter closed with an anguished plea for Max to keep out of trouble.

Keep your pecker up my son, and please, for my sake don’t get into any more mischief. It is no fun being a soldier, but it is less so being a soldier’s father. I know, because I have experienced both.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² GC 45.

¹⁸³ Bartov, op cit, 95.

¹⁸⁴ GC 56.

¹⁸⁵ EWS to EMS 20.10.1943.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*

In recognition of the prisoner having been convicted of an offence, the Convention permitted the cessation of “parcels and remittances of money to the addresses until the expiration of the sentence.”¹⁸⁷ It is arguable then that news of Sawyer’s court martial and his sentencing was couched in language that would have been understood and approved by the Australian military authorities, since imprisonment in Graudenz was contrary to the Convention.

The service and casualty form reveals that Sawyer was transferred to *Stalag* XXA, Thorn, on 8 December 1943. The Red Cross received notification of a transfer of Max Sawyer to *Stalag* XXA Thorn, in a communication dated 11 August 1943. This information was relayed to Max’s family on 11 November 1943¹⁸⁸ and the Australian Army on 24 November 1943.¹⁸⁹ A letter from Max to his father, arrived in February 1944 bearing a *Stalag* XXA postmark.¹⁹⁰ Given that the average time for a letter from Max to arrive in Australia took between five to six months, it further indicates that Max had been in Graudenz since August 1943. In between the handing down of his sentence and the transfer to Graudenz, Max probably spent a good part of that time in solitary confinement. Whatever the case, his life had changed dramatically. The idyll in the Austrian countryside was over: a harsh and cruel episode was to open that would last effectively until the end of his life.

¹⁸⁷ GC 56-58.

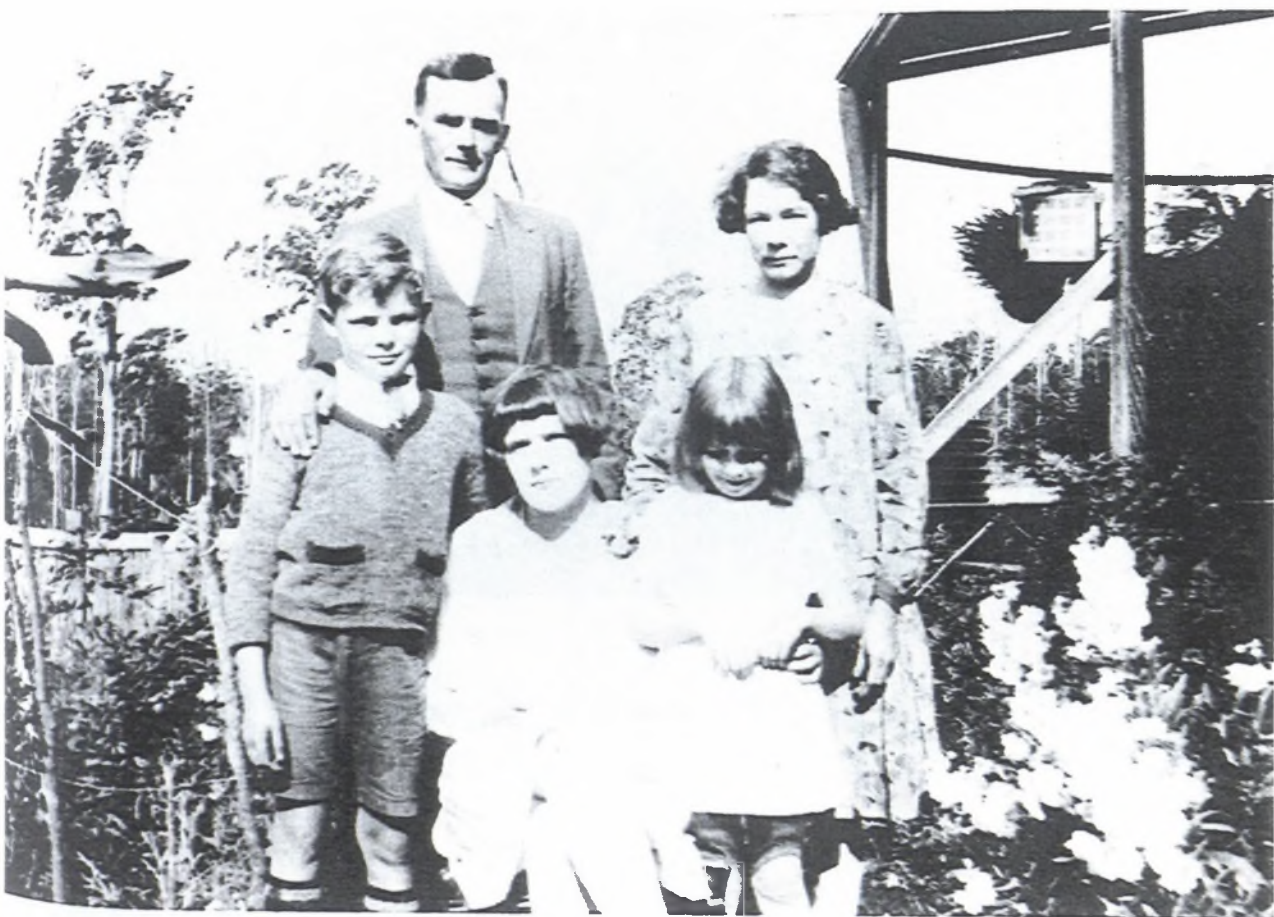
¹⁸⁸ ICRC, RB 30668 M829.

¹⁸⁹ ICRC, Comm CC 490 RB 30468 M307.

¹⁹⁰ EWS to EMS 25.02.1944.



Ernest Wiseman Sawyer c1917 Egypt



The Sawyer Family c1930: Ernest, Minnie, Max, Enid, Vera



Pte Max Sawyer NX1488 November 1939



90 mls from nowhere

"90 miles from nowhere"
In the Palestinian desert. c1940



Scene from Stalag XVIII D, Marburg in annexed Slovenia.
Photo taken 1943-1944. Max was here in mid-1941 (AWM)



Scene from former Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsburg.
Max was held here briefly in 1942. (Photo 1995)



Eichburg, Austria. Farm building where the Arbeitskommando men were housed. 1942-1943 (Photo 1995)



Eichburg satellite camp, Austria 1942.
Wilson Myatt 1st right Front Row; Max Sawyer 2nd right Front Row



Rosenburg family harvesting. Mutzenfeld, Austria c1942



Eichburg, Austria. Farm houses. (Photo 1995)



Max Sawyer June 1945. Wearing the North Africa Campaign ribbons.

Chapter Seven: Strafgefängnis Graudenz

April 1943 - March 1944

When the Wehrmacht swept across the Polish frontiers on 1 September 1939, the Nazi hierarchy had a more or less cogent plan devised for the soon to be conquered state. Hitler had already declared his intention of annihilating Poland, speaking of far greater forces that moved the German *Volk*. “Close heart to pity. Proceed brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what they have a right to. Their existence must be guaranteed. The stronger is in the right. Supreme hardness.”¹ The National Socialist dream lay in acquisition of an empire in the east.² Hitler had painted a policy of *lebensraum* in *Mein Kampf*, stating categorically “land and soil [is] the goal of our foreign policy.”³ Determined to avoid another diplomatic compromise, Hitler was determined to subject Poland to unacceptable demands which would be refused, and thus provide the pretext for planning the invasion and destruction of the Polish state.⁴ Danzig was not the goal of German and Polish negotiations throughout late 1938 and the first half of 1939; “the Germans wanted not Danzig, but war.”⁵

The actions of the Wehrmacht put flesh around the Führer’s words.⁶ Atrocities against Polish prisoners of war began within hours of the invasion, and continued until after the surrender in late September.⁷ At least 12 000 known cases of the murder of civilians in non-military incidents occurred in the Polish Campaign⁸; 18 000 men of the *Totenkopfverbaende* (SS Death’s Head Units) followed the Wehrmacht in order to implement “police and security” measures on the Poles, and in particular Polish Jews — a task they took to with relish.⁹ Once Poland had surrendered on 24 September, the Germans divided the land between themselves and the Soviet Union, who had invaded from the east on 17 September. In the German sector, Hitler announced on 8 October the annexation of the northern and western regions of

¹ Adolf Hitler, in Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, 595. Hereafter Fest 1982.

² *ibid*, 130.

³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 593.

⁴ Gerhard Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II*, 125.

⁵ *ibid*, 128.

⁶ Bartov, *op cit*, 64-65.

⁷ Szymon Datner, “Crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during the September Campaign and the Period of Military Government 1 September-25 October 1939”, in *Polish Western Affairs*, 3.2.302-302

⁸ *ibid*, 332.

⁹ Gerald Reitlinger, *SS Alibi of a Nation*, 125-126; Gilbert 1989.3-4.

Pomerania and Silesia into the *Alt Reich*. Two new Reich administrative districts were established, the *Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen* and *Reichsgau Wartheland*.¹⁰ The remainder of the occupied zone was designated the *Gouvernementgeneral Polen* on 12 October, to be ruled as a personal fiefdom by Nazi *Alter Kämpfer* and Hitler's former lawyer, Hans Frank.¹¹

Absorbed into the Reich was 92 000 square kilometres, with a population of 10.1 million, of whom 8.9 million were ethnic Poles, 603 000 Jews and 600 000 *Volksdeutsche*. These areas

were earmarked by the Nazis for complete germanisation as part of the Reich and were turned into a German outpost in the east. The Polish character of the area was to be obliterated. Poles who were considered by the Germans to be a threat to the Reich or unfit for germanisation were destined for deportation either to the Government General or to the Reich for ultimate extermination.¹²

In the mind of *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler, the conquest of Poland was the beginning of the reclamation of “ancestral soil.” The land of the east would be made into a new paradise, with the opportunity for any Germans to become builders of the Reich through toiling on the land.¹³

An integral part of the reclamation of “ancestral soil” was the obliteration of the Polish nation demonstrated through the forced expulsions begun within weeks of the war ending. Deportations in the *Reichsgau Wartheland* and *Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen* reached their high point in the winter of 1939-1940, with future plans for between 3 to 5.5 million Poles and Jews to be expelled.¹⁴ By 1943, 711 780 Poles had been deported from the *Warthegau*.¹⁵ Polish families, especially Jews, were ordered at gunpoint to pack what ever they could carry, (always minus valuables) and

¹⁰ *Reichsgau Wartheland* was alternatively referred to as *Warthegau* or *Warta*.

¹¹ R F Leslie, *The History of Poland since 1863*, 214; Fest 1963.324.

¹² Leslie, *ibid*, 214.

¹³ Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz*, 163.

¹⁴ Jerzy Marczewski, “The aims and character of the Nazi Deportation Policy as shown by the example of the ‘Warta Region’”, in *Polish Western Affairs*, 10.2, 242-244; Tomasz Szarota, “Poland and Poles in German eyes during World War II”, in *Polish Western Affairs*, 19.1, 240.

leave their homes. The houses were allocated to *Volkdeutsche* from the Baltic States who were on the move.¹⁶

Plans were set in motion, and in March 1940 the *Thorner Freiheit*, the Aryanised newspaper in Thorn, announced that between three to four million *Volkdeutsche* were to be settled in the newly annexed areas of the Reich.¹⁷ Himmler's plan was to create a new agricultural society where Germans could realise their natural destiny of "blood and soil." They would build authentically German villages in land that, according to Nazi historians and geographers such as Dr Konrad Meyer and Professor Walter Geisler, was and always had been German.¹⁸ In the eighteen months up to March 1941, Himmler repatriated a total of 490 640 *Volksdeutsche* "home to the Reich," far short of the millions, but a start nonetheless.¹⁹ The operation was under the direction of Himmler's *Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums* (Reich Office for the Consolidation of German Nationhood.)²⁰

At the heart of the German policy towards Poland was the question of race. As early as 1934 the book *Germany Prepare For War!* by Ewald Banse began preparing the ideological grounds for a future conflict on the grounds of race. Although banned in Germany in November 1933 as being too militaristic, and compromising the Reich government's trumpeted commitment to peace, Banse nonetheless succinctly expressed, albeit prematurely, the National Socialist attitude toward Poland.²¹ Poland's division in the eighteenth century was "the only way [Prussia, Austria and Russia] could feel secure against a turbulent people."²² The Polish people were "filled with a blind hatred of everything foreign, and especially disliked the superior organisation, discipline and orderliness of the Germans."²³ Ruled by a "terrorist regime", Poland was "incapable of quiet, systematic and constructive work."²⁴

¹⁵ Marczewski, *ibid*, 257.

¹⁶ Padfield, *op cit*, 276.

¹⁷ PMI 154.

¹⁸ Dwork and van Pelt, *op cit*, 136-158.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

²⁰ Clarissa Henry and Marc Hillel, *Children of the SS*, 151.

²¹ Fest 1982, 436; Hitler, *op cit*, 354; Shirer, *op cit*, 212.

²² Ewald Banse, *Germany Prepare for War!*, 329.

²³ *ibid*, 333.

²⁴ *ibid*

Perhaps the greatest irony is that this book in its English translation was available in Australia, through the publishers Angus and Robertson in Sydney in 1934.

Poles were to be transformed “into an enslaved people exploited in the interest of the Reich.”²⁵ All traces of humanitarianism, compassion or solidarity were to be obliterated. The Overlords, through draconian regulations, “were to shape the attitudes of the *Untermenschen* by making them aware at every step that they were inferior and subordinated to the *Herrenvolk*.”²⁶ On 6 June 1940, German penal law was promulgated in the new *Reichsgaue* in place of previous legal codes. The new laws applied only to non-Aryans and were designed to keep the Polish population subdued and docile through a liberal application of terror. A new, even harsher code was introduced on 12 December 1941, making the death penalty mandatory for all offences against the Reich, from anti-German attitudes to the more familiar crimes of theft and murder.²⁷

Legal administration was the prerogative and domain of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, who exercised a superior jurisdiction over the local courts of the *Gau*. On Himmler’s order, from 11 March 1943, all Poles who had served sentences of over six months were to be sent directly to a *Konzentrationslager* immediately on completion of their sentence.²⁸ Finally, through manipulation of the *Gauleiters* of the *Wartheland* and *Danzig-Westpreussen*, Himmler ensured that the presence of the SS would be not only tolerated, but also left unhindered to pursue its own objectives. The *Höheren SS und Polizeiführer* (Higher SS and Police Leaders - HSSFP) in each *Gau* were the personal representatives of the *Reichsführer SS*, and were charged to guard SS interests against any threat from Party, State or Wehrmacht. In the annexed areas there was little ability to resist the encroachments of the SS.²⁹ For allied prisoners, the presence of the SS, SD, *Kripo* and the Gestapo was a continual threat that hovered menacingly in the background. In some cases, the Wehrmacht would be unable and, at times, unwilling to intervene to halt the interference of Himmler’s minions.³⁰

²⁵ Leslie, op cit, 215.

²⁶ Szarota, op cit, 238-239.

²⁷ K.M. Popiechalski, “Nazi Terror in Poland”, in *Polish Western Affairs*, 4/5.78-79.

²⁸ *ibid*, 81.

²⁹ Herbert Levine, “Local authority and the SS state”, in *Central European History*, 2.339.

Second only to Jews in the Nazi racial hierarchy, Poles were destined to be a massive pool of readily exploitable slave labour. Some 2 841 500 Poles were deported as forced labour to the Reich during the years of occupation.³¹ However, in order to “pacify” the *untersmenschen*, the elite of Polish culture and society had to be liquidated.

The German definition of “elite” was so broad, that it embraced a major part of Polish society, including not only teachers, physicians, priests, officers, businessmen, landowners, and writers, but also anyone who even attended secondary school.³²

Deliberate germanisation reinforced the rule of the *Herrenvolk*. Poland’s cultural, spiritual and national life was to be destroyed: the method was irrelevant.³³

Alongside the destruction of Poles was the more insidious and gradual extermination of Polish Jewry. On 21 September 1939, Heydrich ordered the secret implementation of plans for “the final aim” of the “Jewish Question in Occupied Territory.”³⁴ Heydrich’s brief covered issues of concentration of Jews in large central locations, the establishment of the *Judenrat*, and the “Aryanisation” of Jewish businesses.³⁵ A month later forced labour was introduced for Jews in the *Gouvernementgeneral*, and from 23 November 1939 all Jews over the age of ten were ordered to wear the Star of David.³⁶ And so the restrictions went on. For the short term, however, Poland’s Jews were to be expelled from the annexed territories and dumped into the *Gouvernementgeneral*.³⁷

³⁰ Cf. Jack Goyder, *A Touch of Sabotage*, 99-106.

³¹ Szarota, op cit, 203.

³² Richard Lucas, *The Forgotten Holocaust*, 8.

³³ *ibid*, 8-17; Henryk Batowski, “Nazi Germany and the Jagiellonian University Sonderaktion Krakau 1939”, in *Polish Western Affairs*, 19.1.113-119.

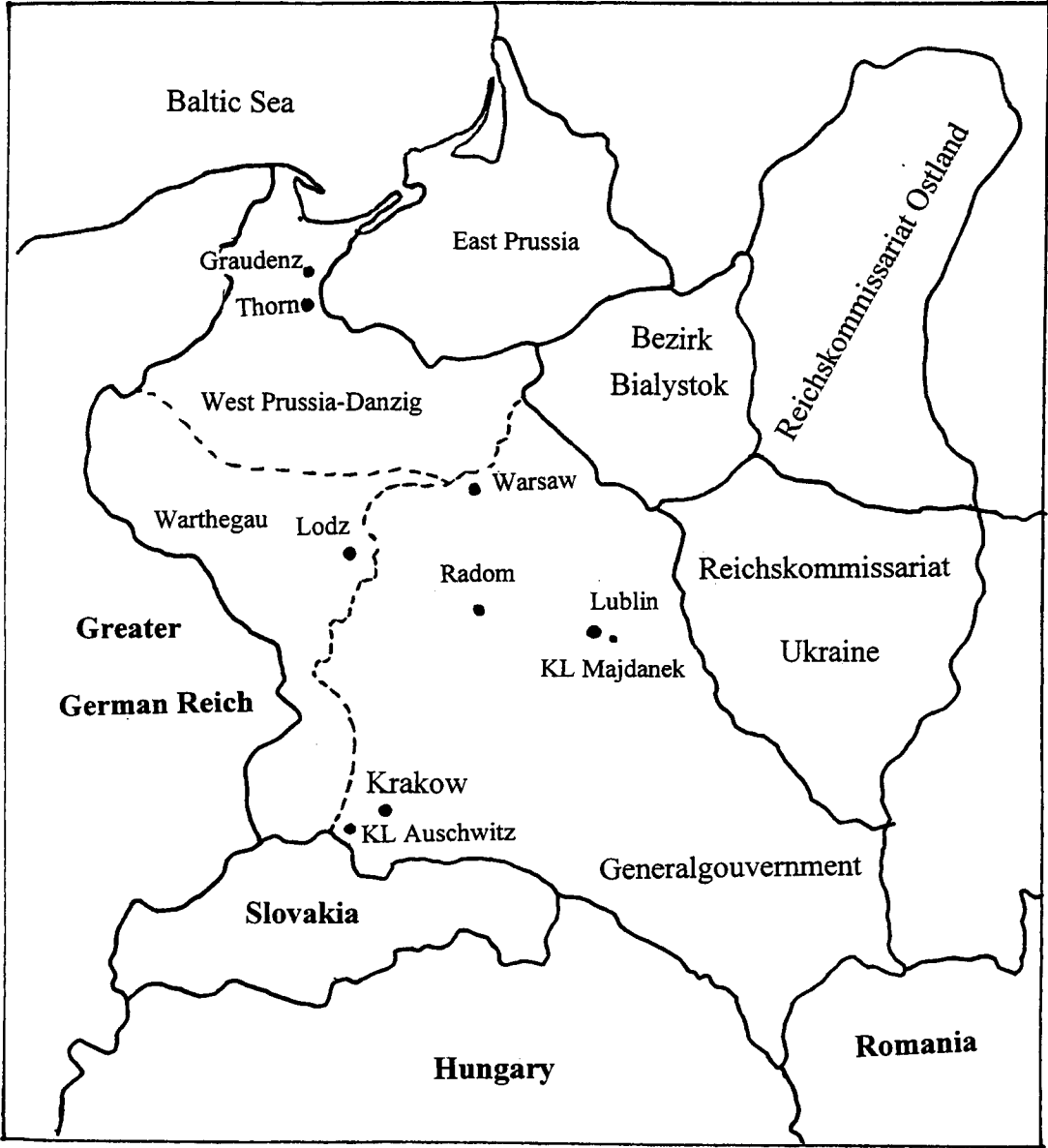
³⁴ Arad, op cit, 173.

³⁵ *ibid*, 173-176.

³⁶ *ibid*, 178-179.

³⁷ Dawidowicz, op cit, 150.

Map 10: POLAND 1939-1945



Reichsgau Danzig incorporated *Wehrkreis XX* and the Wehrmacht *Stammlager* Thorn. Thorn, situated on the river Vistula, had been “Germanised”, beginning with the renaming of the town from Torun to Thorn. Thorn’s Jews had been expelled in April 1940, but not before many had been humiliated and beaten in the local *Arbeiterlager* established in the preceding January.³⁸ Thorn had been the capital of Polish Pomerania, and had a population of nearly 60 000, of whom 96per cent were Poles. Shortly after the fall of France, a *Stammlager* was established about five kilometres outside the town, in Fort XV that had been built with money extracted from the French after the Franco-Prussian war in 1871.

Standing in a wide plain, these were built mostly underground. The walls, which are several yards wide, rise only a little above the surface and the interiors look more like pits than courtyards. They are surrounded by moats with sheer sides.³⁹

Thorn was a perfect place for a *Stammlager*. Another of the reasons Thorn and other Polish towns were selected as prisoner of war camps was as a means of further demoralising the Polish people. A Finnish journalist reporting from Posen in January 1941 recorded the following:

Asked why war prisoners were sent to Poland, when there was no shortage of labour locally, a German official replied: “In every town and village in the *Warthegau* we keep a large number of French and British war prisoners because we want to show the Poles what their saviours really look like.”⁴⁰

The usual satellite *Arbeiterlager* surrounded Fort XV where prisoners were engaged in farming and some factory work.⁴¹ In February 1941, a group of British officers were sent to Thorn as an act of reprisal for alleged ill treatment of German prisoners in Canada.⁴² Life in *Stalag XXA* was not materially different from other

³⁸ PMI 230.

³⁹ Aidan Crawley, *Escape from Germany*, 126.

⁴⁰ Bertil Svahnstroem in PMI 198.

⁴¹ Goyder, op cit, 75-80; David Wild, *Prisoner of Hope*, 22-23.

⁴² Wynnc-Mason, op cit, 91.

Stammlageren, “except that in Poland there was evidence of harsher treatment by guards, including a number of fatal shooting incidents.”⁴³ The combination of the appalling treatment of the Poles and Jews witnessed by many prisoners in *Stalags* in the *Reichsgaue* Wartheland or Danzig, left few in any doubt as to the ferocity of the New Order for those deemed racially inferior. It is an interesting observation to note that very few, if any, *Stammlager* designed for western prisoners were to be found in the *Gouvernementgeneral*.

Some 50 kilometres north of Thorn lay the town of Grudziadz, which had been germanised to Graudenz. Graudenz, of similar size to Thorn, with a population of about 60 000, was a factory city. Factories such as the Firma Vensky works produced most of the heavy metal products in Poland.⁴⁴ By the end of 1939 around 30 per cent of the Polish population was deported to the *Gouvernementgeneral* and many “redeemable” Polish children between the ages of 7 and 14 were seized and sent to Germany in order to be raised as Germans.⁴⁵ At the end of 1942 Graudenz was selected as the site for a *Strafgefängnis*.⁴⁶

Previously, prisoners convicted of serious breaches of military law were sent to the *Strafgefängnis* at Fort Zinna, Torgau, near Leipzig. Torgau was a punishment prison, where allied prisoners of war were incarcerated with German soldiers who had been convicted of serious breaches of discipline. The usual list of charges for prisoners of war consisted of “refusal to work, sabotage, assaulting a guard, [and] sexual intercourse with a German women.”⁴⁷ One former inmate remembered Torgau as a place of terrible brutality and harshness:

Everything you did, you did at the double. And, there were Germans there with self inflicted wounds. There was one poor bloke, he got 19 years in chains. And he was dragging chains around. And he asked [the guards] to kill him, and they wouldn't.⁴⁸

⁴³ *ibid*, 138.

⁴⁴ Goyder, *op cit*, 54-57.

⁴⁵ PMI 30; Henry, *op cit*, 153-154.

⁴⁶ Alternatively referred to as a *Straflager*.

⁴⁷ Wynn-Mason, *op cit*, 395.

Between the outbreak of the war and mid-1944 as many as 107 470 German soldiers were imprisoned in *Straflager*.⁴⁹ Allied prisoners of war witnessing the brutality of the Wehrmacht against its own often wondered what sort of people the Germans were.⁵⁰ Conditions were so bad compared to the regular *Stammlager*, that some prisoners went to extreme lengths to get respite in a prison hospital.⁵¹

There is a discrepancy over the dating of the transfer of Allied prisoners from Torgau to Graudenz. Wynne Mason says the transfer took place in late 1942, but this could be referring only to British prisoners.⁵² David Wild, an Anglican priest who was incarcerated in Thorn from November 1941 to January 1945, claims the transfer was made in the summer of 1943.⁵³ Wilson Myatt was held in Torgau during at least part of 1942 prior to his transfer to Graudenz. There is evidence to argue that the transfer took place in the summer of 1942. In April 1942 six New Zealanders were sentenced to four years imprisonment in Torgau. Five of the men staged an escape from Torgau and although recaptured they spent the rest of the war in *Stalags* under assumed names.⁵⁴ A group of 43 Allied prisoners, including ten Australians and five New Zealanders, were sentenced to prison terms in Graudenz in July-August 1942 after a failed escape attempt at Waldenstein Castle, on Packsattel Pass, about 25 kilometres north of Wolfsburg.⁵⁵ Evidently, by summer 1942, recidivists were being dispatched to Graudenz. It is possible that the transfer of allied prisoners from Torgau to Graudenz took place over some time in 1942 and early 1943.

⁴⁸ WM

⁴⁹ Bartov, op cit, 96.

⁵⁰ WM

⁵¹ Wynne-Mason, op cit, 395.

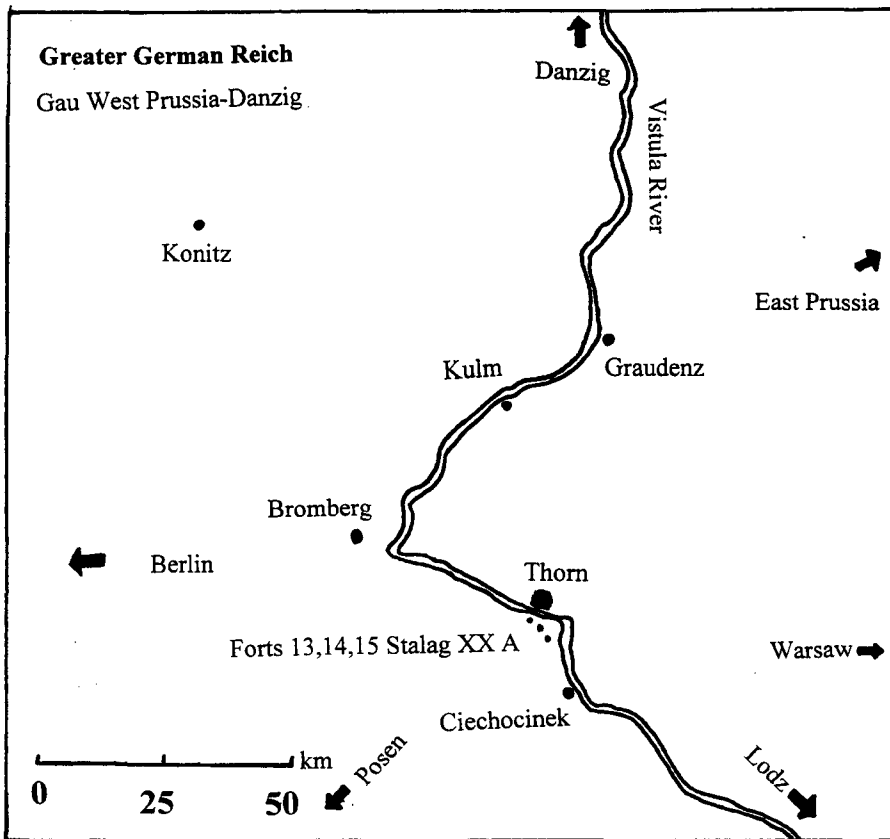
⁵² ibid 396.

⁵³ Wild, op cit, 120.

⁵⁴ Wynne-Mason, op cit, 395.

⁵⁵ Adam-Smith, op cit, 193-194.

Map 11: THORN AND GRAUDENZ



When the *Strafgefängnis* was transferred to Graudenz, conditions did not improve. Indeed, the treatment of the prisoners was more akin to that of inmates in a *Konzentrationslager* (KL). A high wall surrounded four stone buildings that in turn surrounded a central courtyard. Graudenz had at one time been a monastery, and had a chapel, a “surprisingly fine Gothic building in the style of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris.”⁵⁶ Appalling hygiene conditions and constant hunger made the prisoners susceptible to typhus, scurvy, malnutrition, and other disabling conditions more commonly found in the KL. Prisoners were kept on minimum rations of poor quality soup and equally poor bread. It was not until March 1944 that Red Cross parcels were permitted in order to supplement the prison diet.⁵⁷ Wilson Myatt recalled stories of brutal treatment by guards, beatings, punishment details, withdrawal of rations for minor infractions of prison rules and virtual slave labour in a Graudenz factory.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Wild, op cit, 123.

⁵⁷ Wynn-Mason, op cit, 396.

⁵⁸ WM

Another Graudenz survivor, John O'Loughlin, remembered that life in the *Strafgefängnis* was hard:

...six men to each cell, [we] had to work seven hours each day on the banks of the River Vistula, on food unfit for human consumption; no Red Cross parcels as these were confiscated by the Germans. We had to wear clogs and no socks and bits of cloth to rap (sic) around our feet to march 3 miles to work...we had to carry heavy logs.⁵⁹

Stories abound of humiliation inflicted by the guards. Many guards appear to have been veterans of the Russian front — ideal men for brutalising prisoners, who did not scruple or hesitate to shoot prisoners.⁶⁰

The most famous act of German brutality towards the prisoners was the murder of RAF Flight Lieutenant Anthony Thompson in the spring of 1944. Thompson had been sent to Graudenz for his repeated escape attempts from other *Stalags*. Thompson had planned his escape carefully, planning to reach a Luftwaffe base, possibly Gleiwitz some 270km to the southwest, in order to steal a plane and fly to England. Such attempts were not unknown. The Luftwaffe base at Gleiwitz was a well-known destination for many escape attempts.⁶¹ Wild claimed Thompson was recaptured outside the town of Graudenz shortly after his escape.⁶² Myatt remembered Thompson as

a terror. He used to fight the Germans. He escaped one night, took one of our blokes with him. He got to (an) aerodrome and the Germans were on manoeuvres at that time. They picked him up and brought him back to Graudenz...⁶³

Once back in the *Straflager*, Thompson was put into solitary confinement. *Hauptfeldwebel* Ostereich, who had been “laid out” by the flight-lieutenant, “came

⁵⁹ John O'Loughlin to Colin Burgess 23.06.1987.

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ John Herrington, *Air Power over Europe 1944-1945*, Volumes 3 and 4 of Series 3 (Air) *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, 3.141; 4.493.

⁶² Wild, *op cit*, 56.

out with a pistol in his hand and fired two shots into Thompson, and he was left lying outside the cell until the following morning.”⁶⁴ Mortally wounded in the stomach, Thompson “died a horrible death.”⁶⁵ Evidence given at Nuremberg claimed Ostereich shot Thompson in the neck.⁶⁶ In the morning “his body was carried out by a couple of Poles” and Wilson Myatt was a pallbearer at his funeral.⁶⁷ The whole incident was remembered later when Ostereich was arrested by Soviet soldiers at the end of the war. The Soviets tried and executed Ostereich as a war criminal.⁶⁸

Constant representations to German military authorities did eventuate in conditions improving.⁶⁹ Reception of mail was increased from one letter a month to three, but the most significant achievement, as mentioned above, was the permission for the prisoners to receive Red Cross parcels to supplement their diet. Graudenz received all its mail and Red Cross parcels via Thorn, hence the ability of prisoners in Fort XV to exercise some mediation on behalf of the Graudenz prisoners.⁷⁰ Likewise, for the Sawyer family in Australia, and others who had family members in Graudenz, the belief that their sons and husbands were in a regular *Stammlager*, was, for the Germans a handy ruse to avoid detection of a blatant breach of the Geneva Convention.⁷¹

It was into this total contrast to the Austrian countryside that Max Sawyer arrived in August 1943, to begin his sentence in the *Strafgefängnis* Graudenz. Attempting to put together a clear picture of Max’s time in Graudenz is nigh impossible. There is no documentation from Graudenz of any kind known to have survived the war. Such documentation that did survive the siege of Graudenz was most likely seized by the Red Army when the Fortress fell on 6 March 1945, and sent to Soviet archives in Moscow. It has only been in recent years that scholars have been permitted access to records kept there.⁷² After the court martial had delivered its sentence, the verdict

⁶³ WM

⁶⁴ John O’Loughlin to POS 29.03.1996.

⁶⁵ WM

⁶⁶ IMT 6.290. 298.

⁶⁷ John O’Loughlin, op cit, WM.

⁶⁸ John O’Loughlin, ibid; IMT 6.290; cf. Wild 185-186.

⁶⁹ Wynne-Mason, op cit, 320-321.

⁷⁰ Wild, op cit, 120-121.

⁷¹ GC 56.

⁷² Cf. Clark, op cit, 436; Browden, op cit, 335-342.

was sent to the Red Cross in Geneva for transmission to Australia.⁷³ Max's service record notes that the information of his "judicial proceedings" was received on 15 January 1943 (sic). This must have been a clerical error; in January 1943 Max had not even been arrested. The correct year must have been 1944.

From Wolfsberg, Max, who would have been in solitary confinement, was placed on a train for transport under armed guard to Graudenz. The length of the journey would have depended on the availability of transport and the condition of the railways, as well the frequency of air raids.⁷⁴ Increasing bombing of major German cities meant that travel was often slow. At stops, or when prisoners had to change trains, they often encountered the impotent rage of civilians, who were encouraged by the Government to focus their hate on "easy targets" such as prisoners of war.⁷⁵ Wilson Myatt recalled

Some of the people were spitting on me. The guard was more scared than I was. That was in Regensburg where they stared spitting on me - because there was a raid on Berlin, and Regensburg is just outside[sic]; and it was the English bombing.[The Germans] weren't too happy about it either.⁷⁶

Airmen, in particular, were singled out for this treatment, and on some occasions captured airmen were handed over to the *Sicherheitsdienst* for "special handling."⁷⁷ Upon arrival at Graudenz the prisoner was searched and inducted into the *Strafgefängnis*, — designed to impress upon the new arrival that this prison was unlike any other he had been in. The prison term usually began with a time in solitary confinement. It was "a terrible place, like Sing Sing prison..."⁷⁸

Upon his arrival at Graudenz and after a time in solitary confinement, Myatt was placed in a room with French prisoners. "They were alright, they had cigarettes and I

⁷³ ICRC 11.08.1943, Comm CC490 RB 30468 M307.

⁷⁴ WM

⁷⁵ Richard Papc, *Boldness be my Friend*, 94; Robinson, op cit, 164; Wynn-Mason, op cit, 397.

⁷⁶ WM

⁷⁷ Herrington, op cit, 4.473-474; IMT 6.350-357; Shirer, op cit, 955.

⁷⁸ WM

didn't."⁷⁹ Prisoners were quickly assigned to *Arbeitskommandos*, and Myatt was sent to work in a cheese factory. He used the opportunity to steal food for other prisoners in Graudenz.

The blokes in Graudenz were starving, the food, we used to get two thin slices of bread for breakfast, a thin soup for your dinner, and a slice of bread for your tea. And then the Red Cross moved in and they started to feed us. But the Germans were rifling the Red Cross [parcels] What I used to do was to stuff my clogs with the cheese and bring it back into camp for the blokes...⁸⁰

Sawyer's parcels were rifled for things such as tobacco, which earnt a laconic "tough luck" from his father.⁸¹

Myatt believed the German brutality was a reflection of the prisoners' status as "punishment prisoners." Having seen the Germans treating their own punishment prisoners, Myatt was under no illusions about what to expect from his captors.

It was some time before Wilson and Max re-established contact. According to Wilson, they saw one another on parade: "We were paraded one day, and I looked and there's Max. I said 'How is it you're doing here?' He said, 'Same thing you did.'"⁸² Myatt recalled that Max spent a lot of time in isolation, but was able to talk with him during the morning *Appel*. News of Max's transfer to a new location must have been worded fairly bluntly if Ernest Sawyer's letter in reply to his son is any indication of what Max told him.

Dear Max, received your letter of 7 May [1943] and was astounded to learn that you had got into trouble. You do not say what you did to invite such severe punishment but I can only hope it was not anything dishonourable. As you can imagine it gave me a great shock and although you tell me not to worry about you, I don't know how you

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ EWS to EMS 18.12.1943.

can expect me to do otherwise. For God's sake don't do anything to cause any more penalties...Don't be a fool son, be patient.⁸³

From the dating of this letter, September 1943, Max must have been in "altered circumstances" since about March. There are gentle complaints from Ernest Sawyer that the family had not received letters for quite some time.⁸⁴

A letter sent to Max in mid-July opens: "My dear son, Just received your welcome letter dated February 1943", but gives no indication of anything wrong with Max.⁸⁵ Another letter, sent in August, informs Max that a parcel will be on its way soon.⁸⁶ The "close confinement" references appear in letters written in December 1943 and February 1944, which were sent by Max around August and September 1943.⁸⁷ It is safe to assume that he was held in solitary confinement from February to September 1943. The meeting with Wilson Myatt most likely occurred some time in August 1943 as Ernest Sawyer wrote cheerfully in December 1943, "It must have been a thrill meeting your old pal again after so long a time, even if it was in goal that you met him."⁸⁸

Life in solitary confinement was designed to break prisoners' resistance. Once a day prisoners were taken one by one to the latrine. "If you had an accident, you know, couldn't wait that long, they'd [the guards] make you lick it up, that kind of thing. And you usually got a couple of lashes as well."⁸⁹ It was during this break in the monotony that Sawyer was able to communicate for a few seconds with other prisoners. One day, when Sawyer was being marched to the latrines, the occupant of the neighbouring cell "poked his tongue out at the guard" who passed in front of Max, which Sawyer evidently saw. However, there was a second guard behind Max who saw the insult and shot the prisoner through the mouth. "He died eventually. Took a long time. Died a terrible death."⁹⁰ The prisoner was left alone without

⁸² WM

⁸³ EWS to EMS 15.09.1943.

⁸⁴ EWS to EMS 03.06, 13.06.1943.

⁸⁵ EWS to EMS 18.07.1943.

⁸⁶ EWS to EMS 16.08.1943.

⁸⁷ EWS to EMS 18.12.1943; 25.02.1944.

⁸⁸ EWS to EMS 18.12.1943.

⁸⁹ BS; Cf John O'Loughlin to POS 29.03.1996.

⁹⁰ BS

medical attention. Terror in the goal was not new to Sawyer, but the totally irrational lack of concern for the prisoners left him horrified. Witnessing the *Herrenvolk* in action remained a frightful memory for the rest of his life.

Talk of escape filled in time, but the reality was that escape was a remote possibility.⁹¹ Effectively, the only ones who had an opportunity to escape were the prisoners on an outside *Arbeitskommando*. Sawyer and Myatt were kept separate from one another and worked in different areas, although later both men ended up in the same cellblock.

Life for all the prisoners was a constant battle of wits against the constant terror exercised by some of the guards.

The Germans knew the drills and what they used to do was get you out of the cell at night at two, three o'clock in the morning and what you had to do was go down on your hands and knees and then that did it best got back into their cells the quickest. Max and me were always the last in. He used to giggle behind me. We only had our shirts on. Even in the worst of times you can laugh!⁹²

Prisoners who didn't hurry quickly enough for the guard's liking had things thrown at them, from helmets to bunches of keys, followed by kicks and blows.⁹³ This however, was considered to be less of a horror than the treatment Wilson Myatt and John O'Loughlin witnessed when they worked as part of an *Arbeitskommando* outside the *Straflager*. Work parties from the *Straflager* were sent out to repair bomb damage in the town, and there saw parties of *Konzentrationslager* Jews working on the bridges across the Vistula. Myatt remembered seeing Jews being beaten savagely by their guards and some drowning because they were too weak to get out of the water.⁹⁴ John O'Loughlin recalled brutal treatment as normal, reaching new heights if any prisoner attempted to escape.⁹⁵

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² WM

⁹³ *ibid*

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ John O'Loughlin to Colin Burgess 22/23.06.1987; John O'Loughlin to POS 29.03.1996.

Something of the daily struggle, along with the solitary confinement, must have made its way to Tinonee in a letter Max wrote to his father around September 1943. In his reply Ernest Sawyer wrote:

My dear son, I have just returned from a visit to Sydney and found a letter from you awaiting me. I was pleased to get it. The contents rather worried me. My poor boy what a trial you are going through. You mention you are confined to a small space and are marked a bad character. I cannot believe that you have done anything dishonourable. I would not consider trying to escape or even refusing to work for your captors, dishonourable, but unwise in the circumstances. I can imagine how lonely and homesick you must be son, but just keep on reminding yourself that we are all proud of your reputation up to the time you were captured, your courage in captivity etc. I hope that your health is not being seriously affected. Keep a grip on yourself always son, and we will yet have an opportunity of being happily reunited.⁹⁶

The remaining letters sent to Max by his father do not mention anything to do with Max's hardships. News of home, the farm, Max's dogs, local gossip, Empire Day and Ernest's work as President of the Tinonee Patriotic Association fill the pages. There is a determination to keep news to Max positive and cheerful.⁹⁷

One of the more bizarre schemes that was born during the war, was the SS attempt to create a British Waffen SS Division, the "British Free Corps"(BFC). A recruitment drive through the *Stammlager* and *Strafgefängnis* during the autumn of 1943 was organised in the attempt to encourage British and Imperial prisoners to join the great German-led crusade against Bolshevism. Similar foreign units had been in existence since the winter of 1940 when the SS founded the *Nordland*, *Westland* and *Wallonia* regiments made up of volunteers from Scandinavia, Holland and Belgium.⁹⁸ None of

⁹⁶ EWS to EMS 25.02.1944.

⁹⁷ EWS to EMS 21.03, 02.04, 13.04, early May, 24.05.1944.

⁹⁸ Reitlinger, op cit, 155.

these groups reached regimental fighting strength before September 1944, with the exception of *Wallonia*, which was ready for action in November 1943. With the situation on the eastern front growing daily more grim for the Germans, the idea of foreign SS units, including a British unit, alongside the Wehrmacht helping in the struggle against the “enemy of civilisation” would be a major propaganda coup.⁹⁹ In spite of their small numbers, the volunteer SS were renowned for their ferocity of the fighting, especially on the eastern front. However, the much hoped for BFC remained more a propaganda exercise than reality. The British and Imperial prisoners tended to treat recruiters with contempt.¹⁰⁰

Evidently the Wehrmacht overcame its traditional antipathy towards the SS and allowed recruiters access to Allied prisoners. Two members of the BFC came to *Stalag XXA* and then *Graudenz* sometime in late 1943. Myatt recalled meeting the two men on the railway platform at Thorn as he was on his way back to the *Straflager* after time in hospital for an infected wrist.

I came back to *Graudenz*, I got off the train, I could see these blokes with the Union Jack on the sleeve, dressed in German uniform. I said “What are you blokes doing?” They said “What they did was give us six months in Berlin to do as we liked, supplied women and everything.” He said, “Now we have to go and fight on the Russian front. We did this so we didn't have to fight against our own race.” They were supposed to be fighting against communism. I said “You’re stupid man, you'll get killed.”¹⁰¹

It is not unlikely that Sawyer could have seen the recruiters. What is more likely would have been that his response to any overture to join the Legion would have been more forceful than Myatt's. Nonetheless, at least three Australians did join the BFC; Charlie Chipchase, Albert Stokes, and a Corporal Wood, all from *Stalag XVIII A*.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Adrian Weale, *Renegades: Hitler's Englishmen*, 98.

¹⁰⁰ Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, Volume 3 of Series 1, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, 806-807; Weale, *ibid*, 65-66, 128.

¹⁰¹ WM

¹⁰² Weale, *op cit*, 129, 131.

Attempting to reconstruct Max Sawyer's time in Graudenz is difficult. Indeed, for the period March 1944 until March 1945 the only sources we have are the memories of his family. Max rarely spoke about his experiences after his arrest; in fact, when he did he was usually in a highly agitated state, where those about him were more concerned with calming him than listening to the hellish tales that spewed out of him.¹⁰³ In her study *Archives of Memory*, Alice Hoffman observed that the work of Bartlett reached the conclusion

that his subjects could be divided into two groups: those who relied primarily on visual images and those who relied upon language cues...Those who relied upon the image were more sure of the correctness of their response, but in fact there was no difference in the number of errors made by the two groups...¹⁰⁴

The Sawyer family memories are almost all visual accounts, that is, they are descriptive accounts of what Max did, and how and where he did it. The stories are vivid with much detail. This confirms that the stories made an enormous impact on different family members at different times. There is little analysis as to why he did a particular action. Hoffman writes that the retention of these memories over long periods of time is due to the convergence of a number of variable factors. "Information retained over long periods of time is affected by a host of potentially confounding variables, such as perceived importance, interest, comprehensibility, knowledge, personality, attitudes, temperament, prejudices, and so forth."¹⁰⁵

Psychologists seem to agree that once a memory has been stored, it suffers little distortion apart from any distortion that occurred during the initial encoding procedure. However, the understanding of what happens with so-called "long term memory" is less clear. It would appear that "long term memory" remains relatively unaffected, declining with disuse and the onset of natural physical and mental decline. How memory is stored is not entirely clear.

¹⁰³ BS, MB

¹⁰⁴ Alice Hoffman, *Archives of Memory*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 13.

The suggestion that the memory is rather like a storehouse of audio and video tapes available for replay, however, has been an attractive one. It fits in with studies showing that memories can more easily be retrieved if some part of the experience can be brought to consciousness. For example, some studies show that, if a student can arrange to take a test in the same room in which he or she studied, the amount of material available for recall will increase substantially. In other words the environment itself serves to cue or set in motion the retrieval process.¹⁰⁶

Given the traumatic nature of the family's memories, and the evident trauma that is re-experienced in the recalling of events from this time in Max's life, it is probably accurate to say that much has been repressed over the years. This has been coupled with an ignorance of places, names, the nature of the war, and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Much of what Max said during times of great stress may well have been unintelligible. However, what has survived in the collective memory of the family are a number of scenes that physiological psychologist Robert B Livingston described as a "Print Now" mechanism for memory.

This mechanism, a deliberate mental process, enables the person to save a particular bit of experience from the oblivion of the stream of all conscious experience and to do so through the mechanism of either overt verbal rehearsal or covert interior rehearsal.¹⁰⁷

This is further supported by the work of Marigold Linton who concluded that "an event is likely to endure in memory if (1) it is perceived as highly emotional at the time it occurs; (2) if the subsequent course of events makes the event appear to be instrumental or causes it to be perceived as a turning point; and (3) if it remains relatively unique..."¹⁰⁸ All members of the family interviewed expressed feelings of great anxiety and exhibited a high state of emotional tension as they recounted their memories of Max. Beryl Sawyer's memories were particularly difficult to recall, and

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

each “horror” story was followed by a story that contained something amusing. It would appear this was Beryl Sawyer’s coping mechanism for dealing with the traumatic memories of her husband’s war and post-war history. We need to see Max Sawyer’s life during the period March 1944 to March 1945 through the matrix of the Sawyer family’s oral history. The facts in this and the following chapter may not be fully established, but the powerful emotions and visual memories that Max Sawyer passed on to his family — which have endured for more than half a century after the war — at least suggest that these twelve months were highly stressful and traumatic, and remain so today. My task here is to attempt to decipher the family memories and make some statements about the possible chronology of Max Sawyer between 1944 and 1945.

Beryl Sawyer recalled Max working in a workshop where he used his artistic talents, perhaps in the drawing of maps. How he got to be in the workshop is not clear. Family recollections are the primary source for this part of his history. Consequently, there is little way of verifying this anecdotal evidence. What does emerge is a plausible but obscure narrative that moves from Max’s internment in the *Straflager* to the stories of his escape attempts.

While he was in solitary confinement, presumably at the beginning of his sentence in the *Straflager*, Max kept himself amused by drawing caricatures of Hitler on the cell wall. He used pieces of burnt wood he found in the cell, possibly from a stove (if there was one). Evidently he was found drawing his insulting pictures of the Führer, which enraged the guard sufficiently for a threat of execution to be made, and later, confirmed.

Threatening recalcitrant prisoners with execution was a tactic often used in the *Straflager* and Gestapo goals. Richard Pape’s graphic account of his imprisonment and torture in a Gestapo prison gives a detailed picture of the execution threat. Having been captured during his escape from *Stalag* VIII B, Lamsdorf, Pape, who was dressed in civilian clothes, was held in the political prison at Krakow in early 1943. Pape was tortured in the “standard” fashion, that is, physical abuse followed by solitary confinement, more physical torture, and an ever-growing psychological

torment.¹⁰⁹ Pape's refusal to "co-operate" led the Gestapo to employ their last weapon. "Tomorrow...unless you decide to tell us everything, you will be shot by a firing squad."

Early the next morning a mug of black coffee was pushed into the cell and soon afterwards, dressed only in pants and boots, I was escorted by two guards to the courtyard. The firing squad was already there, lounging at ease, laughing and smoking, their rifles propped against the wall.¹¹⁰

This was the first part of the charade. In order to frighten their victims further, Pape was forced to watch the execution of eight Polish Jewish women. Then it was his turn.

Without another word, I was fastened to a circlet of steel. Facing the wall, I looked at a confusion of compact markings in the stone just below me where bullets had flattened themselves after ripping through the bodies. I heard laughing behind me. Then I heard the screaming order to fire and the voices seem to come from another planet, as the shattering noise rent open the universe...and then, as it all receded, I saw the stone wall, and I was pressed against it, erect and trembling.¹¹¹

Pape underwent this scenario three more times before being sent back to the *Stalag*. Other former prisoners of war accounts are remarkably similar in every detail.¹¹²

Sawyer was apparently lined up ready to be marched out to face a firing squad. From his widow's description, it bore all the signs of a scare tactic.

¹⁰⁹ Pape, op cit, 201-214.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, 214.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, 216.

¹¹² e.g. Barrett, op cit, 261-261; Colin Burgess, *Destination Buchenwald*, 59; Hugh Clarke and Colin Burgess, *Barbed Wire and Bamboo*, 83-85.

When they came to get him [for execution by firing squad] there was this senior officer and when he saw the drawings he said “No, we’re not going to shoot you, we can use you.” And he was an artist, this German fellow. And Max said he took him and he actually taught him quite a lot and was very interested in Max’s talent. At the same time Max would spend his time drawing maps for them...apparently he had to put the contours in the landscape, they had him mapping and different things. But he said he always made a mistake, so that they weren’t any use to them really.¹¹³

Beryl added that Max couldn’t have made too many mistakes, since the Germans were not idiots and would have noticed something was wrong before too long. Mapping was one area of artistic work that engaged Max. Painting also occupied his time. The German officer who had rescued him from the firing squad wanted Max to keep on painting, so that he could present an exhibition. This was not a common practice in the *Stammlager*. However, the Germans regularly exploited the talents of the *Konzentrationslager* prisoners for the German war effort and often, for lucrative personal gains. *Straflager* officially held only Wehrmacht prisoners, not Allied prisoners of war because of the restrictions under the Geneva Convention. Therefore it is not unreasonable to suggest that *Straflager* inmates could have been exploited in similar ways to *Konzentrationslager* inmates.¹¹⁴

In Graudenz, Max met Jamie Dunbar who had been sent to the *Straflager* from *Stalag* IX C, Mulhausen near Bad Sulza in Thuringia, on 1 April 1943.¹¹⁵ Dunbar was a private in the 5th Gordon Highlanders, and hailed from Longside, Aberdeenshire. He was captured by the Germans in France, one of the 34 000 British soldiers taken after Dunkirk in June 1940.¹¹⁶ His prisoner or war card is dated 11 July 1940. He was sent to *Stalag* IX C, where he was given the POW number 1955. He remained at Mulhausen until April 1943.¹¹⁷ The reason for Dunbar’s transfer to Graudenz is

¹¹³ BS

¹¹⁴ Cf. Browning, op cit, 59-76; Krzystof Dunin-Wasowicz, “Forced Labour and Sabotage in the Nazi Concentration Camps”, in *The Nazi Concentration Camps: Proceedings of the Fourth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, 133-142; Michael Marras, *The Holocaust in History*, 118.

¹¹⁵ ICRC RB 28867 M587.

¹¹⁶ Gilbert 1989.83.

¹¹⁷ ICRC RB 3773 L24.

unknown, as is the duration of the sentence. Dunbar's official transfer was to *Stalag XX A*, as was Sawyer's and Myatt's. Max Sawyer and Jamie Dunbar became strong friends in the *Straflager*. According to Beryl Sawyer, Dunbar was sick and his name does not appear in the generally authoritative *Prisoners of War: Armies and other Land Forces of the British Empire 1939-1945*. *Prisoners of War* does not appear to include the names of prisoners who died while in captivity.¹¹⁸ However, Dunbar did survive the war, and returned to Scotland, where he lived until his death in 1990.¹¹⁹

At some stage during his imprisonment in Graudenz, Max began planning an escape. There is a strong, though as yet only theoretical, possibility that Sawyer managed to escape by securing Dunbar's help. Opportunities for escape were limited, but since Sawyer had made attempts before, the circumstances of Graudenz were not considered insurmountable. Reasons for escape may appear too obvious to mention. This would be an oversight on the part of the historian, and was certainly not overlooked by the Germans.

Thoughts of escape occupied the minds of most prisoners of war at some stage during their time in the *Stalags*. For others, thought was turned to action. "Of nearly 170 000 British and Commonwealth servicemen held captive by the Germans and Italians, 6 039 managed to escape and return to England. This figure is remarkable considering that not one Axis POW ever escaped from Britain."¹²⁰ After the war, escape stories became a popular literary genre. Tales of the breakout from *Oflag VII B Eichstätt* where 65 men escaped during the night of 3/4 June 1943 fired the popular imagination. However tales of escape were often tempered by sobering accounts of tragedy, such as the mass escape from *Stalag Luft III*, Sagan in March 1944. Of the 76 men who escaped only three made successful "home runs." Of the rest 50 were deliberately separated from the rest and murdered by the Gestapo on orders from an enraged Hitler.¹²¹

Behind every escape was an intricate preparation. For a "regular" *Stalag* prisoner, escape entailed a careful planning of disguise, acquisition of identity papers, a

¹¹⁸ FJHM to POS.

¹¹⁹ General Register Office, Death Certificate of James Kelman Fraser Dunbar, (1990) 9424.

¹²⁰ Hugh Clarke, Colin Burgess and Russell Braddon, *Prisoners of War*, 40.

credible alibi, appropriate dress, awareness of European habits and mannerisms, and some idea of an escape route.¹²² The escapee was effectively on his own. Once outside the *Stalag* he had to be constantly alert for every eventuality. Most men were re-captured quickly, often for making mistakes in things such as social etiquette, ignorance of local conditions, or simply their presence as young men of military age seemingly “unattached” to any war work.¹²³ For a prisoner in a *Straflager* the escape prospects were limited even further due to the higher level of security, more brutal treatment and the starvation diet. Added to this was the ominous danger that if recaptured, a *Straflager* prisoner could be sent to a KL.

Escaping Australian and British prisoners of war were generally treated fairly leniently during the early years of the war. In the case of recaptured escapees, the Gestapo or the SD usually conducted interrogations. If a prisoner’s identity was established quickly, the chances of avoiding physical abuse were high. One such veteran recalled his interrogation. After the psychological “softening up” with tactics such as forced awakenings at night, much slamming of heavy steel doors, unannounced visits by Gestapo or SS officers, came the interrogation. “They always asked you the same question. First thing ‘why did you escape?’ and you’d think it was pretty obvious, so I’d say, ‘I’m a soldier, it is my duty to escape if I can.’”¹²⁴ If the interrogators were convinced the escape presented no threat to the Reich, they usually sent the escapee back to the *Stalag* or *Oflag* with warnings about what might happen if they escaped again.

Under the Geneva Convention, escaped prisoners who had been recaptured were “liable only to disciplinary punishment.”¹²⁵ For most men this meant a stint in a *Stalag* prison barrack or some time in a punishment battalion.¹²⁶ Theoretically, this was meant to apply to all escape attempts.

Attempted escape, even if it is not a first offence, shall not be considered as an aggravation of the offence in the event of the

¹²¹ *ibid*, 44.

¹²² Herrington, *op cit*, 4,487.

¹²³ Adam-Smith, *op cit*, 156; Clarke, Burgess and Braddon, *op cit*, 46.

¹²⁴ AW

¹²⁵ GC 50

prisoner of war being brought before the courts for crimes or offences against persons or property committed in the course of such attempts.¹²⁷

It must be stressed that while many Germans observed the Geneva Convention protocols regarding prisoners of war, many did not. Officially, Germany maintained her strict observance of the Convention, but the testimonies of hundreds of former prisoners of war tell a different story.¹²⁸

Prisoners who became known as repeat escapers became the targets for harsh discipline. It appears that an order from the *Wehrkreiskommando* VI at Munster, dated 27 July 1944 was an attempt to regulate the *ad hoc* arrangement dealing with escapees. Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel admitted at his trial that escapees were often sent to *Konzentrationslager*. Keitel denied the issuing of instructions from OKW or the *Chef des Kriegsgefangenwesens* authorising this procedure, but did not deny the involvement of RSHA and Gestapo in the handling of prisoners.¹²⁹ The Field Marshall went on: “furthermore there are documents to show that prisoners of war in whose case disciplinary powers of the commander were not sufficient were singled out and handed over to the Secret State Police [Gestapo]”¹³⁰ Keitel did not elaborate further.

The International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg heard more evidence supporting the dispatch of prisoners to the *Straflager* and *Konzentrationslager*. There are no accounts of Australian prisoners of war being handled this way. However, this is not surprising, since Australian prisoners were included under the title of “British and Commonwealth Prisoners.” The Nuremberg transcripts are still useful sources for general descriptions, since, as we have seen, there was no completely consistent pattern of behaviour from the German military or police.

¹²⁶ Adam-Smith, 156, 170, 189-190.

¹²⁷ GC 51

¹²⁸ IMT 6 passim.

¹²⁹ IMT 10.562-563.

¹³⁰ *ibid*, 562.

Alarmed at the growing number of attempted escapes, individual *Kommandants*, no doubt fearing for their own safety¹³¹, posted notices in the *Stalags*. The following example is dated 29 April 1944 and was issued by Captain Lussus, *Kommandant* of *Oflag X C*, Lübeck, to the Senior French Officer. There were Australian and British prisoners held at Lubeck at various times, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the notice was given to the Senior British Officer as well.

You will bring to the attention of your comrades the fact that there exists for the control of people moving about unlawfully, a German organisation whose field of action extends over regions in a state of war from Poland to the Spanish frontier. Each escaped prisoner who is recaptured and found in possession of civilian clothes, false papers and identification cards, and false photographs, falls under the authority of this organisation. What becomes of him then, I cannot tell you. Warn your comrades that this matter is particularly serious.¹³²

Again, this statement further reinforces the belief that the military control of prisoners of war gradually deteriorated as the Gestapo, SD and RSHA increased their power over the prisoners, a fact Keitel acknowledged.¹³³ In fact, there is evidence to suggest that this method of disposing of escaping prisoners had been used from as early as April 1941.¹³⁴

Former *SS Sturmbannführer* Kurt Lindow stated during his interrogation at Oberursel on 30 September 1945: "The Gestapo and SD sent recaptured prisoners of war to concentration camps where they were executed."¹³⁵ Lindow was making reference to the *Bullet Decree* of 4 March 1944. The Decree authorised the placing of non-British and non-American escapees under the "Chief of the Security Service...regardless of whether the escape occurred during a transport,

¹³¹ Clarke, Burgess and Braddon, op cit, 44.

¹³² IMT 6.371.

¹³³ IMT 10.560.

¹³⁴ Crawley, op cit, 153.

¹³⁵ IMT 4.261.

whether it was a mass escape or an individual one.”¹³⁶ The destination was usually designated as *Konzentrationslager* Mauthausen in Austria.

Max Sawyer would most likely have had some idea of the risks involved in making an attempt to escape. He was known as an escaper because of his wanderings in Austria. The only feasible plan would be to get into an *Arbeitskommando* that worked outside the *Straflager*. The easiest and most common method employed was the exchange of prisoner of war identity discs. Each man wore a disc that was divided into two halves. Both halves had the prisoner’s *Kriegsgefangenernummer* stamped on it. One half would be left on the body of a prisoner if he died during his incarceration, and the other would be sent to the Red Cross. For this reason they were commonly known as a man’s “dead meat ticket.”¹³⁷

Identity disc exchanges are recorded in many prisoner of war stories. The most famous is probably the exchange of identities by Richard Pape and New Zealander Winston Yeatman. Pape details how he persuaded Yeatman to agree to a swap of identities.¹³⁸ Pape described the greatest danger in an identity change.

...our respective next-of-kin would receive mail from the prison camp in unfamiliar hand writing, and the contents of the letters, by their lack of domestic intelligence and homely intimacy would arouse alarm. The people back home in Britain and New Zealand would know that the senders were not their sons, and doubtless approach the Red Cross at Geneva in their bewilderment and concern. This would give rise to official correspondence between Geneva and the German authorities and possibly lead to our undoing.¹³⁹

We do not know if Max Sawyer made some arrangement with Dunbar as to the answering of mail. The last known letter written by Max to his family was sent

¹³⁶ IMT 3.505.

¹³⁷ Colin Burgess to POS , 3.03.1997.

¹³⁸ Pape, op cit, 130-131.

¹³⁹ ibid, 133.

on 30 January 1944.¹⁴⁰ Since there is evidence that regular prisoner of war mail was arriving at Thorn in late 1944, mail for Sawyer had either stopped or was being received by someone else.¹⁴¹

Aidan Crawley describes six successful escapes involving identity exchanges.¹⁴² Herrington recorded 19 Australian escapes, chiefly from Lamsdorf and Mühlberg, in which identity swaps also featured. Of these, only three made the journey out of Europe successfully.¹⁴³ In all the cases there was a time frame of between several hours to several days before an escape was confirmed, usually enough time frame for the escapee to make a good start.

How and when Max escaped is unknown. Using his new identity, “Jamie Dunbar”, Sawyer escaped from Graudenz. His chances of success were slim. Weakened from the near starvation diet, without a fluent command of German or Polish, no money and possibly no papers, Sawyer’s best chance lay in the east. This is one way of trying to determine when Sawyer escaped.

Early spring 1944 appears to be the most likely time for his escape. The last letter known to have reached Sawyer was probably one from his father dated December 18, 1943. The last letter written by Max to reach Australia was dated January 30, 1944.¹⁴⁴ According to the family many letters sent after December 1943 were either sent back to Australia or presumed lost.¹⁴⁵ Wilson Myatt, who had been working outside the *Straflager*, had been moved from the cheese factory to work on an aerodrome near Königsburg, the capital of East Prussia, sometime in late 1943 or early 1944. This is compounded by Myatt’s assertion that he had been a pallbearer at the funeral of Anthony Thompson, who was killed in mid-1944.¹⁴⁶ If Myatt had left Graudenz by the beginning of 1944 at the latest, he could not have been at the funeral of Thompson. If he was transferred to Königsburg after Thompson’s funeral, his departure from Graudenz could be placed at mid-1944,

¹⁴⁰ EWS to EMS 24.05.1944.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Wild, op cit, 225.

¹⁴² Crawley, op cit, 140-152.

¹⁴³ Herrington, op cit, 4.489.

¹⁴⁴ EWS to EMS 24.05.1944.

¹⁴⁵ BS, MB

¹⁴⁶ WM; Wild, op cit, 186.

after Sawyer had escaped. If this is the case, how could it be that Myatt had no memory of the escape of his close friend? The most plausible explanation appears to be a confusion of merged memories of prisoners who had been murdered by savage guards.

Surrounding Graudenz were the dozens of small farming communities that had been thoroughly Germanised in 1939/1940. Hundreds of Allied servicemen worked as labourers on the farms in conditions not unlike those Sawyer knew in Eichburg. One possibility in escaping could have been to join a *Landwirtschaft Arbeitskommando*, but the risks would have been too high. As soon as “Jamie Dunbar” was registered as missing, a full search would have commenced. Strangers without papers would be prime suspects for the police. For men working on the farms, the risk of exposing the whole group to punitive action was too great, and they were generally unwilling to jeopardise tightly knit groups that had formed cohesive survival units for several years.¹⁴⁷

Other reasons for Sawyer’s escape, such as returning to Austria to “rescue” Mitzi Gemandl, or aiming for the Russian front, are quaint but fanciful. Sawyer would have had no hope of reaching Eichburg without a bundle of identity cards, travel passes and money. As for striking east to meet the Russians, he would have had a journey of some 450 km ahead of him; from the borders of East Prussia to Mogilev to find the nearest Red Army units. The major Soviet advances between December 1943 and Sawyer’s escape, possibly in April 1944, were concentrated on the southern part of the Russian front. The disintegration of the eastern front would not begin until 22 June. Until then the Germans managed a relatively organised withdrawal and retreat.¹⁴⁸

The simplest explanation for Sawyer’s escape was the claustrophobia of Graudenz. His frustration at being confined has already been noted. In a letter from home, Ernest Sawyer had expressed concern over Max’s lack of patience with his prison regimen, and voiced his worries “wondering what you may do

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Wild, *ibid*, 91-92, 95, 102-103. 197.

¹⁴⁸ Albert Scaton, *The Russo-German War*, chapter 26.

next.”¹⁴⁹ News of the war came in scraps of information, much of which was unreliable. About all Sawyer would have known, was that Germany no longer appeared certain of winning the war. How long it would take before the end and his liberation from Graudenz was only a guess. It is highly possible that Sawyer simply decided he had endured enough, and it was time to get out and take his chances.

We have no way of knowing how far Sawyer managed to travel before he was recaptured. If Anthony Thompson can be used as a measure, Max probably did not get very far at all. Beryl says that Max made his way through the Polish countryside and was given shelter by a German-speaking woman, possibly a compassionate or disillusioned *Volksdeutsche* fearful of the approaching Russians. Evidently she hid Sawyer under the farmhouse. The sight of an emaciated man with a shaven head, wearing old and worn clothes, alerted a group of children who were working or playing nearby. The group may have been a *Landdienst* brigade, which was made up of *Hitler Jugend* and *Bund Deutscher Mädel* members who worked on the eastern farms, mostly in the Wartheland.¹⁵⁰ In any case, the children reported what they had seen and local police were sent to the farmhouse to apprehend the stranger.¹⁵¹

Sawyer/Dunbar was in dire straits. An escapee from a *Straflager* could expect to be handed over to the Gestapo for questioning. This would have been in accord with the understanding of an OKW order of 26 June 1942 which “laid down that those prisoners whose cases were not tried by the military courts because of lack of evidence or who were acquitted should be handed over to the Gestapo.”¹⁵² In the interrogation procedure, it was usual for the prisoners to be strip-searched. In Sawyer’s case this would have revealed that he was circumcised, a sure sign of a Jew. An escaped Jew, regardless of prisoner of war status, was defenceless. One former Australian prisoner of war, Clarrie Smith, recalled that all prisoners were checked for circumcision. “Yes, I was checked. They [the Germans] even suggested I was a Jew at one stage, but I had my paybook with me and I showed a

¹⁴⁹ EWS to EMS 15.09.1943.

¹⁵⁰ Gerhard Rempel, *Hitler's Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS*, 133-136.

¹⁵¹ BS

bloke and said 'Roman Catholic', he let me go."¹⁵³ It is doubtful whether the Gestapo would have bothered to verify whether Sawyer was or was not Jewish. Sawyer, as we have seen above, always claimed to have been believed to be Jewish.¹⁵⁴ What appears certain is that Sawyer was arrested and taken to the nearest Gestapo office for interrogation and torture.

It is from this point that we contend Sawyer's severe traumatising developed dramatically. He had already been brutalised by his arrest in Nestelbach, but he had then been under the jurisdiction and protection of the Wehrmacht. We have already discussed the change in official German attitudes to escaped prisoners, so legally Max Sawyer was outside the parameters of military law and firmly in the hands of the Gestapo and SD.

He was tortured. His widow described the scars on Max's back received from the substantial beatings. It is possible the scars could have come from another time, the marks indicated a systematic and skilled torment executed by professionals.¹⁵⁵ The area of greatest torture was Sawyer's genitalia. His widow recalled that her husband had been tortured around the groin, "mainly his testicles. They had stretched them out and put nails through them."¹⁵⁶ Genital torture was a technique commonly employed by Gestapo interrogators.¹⁵⁷ In his testimony to the International Military Tribunal, French Captain Labussiere described such a procedure.

Electric current: The terminals were placed on the hands, then on the feet, in the ears, and then one in the anus and another on the end of the penis... Crushing the testicles in a press specially made for the purpose. Twisting the testicles was frequent...¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² IMT:NOKW.2579.

¹⁵³ CS

¹⁵⁴ BS, MB

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Papc, op cit, 201-219.

¹⁵⁶ BS

¹⁵⁷ Burgess, op cit, 58; Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo: Instrument of Terror*, 122,124.

¹⁵⁸ IMT 6.172-173.

The method and practice of torture was based on the principle that anyone brought into a Gestapo gaol was believed to know something. Crankshaw detailed how the Gestapo tortured a person “on the off chance that he might know something...If a man had nothing to say under mild torture, the pressure would be increased, and frequently he was dying before his interrogators could bring themselves to conclude that he had nothing to tell them at all.”¹⁵⁹

Having failed to extract from Sawyer a satisfactory answer to their interrogations, the Gestapo used a final psychological trick in an attempt to break his resistance. He was taken, unconscious, into the countryside again, and at a designated stop was dumped in a small hut. There is confusion as to the veracity and location of this incident. It appears that the Gestapo were employing a regular ruse, namely telling prisoners they were free to go, and then shooting them while they “attempted to escape.”¹⁶⁰ Sawyer refused to run, perhaps demonstrating knowledge that he was aware of such tactics.¹⁶¹ Frustrated by their victim’s lack of cooperation, or believing that Sawyer had nothing of value, the Gestapo bundled him back to the prison and arranged for a transfer to a *Konzentrationslager*.

If our hypothesis is correct, the Gestapo had Max Sawyer/Jamie Dunbar, a Jewish escapee from the *Straflager* Graudenz, sent to *Konzentrationslager* Lublin, which had a long history of working Jewish prisoners of war to death. Most of the prisoners were Polish and Russian Jews who had been “culled” from the various transit camps in the east.¹⁶² In the spring of 1944, KL Lublin, Majdanek, was in no apparent danger from the advancing Soviet forces. The Soviet strategy consisted of two great advances. The first, in Ukraine began in mid-Winter 1943, led by Vatutin, Zhukov and Koniev.¹⁶³ Advancing quickly, the Red Army crossed the pre-1939 Polish border on 4 January 1944.¹⁶⁴ Hitler was convinced the Red Army’s objective was the Romanian oilfields.¹⁶⁵ Consequently, he stripped six

¹⁵⁹ Crankshaw, op cit, 130-131.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Clarke, Burgess and Braddon, op cit, 45; Crawley, op cit, 264-265; Herrington, op cit, 4.495.

¹⁶¹ BS

¹⁶² Cf. Marszatek, op cit, 18-23.

¹⁶³ Seaton, op cit, 410.

¹⁶⁴ Basil Liddell-Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 570.

¹⁶⁵ Seaton, op cit, 433.

divisions from Field Marshal Busch's Army Group Centre to defend the fortress cities of Bobruisk, Mogilev, Orsha and Vitebsk. This move reduced the mobility and resources of Busch's forces.¹⁶⁶ When the Soviet summer offensive was launched on the third anniversary of Barbarossa, 22 June 1944, the Wehrmacht were unable to halt the tidal wave. At the southern edge of the Red Army's area of advance was the highway to Lublin. And just outside of Lublin, on the Chlmska road, was *Konzentrationslager* Lublin, Majdanek.

¹⁶⁶ Clark, op cit, 280.

Chapter Eight: *Konzentrationslager Lublin (Majdanek)*

In 1979 British historian A J P Taylor was editing the series *Twentieth Century*. In Volume 14, Holocaust scholar Saul Freidländer wrote an article entitled, “The Final Solution.” Sometime in the early 1980s, shortly before his final illness, Max Sawyer wrote a note on page 1889 of a copy he had acquired. The page showed a photograph from Majdanek. It was a pile of human bones, mostly skulls displaying bullet wounds. Above it, he wrote:

I took a bone and a small child’s shoe from here in 1944 as proof of what was happening to people in Maidanek [sic] I was considered a jew [sic] because I was circumcised, brown eyed and friendly towards jewish people who became my most loyal friends. E.M.Sawyer 7469¹

Attempting to discover with documentary certainty whether or not Max Sawyer was in the notorious KL Lublin has proved extremely difficult. Searches undertaken by Professor George Browder at the State University of New York in the archival material copied from the former Osoby Archive in Moscow have been without success.² Edward Balawejder, Director of the Majdanek Museum searched the records at the former KL and while he was unable to find any reference to Max Sawyer, he added that since the Museum “possesses only a small part of the records from the camp files...it can not be excluded that he was in the camp.”³ Suggestions made by Colin Burgess have unearthed much helpful and relevant contextual information, but no concrete data directly related to Sawyer.⁴ Australian Army records are, not surprisingly, mute on the subject, as are British records.⁵ The remains of the German archives concerning prisoners of war, which survived American capture, have been combed to no avail.⁶ The archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva located the records of the letter cards sent by Max to his family, along with notations detailing information sent to military authorities, but do

¹ A J P Taylor, *Twentieth Century*, Volume 14, 1889. Copy held by Tim Sawyer.

² George Browder to POS 18.11.1996.

³ Edward Balawejder to POS 18.02.1997.

⁴ Colin Burgess to POS 15.12.1995, 31.01.1996, 17.03.1996, 26.05.1996.

⁵ Ministry of Defence (UK) to POS 24.10.1996.

⁶ *Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht* to POS 05.08.1996.

not indicate any situation out of the ordinary.⁷ Former prisoners of war have been unable to shed light on this part of Sawyer's history.⁸ Searches conducted through Returned Servicemen's organisations — and with the assistance of the Department of Veterans' Affairs — have revealed nothing relevant to this study.⁹ Contacts made with several men who had written of their war time experiences in Austria and Graudenz have not provided further information.¹⁰

While it is indisputable that there were Australians in *Konzentrationslager*, it has, up to the present, been impossible to locate any concrete documentary evidence to say without doubt that Max Sawyer was incarcerated in a KL. Such evidence that I possess is chiefly the collected memories of his family, in particular the story of the child's shoe and the piece of human bone, and the note made in his copy of *Twentieth Century*. Other sources that help to provide circumstantial evidence include the War Pension Medical Reports and Repatriation Board Files.¹¹ The various histories of Majdanek and related Holocaust studies have enabled the piecing together of a plausible reconstruction that is compatible with the family memories. Together, all the elements tell the life story of a young man who returned from Europe vastly changed from the 19 year-old that left Sydney in January 1940.

By examining the documentation, and listening carefully to stories recalled by his family, I am able to piece together a convincing if not conclusive scenario that accounts for the behavioural change in Max Sawyer's life. We may never know with certitude that Sawyer was in Majdanek, yet the circumstantial data would suggest that it was highly likely he was there. We do know that Max Sawyer witnessed and, to an extent, participated in the horrors of the Holocaust as an unintentional victim. The fact that he was adamant he had been in KL Lublin suggests that, at the very least, an event, or events, of some magnitude occurred which caused Max Sawyer to believe he was in Majdanek.

⁷ ICRC to POS 14.08.1996.

⁸ David Wild to POS 19.09.1995; Francis Mitchell to POS 22.03.1996; John O'Loughlin to POS.29.03.1996;

⁹ Keith Rossi to POS 11.06.1996; Fred Borcham to POS 18.06.1996; Ernie Jones to POS 20.06.1996; Max D'Astoli to POS 08.07.1996; Les Jones to POS 11.07.1996; DVA to POS 07.02.1996, 25.06.1996.

¹⁰ Barney Roberts to POS 08.08.1996; Joan Ramsey (widow of Ian Ramsey) to POS 24.08.1996.

¹¹ War Pension Medical Reports, 1950,1952,1953; Repatriation Board File MX5118.

Max had nothing to gain from inventing such a story such as this. Indeed, he ran the risk of being labelled “crazy.” He never sought to make profit from his claims, nor did he ever use his claim as a means of “big-noting” himself, or making himself appear to be a victim or hero. The claim that he had been in Majdanek was consistently asserted over the years to his family. All Max Sawyer wanted was someone to say to him “Yes, I understand, and I believe you.” In the Australia into which Max returned there were no such people. Consequently the experiences of the war, and in particular the experiences of mid-1944, were buried deep in the recesses of his mind.

By repressing the terrible memories of Majdanek, Sawyer was not extraordinary. Most survivors of the KL system went to great lengths to forget.¹² Prisoners of war also learnt to forget: it was easier than facing the humiliating tribunals of the Repatriation Department where one had to plead for pensions and benefits before public servants and medical professionals who had decided that the manifestations of psychological trauma were physical in origin. The trauma of facing such boards often meant that many prisoners preferred to say nothing.¹³

The city of Lublin lay in eastern Poland, in the plains area between the Bug and Vistula rivers some 150 kilometres southeast of Warsaw. Surrounding the city was fertile farming land with the small rural villages that characterised Polish agriculture prior to modernisation. Ethnically and religiously, the population throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been a mix of Catholic Poles, Uniate Ukrainians, Orthodox Russians and Jews. Lublin had been a centre for German merchants and craftsmen since the fourteenth century, which became sufficient justification for the Nazis to claim Lublin as an ancient Germanic town.¹⁴ At the time of the invasion, Lublin had a population of 122 000, of whom 40 000 were Jews living in a community that had been established in the fourteenth century.¹⁵ The Germans occupied the city on 18 September 1939. Once the city was “secured”, the Germans began seizing Jews for forced labour, all the while beating and maltreating them. In November 1939 “the Jews were driven out of the main street Krakowskie

¹² Martin Bergmann and Milton Jucovy, *Generations of the Holocaust*, 5 Hereafter Bergmann.

¹³ Cf Garton, op cit, 221-225.

¹⁴ Dwork and van Pelt, op cit, 24.

Przedmiescie, their apartments were confiscated; they were ordered to wear the Jewish badge and their movements in certain areas, both inside and outside the city were restricted.”¹⁶

In the Nazi plan for the newly formed *Gouvernementgeneral*, Lublin was designated a “resettlement” zone for the unwanted Jews of the *Reichsgaue Wartheland* and *Danzig-West Pruessen*, as well as for Jews arrested in Stettin, Hamburg and Moravska Ostrava.¹⁷ Expulsions of Jewish communities over 500 to “concentration centres” had begun by Heydrich’s order from Berlin on 21 September 1939.¹⁸ The intended plan was to move some 600 000 Jews from the incorporated territories into the *Gouvernementgeneral*. In mid-November it was decided that Poles would also be expelled from the new *Gaue*, so that the number people to be moved numbered over a million.¹⁹ Governor General Frank was not troubled by the huge numbers of Jews and Poles being deported into the *Gouvernementgeneral*, since he believed the establishment of a *Judenreservat* in the Lublin area was a preamble to a “final solution to the Jewish Question”, namely, sending the Jews to Madagascar.²⁰ Frank’s amenity to the dumping scheme ended quickly once the enormity of the project dawned on him. In February 1940 he protested directly to Himmler and Göring to have the transports stopped, which Göring ordered on 23 March 1940. Nonetheless, the Governor General took it upon himself to deport Jews within the *Gouvernementgeneral* to Lublin. Frank was still convinced that the Jews would eventually “disappear” to Madagascar, Africa or even an American colony.²¹

Nisko, near Lublin, was chosen as the first “Jewish reservation.” Adolf Eichmann addressed the first group of deportees on 18 October 1939

About seven or eight kilometres from here, the “Führer” of the Jews has promised a new homeland. There are no apartments and no houses — if you will build your homes you will have a roof over your

¹⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, 28. Hereafter, Gilbert 1988.

¹⁶ Shmuel Krakowski and Aharon Weiss, “Lublin” in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 3.915.

¹⁷ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, op cit, 94 Hereafter Gilbert 1986.

¹⁸ “Instructions by Heydrich on Policy and Operations Concerning Jews in the Occupied Territories, 21.09.1939”, in Arad, op cit, 174.

¹⁹ Raul Hilberg, op cit 1. 205-206.

²⁰ Cf “Discussions by the Authorities following Kristallnacht, 12.11.1938”, in Arad, op cit, 112; “The Madagascar Plan, 03.07.1940”, in Arad, ibid, 216-218.

²¹ Hilberg, op cit, 208-209, 211.

head. The wells are full of epidemics; there's cholera, dysentery and typhus. If you dig for water, you'll have water.²²

Dumped in the Nisko "reservation" the Jews — most of who were city dwellers totally unequipped for non-urban life — were left to die of starvation and freeze with the onset of winter.

Governor General Hans Frank divided his fiefdom into four regions: Krakow, the seat of the German administration, Radom, Warsaw and Lublin. The regional governor of Lublin was Ernst Zorner, representing the interests of Hans Frank. Representing the interests of the *Reichsführer SS*, was the *SS-und Polizeiführer*, *SS Brigadeführer* Odilo Globocnik, a man whose loyalty always lay with Himmler, never with Frank.²³ It was Globocnik's responsibility to ensure that the deportation process continued without trouble. Globocnik did not disappoint his superiors. Throughout 1940 as the deportation trains disgorged their human cargo into the Lublin region, Globocnik conducted a well-organised harassment program. He

carried out a wide-scale and ruthless action of annihilation of the intelligentsia in 1940, established a network of labour camps, applied the principle of collective responsibility on a wide-scale, and devised far-reaching colonisation plans.²⁴

On 17 July 1941 Himmler authorised Globocnik to commence plans for the establishment of a huge SS settlement area. In order for this area to be made suitable for German colonists, the local Poles, and the few remaining Jews, would have to be disposed of. Globocnik proved able to the task.

In Himmler's mind, Lublin played an important role. It was the furthest eastern city directly incorporated into the immediate zone of interest of the Greater German Reich.

²² Gilbert 1986, op cit, 94 Cf also Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 58-61.

²³ Because of his many altercations with the Nazi hierarchy Globocnik was only SSPF and not HSSPF. Richard Tidyman to POS 6.05.1997.

From Lublin, the SS would remove the Poles, concentrate and ultimately murder the Polish Jews, create space for German settlers, and “retrieve” wayward German blood by identifying and securing the partially polonised German ethnic population of the district.²⁵

Nazi historians had shown that Lublin was, in fact, an old German town.²⁶ South of Lublin was the fertile Zamosc region in which Globocnik had “discovered” significant numbers of people who had German blood.

On 15 June 1941, at a conference of the NSDAP in Zamosc the Higher SS and Police Leader of the Lublin district announced the establishment in the Lublin region of a “purely German settlement area, to which colonisers will be brought from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Bessarabia, etc...”²⁷

Himmler thoroughly approved of the plan and gave orders for an immediate start to its execution. Lublin was to become the nucleus of a vast SS settlement, with an independent economic and social life. Central to the economic life was provision of a compliant labour force. The key device for the implementation of racial ideology was the establishment of a centre for “purification” of the blood. For these reasons Himmler authorised on 22 September 1941 the building of a *Konzentrationslager* to hold 5000 prisoners with an intended population of 50 000 in the future.²⁸ Five days later a second order was issued stating that a prisoner of war camp with a holding capacity of 50 000 be established within the KL.²⁹ This figure was raised to 150 000 on 8 December 1941.

The new KL was to serve two functions. Firstly it was to help relieve the economic burden of the war effort by using slave labour drawn from the hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, an arrangement with which the Wehrmacht agreed.

²⁴ Jozef Marszatek, *Majdanek*, 18.

²⁵ Peter Black, “Rehearsal for Reinhard?” Odilo Globocnik and the Lublin Selbstschutz”, in *Central European History*, 25.2, 204-226.

²⁶ Marszatek, op cit, 19.

²⁷ *ibid*, 19-20.

²⁸ *ibid*, 21.

²⁹ *ibid*, 22.

Secondly, the KL was to continue the racial war against the biological enemies of the Reich. It was the second function that always retained the primary priority, even up to the very last moment of the war.

Konzentrationslager were as old as the Third Reich itself. Dachau, just outside of Munich, had opened its gates on 22 March 1933. In the controlled press, one can find a very clear and precise rationale for the *Konzentrationslager*.

All Communists and — where necessary — Reichsbanner and Social Democratic functionaries who endanger state security are to be concentrated here...these people cannot be released because attempts have shown that they persist in their efforts to agitate and organise as soon as they are released.³⁰

Hannah Arendt, in *The Burden of our Time*, described the *Konzentrationslager* as the one place where the idea of the totally controlled space could and did exist: “The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified. To the totalitarian dictator their very existence is the supreme proof of his own omnipotence.”³¹

The knowledge that the *Konzentrationslager* existed was an effective means of terrifying into submission the populations of the occupied countries. Further, since the existence of the *Konzentrationslager* contradicted every moral norm, to those outside the totalitarian world the very idea of the world of the camps was beyond belief.

At the same time, they offer the great advantage of being so horribly removed from the experience and understanding of the non-totalitarian world and mentality that somehow even in the face of overwhelming

³⁰ *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, 21.03.1933, in Barbara Distel and Ruth Jakush, *Concentration Camp Dachau 1933-1945*, 46.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Burden of our Time*, 414.

proof the world hesitates to believe in this central institution of the totalitarian power and organisation machine.³²

The inability to believe that the KL system existed in the barbarous form that it did paralysed opposition. And when the *Endlösung* was operating with its perfected and refined killing factory-like efficiency, witnesses could not make themselves believed. Jan Karski's 1943 mission to the United States relaying the scenes he had witnessed in the Warsaw Ghetto and in a *Vernichtungslager* typifies Arendt's assertion. Having recounted what he had seen to US Supreme Court Judge, Felix Frankfurter, Karski received the reply: "Mr Karski...I am unable to believe you." Frankfurter's response was shared by thousands of others until newsreel cameras revealed on film the truth of the camps.³³ Misinformation and rumour, the anxiety of never knowing the truth, all served to keep the bio-political purpose of the camps shrouded.³⁴

A survey of the history of the *Konzentrationslager* shows a process of evolution. From 1933 to 1936, the *Konzentrationslager* provided a way of asserting the authoritarian nature of the regime. Communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists and other political threats were neutralised in the KL. In the second stage, 1936-1941, the repercussions of the Four Year Plan, preparations for war and the results of the war forced a change in the purpose of the KL. "The Four Year Plan led to the harnessing of the labour market to such an extent that for the first time economic considerations played a decisive role in the recruitment of new prisoners."³⁵ In the third stage, 1942-1945, the demand for labour necessitated a reorganisation of the KL. Prisoners were regularly conscripted into the German workforce as an integral part, not as an accessory. Pinkel observes that "This was not an independent decision of the SS leadership; responsibility was borne jointly by Hitler, the Armaments Ministry under Albert Speer, and the Army Armament Office of the OKW under General Georg Thomas."³⁶

³² *ibid*

³³ E Thomas Wood and Stanislaw Jankowski, *Karski: How one man tried to stop the Holocaust*, 188.

³⁴ Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camps*, 7-9.

³⁵ Falk Pingel, "The Concentration Camps as Part of the Nazi System", in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf, *op cit*, 4.

³⁶ *ibid*, 5.

Economic imperatives, while important in the exploitation of the prisoners and the maintenance of the German war economy, were not the primary function of the KL. National Socialism was driven by a racial-biological *Weltanschauung*, that demanded the destruction of racially inferior *Untermenschen* in order for the *Herrenvolk* to survive. It was in the two KL of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek-Lublin that the National Socialist “dream” came closest to full realisation.

Even when it became clear that the material objectives of the war - conquest of new territories- were unlikely to be realised, the National Socialist leadership continued to pursue their ideological aims. The concentrations camps had to serve these two objectives, for both — the ideological as well as the material objective — presupposed an apparatus of violence by which they could be realised. The SS maintained this double objective almost to the last moment; only with the beginning of the dismantling of the concentration camps themselves did the gassing of the Jews cease.³⁷

The single most radicalising event in the history of the KL was the invasion of the Soviet Union.³⁸ Battle against the racial enemy entered a new and ferocious stage. The KL system was a vital link in the overall effort to destroy the Judeo-Bolshevik menace, and so became the vanguard of efficient, economic and industrialised killing.

In 1942-1943 the KL population reached 600 000 in a network of camps and subcamps that stretched from the Pyrennes across Europe to the Black Sea.³⁹ Among the KL was a system of categorisation that denoted the purpose of the KL and who was likely to be admitted there.

The following Table summarises the different categories of Camps that operated during the war.⁴⁰

³⁷ *ibid*, 6.

³⁸ The Jewish population of the USSR in 1939 was estimated at over 3 million. By 1945 about 1.25 million had been killed. Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 475, 479.

³⁹ *ibid*, 13.

⁴⁰ Adapted from Aharon Weiss, “Categories of Camps - Their Character and Role”, in Yisrael Gutman

Table 4: Categories of Camps used by the Germans during World War II

<u>TITLE OF CAMP</u>	<u>PURPOSE</u>
<i>Umsiedlungslager</i> et al	Camps for deported Poles in the <i>Gouvernementgeneral</i>
POW Camps	Prisoners of War. Technically under Wehrmacht control.
Hostage Camps	Used to enforce terror and compliance on civilian populations.
Transit Camps	To facilitate transport to labour camps and death camps
Labour Camps	Camps for forced labour, Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners
Concentration Camps	Category I Camps for “re-education” e g Dachau, Auschwitz I
	Category II Camps for prisoners who had committed serious crimes but for whom there still existed the possibility of “re-education” e g Buchenwald, Flossenbug
	Category III No release: Mauthausen
Death Camps	Camps erected for the sole purpose of mass extermination
	Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec, Treblinka
Death Camp + Concentration Camp	Combined mass killing with forced labour. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Lublin-Majdanek

The total number of camps is difficult to calculate. At a conservative estimate, and according to the Nazis’ own figures, there were twenty concentration camps operating with 165 affiliated labour camps. In Poland alone 5877 sites have been identified as places of Nazi internment.⁴¹

SS Standartenführer Karl Otto Koch, appointed *Kommandant* of KL Lublin in September 1941, decided that the new KL would be built on the highway running from Lublin to Zamosc, Lvov and Chelm. Koch’s reasons were simple. The size of the projected KL was too big for the city, besides which there was a greater possibility of escape within the city. The location outside the city was convenient for transport, there would be no need to build a railway spur and siding, and security could be

and Avitar Saf, op cit, 117-132.

⁴¹ *ibid*, 130.

maintained because of the open nature of the countryside surrounding the KL.⁴² By placing the KL in such a prominent position, the Germans discounted any pretence at secrecy, and showed a new stage in *Konzentrationslager* development. KL Lublin would be a model of SS economic management.⁴³ The new KL could be seen, and it can still be seen easily, from the suburbs of Lublin, and lies only 4.8 kilometres from the centre of the city. It would appear that the builders were certain of German victory. And in rural Poland, so far from the prying eyes of the enemy media, the KL would remain relatively secret until the final victory.

Throughout September and early October, Jewish, Polish, and Soviet prisoners of war constructed the KL. On 11 November 1941, Koch advised Oswald Pohl, the head of the KL Inspectorate, that KL Lublin was ready to accommodate 10 000 prisoners. A month later, on 8 December, revised plans expanded the KL projected population to 150 000.⁴⁴

The most authoritative history of KL Lublin is Józef Marszatek's *Majdanek: obóz koncentracyjny w Lublinie*, published in 1981 and translated into English under the heading *Majdanek: The Concentration Camp in Lublin* in 1986. Marszatek's work is the most detailed history of the KL and shows evidence of painstaking research. It compliments the more personal history, *The Lublin Extermination Camp* by Constantine Simonov, published in Moscow by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in late 1944.⁴⁵ One can gauge the impact of the KL on Simonov by noting that there is next to no pro-Soviet bias present in his writing. Simonov writes graphically of the KL and the murder of the thousands of men, women, and children with pathos. His task was clearly to describe what he saw, without political references. The crimes of the "Hitlerites" would speak for themselves. Since Marszatek and Simonov and others have ably and accurately recorded the history of Majdanek, I need not recount it here — except for a brief general description of the KL.

The camp was divided into five sections, each serving a different purpose - one, for example, was for women prisoners and another for

⁴² Marszatek, op cit, 22-23.

⁴³ Konnilyn Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps*, 317.

⁴⁴ Zygmunt Mankowski, "Majdanek" in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 3.937.

hostages. There were 22 prisoner barracks, two of which were used for administration and supplies. Majdanek also had seven gas chambers and two wooden gallows, situated in the area separating the camp sections from one another, as well as a small crematorium. Adjoining the Camp were workshops, storehouses, buildings for coal storage, laundries and so on. In all there were 227 structures. In September 1943 a large crematorium containing five furnaces was added. The section reserved for the SS contained their barracks, a casino, and the camp commandant's offices. The plans for the camp provided for the eventual construction of barracks for 250 000 prisoners, the establishment of industrial plants and the construction of additional gas chambers and a more efficient crematorium, but by the time the camp was liberated, only 20 per cent of these plans had been put into effect.⁴⁶

Surrounding the KL was a double barbed wire fence and white breakstone that formed the *todeszone* (death zone), a five metre wide zone between the wire and the barracks. Security was further strengthened by the 18 watchtowers, revolving searchlights, sentry boxes at the entrance to each compound, and eight pillboxes built in 1944 on the eastern boundary of the KL to guard against partisan attacks. "All this...was intended to...create the conviction that the only way out of the camp was through the chimney of the crematorium."⁴⁷

Within the KL itself the area was divided into five "fields" or compounds designed to hold prisoners. Field I was the "Lazarette" or Camp Hospital.

Field II housed Russian POWs; Fields III and IV, men of different nationalities and categories as prisoners; Field V, women and children, and VI, never completed, housed some storage barracks and

⁴⁵ Constantin Siminov, *The Lublin Extermination Camp*, Hereafter, Siminov.

⁴⁶ Mankowski, op cit.

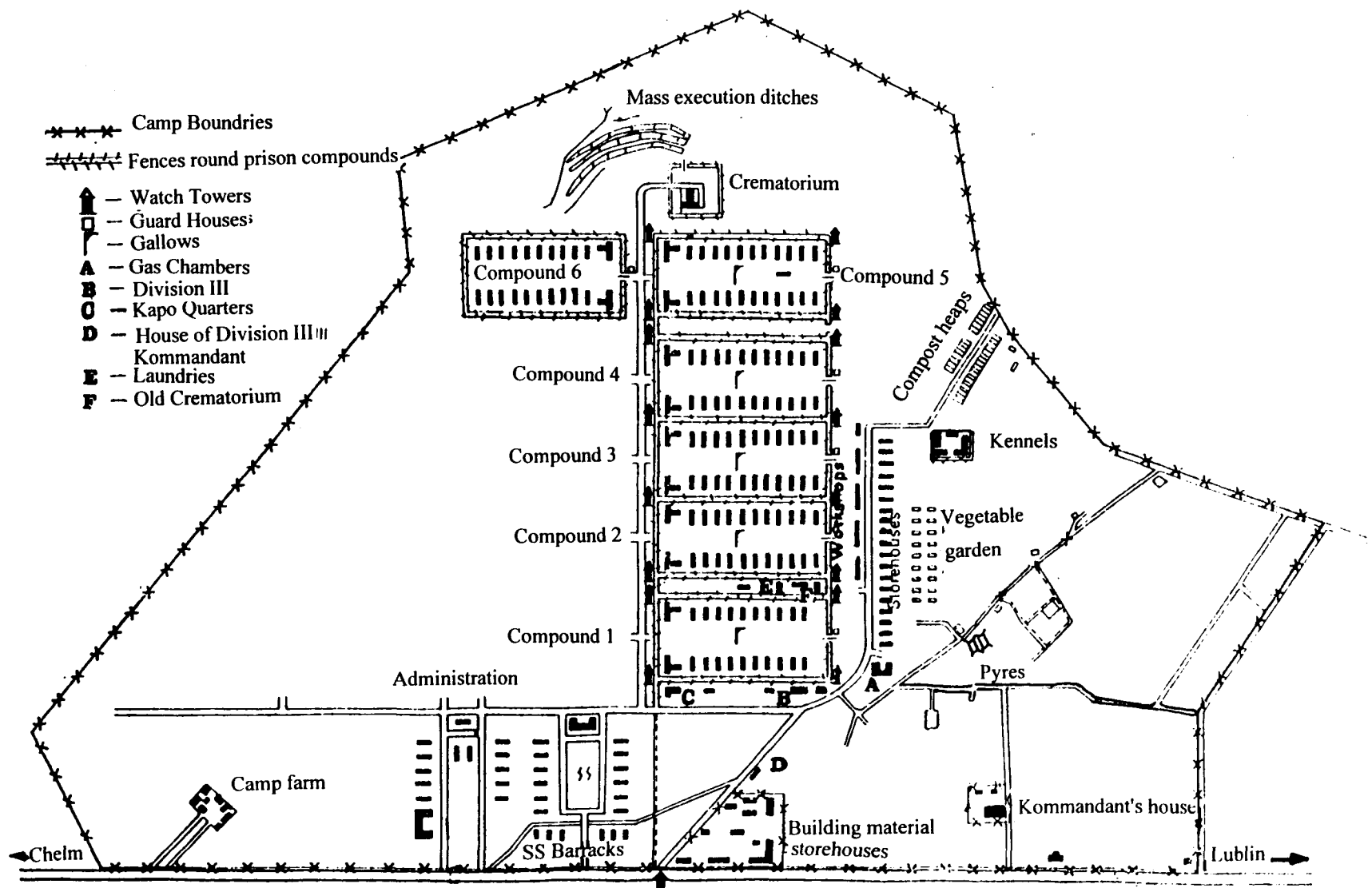
⁴⁷ Marszatek, op cit, 31.

workshops. In September 1943 the hospital for men was moved into Field V, and women and children were moved into its place.⁴⁸

Hovering over the KL was the spectre of the crematorium chimney, a constant reminder that the purpose of the KL was murdering human beings.

⁴⁸ Czesław Rajca and Anna Wisniewska, *Majdanek Concentration Camp*, 6.

Map 12: KONZENTRATIONSLAGER LUBLIN-MAJANEK



Jews were not the principal victims destined for KL Lublin. The dumping of Jews into the Lublin-Nisko region was part of the scheme to create a Jewish reservation prior to a massive migration of Jews out of Europe.⁴⁹ In April 1940 it was decided that the Lublin reservation idea was defunct, and the establishment of ghettos in the major cities would be preferable for the exploitation of Jewish labour.⁵⁰ As each plan for disposing of the Jews came to naught, and with the invasion of the Soviet Union and the “acquisition” of millions more Jews, Hitler made the decision sometime in the late spring early summer of 1941 to kill all of Europe’s Jews. Göring ordered Heydrich to make “all necessary preparations with regard to organisational, practical and financial aspects for an overall solution [*Gesamtlösung*] of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.”⁵¹

The *Protocol of the Wansee Conference* on 20 January 1942 ordered the *Endlösung* into an efficient government exercise.⁵² Auschwitz-Birkenau was designated as the primary killing centre for Europe’s Jews once the initial work of the *Einsatzgruppen* and the *Totenlager* of Operation Reinhard, Sobibor, Chelmno and Belzec had done their work. Lublin-Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau were to be the lynchpins of Himmler’s “racial purification” of Europe, but it fell to Auschwitz to be “the centre piece for the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe.”⁵³

KL Lublin was specifically charged with the task of implementing racial cleansing throughout Eastern Europe in preparation for the colonisation of the East by the Germans. Those Jews already there, along with others despatched from the *Alt Reich*, would be “dealt with.” Some 120 000 of the estimated 360 000 people murdered at Majdanek between October 1941 and July 1944 were Jews.⁵⁴ The remainder were mostly Poles, civilian, political and military prisoners, Russian POWs and political prisoners from across occupied Europe.

⁴⁹ Cf Dawidowicz, op cit, 156-157.

⁵⁰ Waldemar Schön, Head of the Department of Resettlement in the Warsaw District, “A Lecture on the Steps Leading to the Establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto, 20.01.1940”, in Arad, op cit, 223.

⁵¹ Hermann Göring to Reinhard Heydrich, 31.07.1941, in Arad, op cit, 233.

⁵² “Protocol of the Wansee Conference 20.01.1942”, in Arad, op cit, 249-261.

⁵³ Gutman, *Auschwitz*, 6.

⁵⁴ Marszałek, op cit, 187; Rajca and Wisiewska, op cit, 11.

Originally the complex was known as *Kriegsgefangenlager der Waffen SS in Lublin*, (KGL Lublin) and then later as *Konzentrationslager der Waffen SS Lublin*, (KL Lublin). The name *Majdanek* is derived from the name of the Lublin suburb, Majdan Tatarski, which lay immediately adjacent to the northern side of the KL. In the official documents related to the KL, the name Majdanek was never used.⁵⁵ The fact that the KL was originally established and known as a *Kriegsgefangenlager*, further highlights the complicity between the Wehrmacht and the SS. There is no evidence to suggest that the Wehrmacht was unwilling to hand over control of a significant number of prisoners of war to the SS. And there is likewise no evidence to suggest that the Wehrmacht were under any illusions as to what the fate of the prisoners would be.⁵⁶

Daily life in KL Lublin was similar to daily in all the *Konzentrationslager*. Degradation, humiliation, brutality, “annihilation through work” for those deemed worthy of living for a little longer, and the constant tension of applied terror were hallmarks of KL prisoner life. So great was the trauma upon entering the world of the *Konzentrationslager* that many prisoners went into shock. Elie Wiesel’s description of his arrival in Auschwitz conveys something of the terror that greeted new arrivals.

I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare...Soon I should wake with a start, my heart pounding, and find myself back in the bedroom of my childhood, among my books...⁵⁷

Keeping the prisoners terrorised and terrified was a deliberate ploy on the part of the Germans and their auxiliaries to ensure an orderly process of initiation into the *Konzentrationslager*. Upon arriving at Lublin station, 1.5 kilometres from Majdanek, prisoners were force into columns five abreast and marched to the camp accompanied by blows and the barking of police dogs.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 23.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 21.

⁵⁷ Elie Weisel, *Night*, 43.

Once inside the *Lager*, the prisoners were stripped naked, had all their body hair shaved, and were then pushed into concrete tubs filled with a lysol solution for “disinfection” from lice. Then came the showers, where the water often alternated between very hot and very cold depending on the whim of the SS operators. Prisoners were then issued with “clothes” to replace those that they had handed over upon arrival. Originally KL Lublin inmates wore the standard striped *Konzentrationslager* uniforms, usually taken from the bodies of the dead; however, as the population kept increasing, civilian clothes were issued from 1942. “Clothes” is almost a euphemism in the KL vocabulary. Often the clothes were little more than rags, which offered little protection against the elements.⁵⁸ Registration, labelling with the appropriate triangle, and numbering completed the initiation process.⁵⁹ At the same time, the initiates were introduced to the regulations of the KL, none of which were written anywhere, but had to be learnt quickly nonetheless. Failure to follow even the minutest of rules lay one open to frightful “punishments.” Judging by the number of prohibitions and injunctions, a prisoner had the impression “that everything was forbidden save dying.”⁶⁰ The procedure varied from *Lager* to *Lager*, but the chief elements of brutalisation and humiliation were common for all *Lager*.

Prisoners were plundered while they lived, and then plundered again once they were dead. Feig made the observation that Majdanek was where the Germans reached the most ghoulish application of the maxim “waste not want not”.⁶¹ Clothes, money, jewellery, gold teeth, and personal possessions that had a saleable value were taken by the SS and recorded before being despatched in trains for the Reich. In December 1942, in excess of RM 180 million was deposited in the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office account at the Reichsbank in Berlin. Three months later, RM 100 047 983 was deposited.⁶² The *Konzentrationslager* were lucrative business ventures.

Having survived the initiation into the *Lager*, the prisoner faced the trauma of the daily routine.

⁵⁸ Marszatek, op cit, 84-85.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 79-81.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 95.

⁶¹ Feig, op cit, 313.

⁶² Feig, *ibid*, 325, 328.

...he was immediately subjected to the regime of the camp regulations. His day was filled from the morning till the evening roll call with a maximum amount of activity. He was in constant haste, always fearful of beating and vexations.⁶³

With little variation, the prisoner's day followed a regular routine. The greater part of the day was spent in some form of backbreaking toil, either in one of the SS owned factories, the coalmines, or agriculture. If for some reason work could not be found for prisoners, the SS devised "useless work" in the form of activities such as the carting of heavy stones from one part of the camp to another, then taking them back to the original heap.⁶⁴

The most horrific work detail was the *Sonderkommando* whose task was to remove the bodies of the dead who had been gassed and destroy them. At first this was done on huge pyres in the Krepiecki Forest seven kilometres away from the KL.⁶⁵ After the *Krematorium* arrived from KL Sachsenhausen in October 1941, bodies were destroyed within the KL itself.⁶⁶ Once the *Gaskammern* were operative from September-October 1942, the *Sonderkommando* was enlarged to cope with the increased demand. For the men of the *Sonderkommando* there was no hope of liberation; all were shot and replaced on a regular basis. KL Lublin did not require an extensive killing operation because of its close proximity to the *Totenlager* of Sobibor and Belzec.

⁶³ Marszatek, op cit, 87.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 107.

⁶⁵ *ibid*

⁶⁶ Mankowski, op cit, 3. 937.

Table 5: PRISONER TIMETABLE: KL LUBLIN 1940-mid 1944⁶⁷

TIME	ACTIVITY
0400 (April-Sept)	Reveille. Dress, clean barracks, wash, receive “coffee”
0500 (Sept-April)	Appellplatz for Roll call with bodies of those who had died during the night.
0500-0600	Roll call
0530-0630	Form <i>Arbeitskommando</i> ; brigades leave for work.
1145-1300	Roll call and Lunch (watery soup)
1300-1630/1800	Roll call and Punishments followed by “Supper” and “Leisure Time” This was often used by the SS for projects such as the vegetable gardens etc.
2100	Lights out.

Compounding the prisoner’s misery was the overcrowding that made privacy impossible. In KL Lublin the prisoner barracks, designed to hold between 250-270, on average held between 500 to 800 people.⁶⁸ This led to the prevalence of all manner of illness and diseases that were aided and abetted by the totally inadequate diet and the constant terror. This meant that the average life expectancy for a prisoner was between two to three months.⁶⁹

Attrition through starvation was standard KL policy up until the worsening war situation forced a change in 1942. The basic food was soup made from the remains of “turnip, rotten potatoes, kale, dried cabbage leaves, and from the spring of 1942 of weeds growing wild within the camp.”⁷⁰ Only in autumn 1943 did the diet begin to improve somewhat. As well as the soup, prisoners were given a ration of bread made from verminous flour mixed with sawdust, and on occasions, “a slice of horse sausage, a spoonful of marmalade, margarine or mousetrap cheese.”⁷¹

Starvation posed the greatest threat to life in the KL. Even after the increase in rations in 1943, prisoners had insufficient food for their emaciated bodies to respond effectively to the heavy work they were forced to do. Drastic body weight loss, coupled with the onset of typhus, dysentery, diarrhoea, a host of intestinal disorders and the erosion of the natural immune defence systems left the individual weak and at

⁶⁷ Adapted from Marszatek, op cit, 88-90.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 91-92.

⁶⁹ Anton Gill, op cit, 36-37.

⁷⁰ Marszatek, op cit, 94.

greater risk from the arbitrariness of the *Kapos* and SS since they would not be able to respond to orders quickly.⁷² It was reasons such as this that gave Majdanek a higher mortality rate and a more hellish existence than even Auschwitz.⁷³

A *Frauenkonzentrationslager* was established in January 1943, accommodating between 6000 to 8000 women and children by the summer of 1943. The presence of children in a *Konzentrationslager* demonstrated the logicity of the racial war against the *Untermenschen*. Himmler had warned that all enemies of the *Volk* had to be destroyed. This, he made excruciatingly clear to the meeting of *Gaulieters* in Poznan on 6 October 1943.

The maxim with its few words, “The Jews must be exterminated”, is *meine Herren*, easily spoken. For he who has to execute its demands it is the hardest and most difficult task there is... We come to the question: how is it with the women and children? I have resolved even here on a completely clear solution. That is to say I do not consider myself justified in eradicating the men — so to speak killing or ordering them killed — and allowing the avengers in the shape of the children to grow up for our sons and grandsons. The difficult decision had to be taken, to cause this *Volk* to disappear from the earth...⁷⁴

Murdering children was part of the *Endlösung*; and it was done in the same way as for the adults. Children who were deemed old enough to work were made into slaves; those considered too young or sick were killed. The very young were usually despatched by bashing them against a wall or throwing them live into the *Gasskammern* or the furnaces.⁷⁵

In KL Lublin there were *Kinderkommandos* with children as young as eight years old who carried ashes from the crematoria to the pits. Other children worked in the camp

⁷¹ *ibid*, 95.

⁷² *ibid*, 96-97.

⁷³ Feig, *op cit*, 323.

⁷⁴ “Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler to Meeting of Gaulieters, Poznan, 06.10.1943”, in Padfield, *op cit*, 468-469.

garden and the kitchen. Ultimately, their fate was the same as all other prisoners.⁷⁶ Younger children were usually kept with their mothers in the *Frauenkonzentrationslager*. Older male children were sent to the regular *Lager*, where the more handsome boys often fell prey to sexual exploitation and rape. The granting of sexual favours to *Kapos* and *Blockführeren* was a common survival technique. Children learnt the art of survival quickly.⁷⁷

Survival was not an option for Jews in KL Lublin. On 14 October 1943 the *Sonderkommando* at Sobibor revolted, killing nine SS men and two Ukrainian guards. Some three hundred men and women escaped into the forests. Stunned by the uprising, the Germans launched a massive hunt for the escapees, catching about two thirds and killing them.⁷⁸ This was the second revolt in a *Vernichtungslager*. Treblinka had been the site for an uprising two months earlier on 2 August.⁷⁹ Fearful of future Jewish revolts and the possibility of some escapees passing information to the Allies, Himmler ordered the liquidation of all Jews in the Lublin region. There were to be no exceptions.⁸⁰

Operation *Erntefest* (Harvest Festival) was the codename given to this extermination exercise. The date was fixed for 3 November 1943 and preparations began in KL Lublin within days of Himmler's orders. HSSFP Jacob Sporrenburg, successor to Globocnik, was responsible for the murders. He organised the killings along the lines of a military venture, calling in Waffen SS, SS and Police Battalions from across the *Gouvernementgeneral*. In order to forestall any resistance, the *Aktion* was accomplished at top speed simultaneously in three locations: KL Lublin, Poniatowa and Trawniki.⁸¹

SS *Hauptscharführer* Erich Muhsfeldt who worked in the crematoria described the events of 3 November.

⁷⁵ Cf Richard Lukas, *Did the Children Cry?*, 75.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 90.

⁷⁷ Azriel Eisenberg, *The Lost Generation*, 147-148.

⁷⁸ Gilbert 1986, 618-619. Yitzhak Arad claims that the figures should be reversed; namely that two thirds escaped and only about 100 were recaptured and shot. Cf Yitzhak Arad, "Jewish Prisoner Uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibor", in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf, *op cit*, 397.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 596-597.

⁸⁰ Hausner, *op cit*, 188.

⁸¹ *Erntefest*, in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 2.448.

About 6am...a great action began. A group of Jews, by then already herded into Field V, was pushed into one [of the] barracks and stripped naked. The *Schulzhafllagerführer* [Anton] Thumann cut the wires dividing Field V from those ditches. In this manner, an opening was made. Between this opening and the ditches a double row of armed policemen was formed. The Jewes (sic) were driven towards the ditches through there. There, one SS man from [the] *Sonderkommando* would force ten persons into each ditch. Those already in were pushed towards its furthest end. They had to lie down and the SS from [the] *Sonderkommando*, standing at the top of the ditch, machine-gunned them. Consecutively, other batches were run along the bottom of the ditch to its very end, where they had to lie down on the corpses of those already shot, so that the ditch would be filling up, section by section, to its very brink. Men were executed in groups separate from women. The action lasted without any break till 5pm...Throughout the day, music was played from two cars specially equipped with loudspeakers...⁸²

Jews imprisoned in Lublin itself were also marched out to the KL for execution. So great was the number to be killed that as “the first ranks finally reached the gate of compound IV and passed through it...the end of the column had not left the town.”⁸³ At the end of that day 18 000 Jews had been shot to death in KL Lublin. A further 15 000 had been killed in Poniatowa and between 8 000 - 10 000 in Trawniki, making a total of some 42 000 dead. With Operation *Erntefest*, Operation Reinhard, the systematic murder of the Jews in line with the principles laid down at the Wansee Conference in January 1942, was considered ended.

With the cessation of *Erntefest*, the killing process in the KL returned to “normal.” KL Lublin had a fully operational killing plant in the form of *Gasskammern* and *Krematoria* since 1942. “Death Transports” arrived at the KL at regular intervals comprised of people who, in the words of Governor General Frank, “are not Germans

⁸² Erich Muhsfeld, in Rajca and Wisiewska, op cit, 22-23.

⁸³ Cited in Marszatek, op cit, 131.

and who, intending to hinder obstruct the German task of reconstruction in the General Government infringe laws, decrees, regulations, or decisions of the authorities, shall be liable to the death penalty.”⁸⁴ Shooting killed most people in the “Death Transports”. The gassing of prisoners was used for those unfit for manual work, the sick, elderly, disabled, and young children.

Selektion took place as each group arrived in the KL. The famous descriptions of *Selektion* at Auschwitz-Birkenau by Josef Mengele typify the process at Majdanek.⁸⁵ The differences lay in “regional styles”, not in overall purpose. At KL Lublin prisoners were assembled into columns and herded with whips and clubs to “dressing rooms” where they were ordered to strip naked and hand over any valuables. From these rooms, they were herded with whips and batons into the “bath house” where a panel of SS doctors made the first *Selektion*. Those condemned to die were taken either directly to the *Gasskammern* or to the *Gamelblock*, a waiting barrack.⁸⁶ *Selektions* were a constant threat that hung over the heads of all prisoners, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. *Selektions* amongst the sick took place several times a month.

KL Lublin’s *Gasskammern* were not destroyed in the evacuation of the KL in July 1944, and so have left an intact example of the killing plant. The *Gasskammern* were opened in October 1942, using the Auschwitz method for killing — Zyklon B. A subsidiary of the international chemical giant I.G. Farben, *Dessauer Werke für Zucker und Chemische Industrie* (Sugar and Chemical Industry Works in Dessau), supplied KL Lublin with 7 711 kilograms of Zyklon B between 1942 and 1944.⁸⁷ Zyklon B was the most effective killing agent used at Majdanek, as it was at Auschwitz. Taking between five to ten minutes to kill a room full of people; it was efficient, quick and relatively “clean.” The different times took into account things such as the humidity, health and age of the victims, temperature and quality of the Zyklon B.⁸⁸

The victims were herded into the *Gaskammer*, usually still being told by the SS men that they were going to have a shower. Once the chamber was full, the operator

⁸⁴ Hans Frank, 02.10.1943, in Marszatek, op cit, 134.

⁸⁵ E g Abraham Biderman, *The World of My Past*, 175-178; Gerald Posner and John Warr, *Mengele*, 27-29, 31-32; Wiesel, op cit, 40-42.

⁸⁶ Rajca and Wisniewska, op cit, 79; Marszatek, op cit, 136-137.

⁸⁷ Marszatek, op cit, 177.

would slam the hermetically sealed door. SS orderlies would then open vents in the roof and pour granulated Zyklon B into the chamber.

Then they started to cry out terribly for they now knew what was happening to them...After a few minutes there was silence. After some time had passed, it may have been ten to fifteen minutes, the gas chamber was opened. The dead lay higgledy-piggledy all over the place. It was a dreadful sight.⁸⁹

Exhaust fans removed the vapour of the gas, and then the doors were opened to allow the *Sonderkommando* to enter and drag the bodies out, where other members of the *Kommando* would examine the mouths for gold teeth and fillings that were pulled out. Orifices of both men and women were searched for hidden valuables, before the bodies were carted off for burning.

Up until June 1942, bodies were buried behind Field V. After June, bodies were disposed of in the two-oven *Krematoria* acquired from KL Sachsenhausen. In February 1943, the bodies buried within the KL and those buried in the Krepiecki Forest were disinterred and burnt on huge pyres, again following the example of Auschwitz.⁹⁰ The Auschwitz “method” was to place the bodies on top of an enormous grate, with wood piled underneath. Then the bodies were soaked in methanol and set alight. “Sweet, suffocating smoke rising behind Compound 5 and in the vicinity of the gas chambers signalled to the inhabitants of Lublin that the ‘death factory’ was working in full swing.”⁹¹

Whether destroyed in the pyres or *Krematoria*, the remains were then taken and pounded into ash by a special bone grinder. Having finished the grinding, the ground ash was poured into bags and trucked to the nearby SS farm for fertiliser. “At the

⁸⁸ Brian Harmon, *Technical Aspects of the Holocaust: Cyanide, Zyklon B and Mass Murder*, 7-13.

⁸⁹ SS *Untersturmführer* Hans Stark, cited in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess, *Those were the Days*, 255.

⁹⁰ Marszatek, *op cit*, 178.

⁹¹ Erich Muhsfeldt in Marszatak, *ibid*, 179 Shmuel Spector gives a graphic description of the methodical and well-engineered “Auschwitz” method in “Aktion 1005 – Effacing the Murder of Millions”, in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 5.2, 159-162.

moment of liberation, 1 350 cubic metres of compost containing fragments of human bones was found in that area [Compound 5]”⁹²

The recollections of the Sawyer family regarding Max Sawyer’s incarceration in KL Lublin-Majdanek are interesting for several reasons. Firstly, there is a high degree of agreement among family members on a great deal of the story. All agree that Max brought home to Australia a child’s shoe, and several support the story of the piece of human bone. There is significant agreement on the artworks that Max painted depicting scenes of atrocious acts committed by men in uniforms on women and children. Further, all agree that whatever had happened to him was so terrible he would not, or could not, speak of it, except in involuntary ways through nightmares and ramblings when he was drunk, and what was revealed was a preoccupation with death. Secondly, through examining the family memories, there emerges a strong indication that the family had not “processed” the reflections through either psychological or historical analysis. Thirdly, the content of the memories as retold by family members contain details that could only be known either by survivors of the *Konzentrationslager* or someone who had studied them in some detail. And since no one in the family has done any extensive historical research on Eastern Europe between 1941-1945, it is more certain to say that the memories accurately reflect the truth.

I turn now to those memories. Having made a summary of KL Lublin-Majdanek, we are now in a position to take Max Sawyer’s recollections and place them beside the known data.

After his arrest following the escape from Graudenz, Sawyer was sent to KL Lublin. Why send a western Allied prisoner of war to Majdanek? It was noted previously that as the war situation worsened for Germany, military control over the prisoners of war gradually deteriorated as the Gestapo, SD and RSHA took a greater role in the management of prisoner affairs, a fact acknowledged by Keitel.⁹³ The *Kugel* Decree

⁹² *ibid* A description of a bone grinding machine was presented at Nuremberg as part of the Soviet prosecution’s case on 19 February 1946. “The machine for crushing bones was mounted on a special carriage on the platform of a trailer ...A machine of these dimensions can produce 3 cubic metres of calcinated bone powder during one hour.” IMT VII.593. See too Spector, *ibid* 159,162.

⁹³ *cf* Chapter 7, 188.

of 4 March 1944 directed that “every escaped officer and NCO prisoner of war who had not been put to work, with the exception of British and American prisoners of war, should on recapture be handed over to the SIPO and SD...”⁹⁴ The example of the murder of the supposedly- exempt fifty RAF Officers at Sagan after their failed escape attempt, demonstrates the gulf between the written word and the application.⁹⁵ In August of the same year, a further order was given to execute all escaped prisoners of war without regard to any judicial or military procedure.⁹⁶ It is not surprising therefore that Sawyer would have been sent to Majdanek. Since conditions in the “nether world” of the *Straflager* and the *Konzentrationslager* were far worse than the regular *Stammlager*, the adherence to military procedure was likewise less firm. Sending an escaped prisoner who was also presumed to be Jewish to the nearest “facility” for *sonderbehandlung* would have not have been out of the ordinary, as one of the most prolific sources of KL Lublin were prisoners sent in by SIPO units in the *Stammlager*. Up to 7500 prisoners of war were sent to KL Lublin between 1942 and the liquidation of the KL in July 1944.⁹⁷

By the spring of 1944 the major *Vernichtungslager* of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka had been closed and demolished. The only facility still operative within the general direction of Graudenz and the *Warthegau* was KL Lublin. Despatching Sawyer to Majdanek would have depended only on the availability of transportation, which for the purposes of murdering the enemies of the Reich, was always found. Transports to KL Lublin reached their highest rate of arrival in the first four months of 1944, levelling off in May before rising again in June and July. The last transport of prisoners to be executed arrived at the KL on 21 July, barely 24 hours before the Red Army liberated the camp.⁹⁸ The vast majority of these Transports were made up of hostages held in revenge for the activities of the Polish Underground Army.⁹⁹

KL Lublin had been in a state of flux throughout 1944. While continuing to murder prisoners through gassings and shootings, the KL was also sending prisoner transports

⁹⁴ IMT 1.229.

⁹⁵ Cf Gilbert 1989, 510-511.

⁹⁶ IMT 6.373.

⁹⁷ Marszatek, op cit, 60.

⁹⁸ ibid, 134-135.

⁹⁹ ibid, 69.

to KL Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Gross-Rosen, Ravensbruck, Natzweiler and Plaszow, as a part of the evacuation of the camp as the Russians drew near.¹⁰⁰

If Sawyer arrived in March 1944 he would have gone through the *Selektion* and registration processes. I have no way of determining this since the SS destroyed prisoners' files before fleeing.¹⁰¹ Once inducted into the KL, Sawyer was set to work. He claimed that he was sent to work with the *Sonderkommando*, attached to the crematorium behind Field V, with the particular task of raking ashes into fields.¹⁰² If Sawyer were actually assigned as part of the *Sonderkommando* team, then he would have lived in the rooms set aside in the gas chamber complex, kept isolated from the rest of the prisoner population.¹⁰³ If, however, he were not directly assigned to the *Sonderkommando*, he would have been allocated a place in Field V, since with the evacuations that had begun in March-April, Fields III, IV and VI had been closed.¹⁰⁴ Given that the Germans regularly killed off those who closely involved in the exterminations, it is probable that Sawyer was not a member of the *Sonderkommando*.

After gassing, the bodies were taken to the crematorium and burnt. The Majdanek crematorium had five furnaces with an optimum average burning time of approximately 45 minutes. This was reduced to 25 minutes as the demand for the incineration of bodies increased. Majdanek worked at "factory" output level.

Experts have already examined the Dinas bricks of which the furnaces of this crematorium are built, and judging by their deformation and degeneration they calculate that the temperature must have been as high as 1500°C. Further evidence is provided by the iron stokers which were also deformed and smelted off. If we calculate that on the average each consignment of corpses was incinerated within half an hour and add the universal testimony that beginning with the autumn of 1943 the chimney of the crematorium belched smoke day and night without interruption, that it worked continuously like a blast furnace,

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 70.

¹⁰¹ Rajca and Wisniewska, 97.

¹⁰² MB

¹⁰³ Marszatek, *op cit*, 107.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, 184.

we shall get an average output capacity of approximately one thousand four hundred corpses per twenty four hours.¹⁰⁵

Bones and pieces of bodies that had not been reduced to ash in the furnace were ground into ash before being placed in bags. The bags were then taken to the SS farms within the KL and used to fertilise the vegetable plots.¹⁰⁶

Reporter Alexander Werth visited Majdanek shortly after the liberation. He described what he saw:

At the other end of the camp, there were enormous mounds of white ashes; but as you looked closer, you found that they were not perfect ashes: for they had among them masses of small human bones: collar bones, finger bones, and bits of skull, and even a small femur, which can only have been that of a child. And, beyond these mounds there was a sloping plain, on which there grew acres and acres of cabbages. They were large luxuriant cabbages, covered with a layer of white dust. As I hear somebody explaining: "Layer of manure, then layer of ashes, that's the way it was done...These cabbages are all grown on human ashes...and the prisoners ate these cabbages, too, although they knew themselves that they would almost certainly be turned into cabbages themselves before too long."¹⁰⁷

A Polish boy aged about 11, showing Werth the cabbage fields, commented that "Everything is growing well here...now the SS are gone, we'll get the land back."¹⁰⁸ Living within the shadow of KL Lublin had instilled nonchalance about death.

If Sawyer was raking ashes into vegetable plots or simply spreading the ash around in order to cover the size of the murder operations, he would have been in a position to see quite clearly the *Sonderkommando* taking bodies from the gas chamber, at the front of the KL, to the crematorium, which lay at the back of the KL. Secondly, it is

¹⁰⁵ Siminov, op cit, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Video: *The Liberation of Majdanek*.

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War*, 892-893.

highly probable that Sawyer would have been involved in the loading of the ashes into bags prior to taking them to the fields. In any case, simply by being in the KL, Sawyer would have seen most of the activities related to the killing procedure.

What he did see, Sawyer later depicted in a series of painting he executed in the 1950s. Painting and drawing were always a source of comfort and relaxation for Max, especially after the war. It would appear that drawing and painting helped him cope with the memories. Beryl Sawyer recalled three paintings that show horrific scenes of death and destruction of human beings in a KL environment. So forceful was the impression made on her in the early 1960s, that when she saw them for the first time the memory lasted with clearness and precision. All three paintings illustrate scenes of a KL that only a survivor would know.

The first showed women and children standing behind barbed wire “with both arms stretched out and everyone with these pleading looks...and really just skeletons looking at you.”¹⁰⁹ Scenes such as that would have been common enough in Majdanek, as they would have been common in any KL. It is interesting, but not unusual, that Max would have painted a scene showing women and children behind barbed wire. From the time of his arrest in Nestlebach up until his incarceration in KL Lublin, Sawyer had been in exclusively male environments. The shock of seeing women and children in a place such as Majdanek would have been enormous, given that Max had come from a cultural and family background that had taught him to show great respect for women.

Throughout the history of the KL, groups of Polish peasants would be rounded up and sent to Majdanek for a short period before dispatch to either the gas chambers, or another camp, usually Auschwitz. The reasons for these roundups were related to attempts to “pacify” the region against partisan activity. In June 1944, about 2000 men, women and children were sent to Majdanek as a part of the “pacification” program. Once in the KL, they soon succumbed to the harsh conditions and many died within a short time.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 895.

¹⁰⁹ BS

¹¹⁰ Marszatek, *op cit*, 64.

The second painting showed “bits of soldiers hanging on the barbed wire.”¹¹¹ Beryl felt that this painting might have derived from an earlier time in the war. However, it is possible that it may have been from the KL period. “Going to the wire” was a common way of ending the constant torment of life in the KL. Prisoner suicide was usually done by hurling oneself against the highly charged wire fence. Death by electrocution was instantaneous if the guards in one of the eighteen towers surrounding the KL didn’t shoot first. Around the perimeter of each of the five Fields was a double barbed wire fence, electrified in 1943 as part of KL security precautions.¹¹² It is most likely that Sawyer would have seen the bodies of prisoners who had suicided being carted away to the crematorium in the mornings.

The third painting is perhaps the most autobiographical and distressing.

Then there was one of himself, obviously a self portrait, and he had the chicken hoe type of instrument, and he was in this big paddock, there were all these people being marched away, smoke was coming up in the air, [the people] obviously to be gassed, and he had hold of this little girl and the guards, two guards were pulling her away from him.¹¹³

In 1996 Beryl was able to recall vividly the details of this picture, which she said had made her feel ill the first time she saw it along with the others.

In this self portrait Max had depicted himself wearing torn striped trousers, consistent with standard KL uniforms, a pair of boots, which could have been his own, or a pair “organised” during his registration in the KL. He looked as though his head had been shaved, although it was covered with a cloth cap, similar in shape to “a hanky tied...with four corners...”¹¹⁴ The description of Max could quite possibly be an accurate description of the standard dress of KL prisoners.

¹¹¹ BS

¹¹² Marszatek, op cit, 31.

¹¹³ BS

KL Lublin issued striped uniforms to all incoming prisoners, with the exception of prisoners of war, until the beginning of 1942, when striped clothes were given to “asocial” prisoners only. On 26 February 1943, the KL Inspectorate ordered those prisoners

employed within the bounds of the camp should wear appropriately marked civilian clothes. In keeping with this instruction, prisoners were issued with the most worn-out clothes of murdered Jews. On the backs of the jackets were painted in oil the large red letters KL separated by a broad stripe of the same colour. Similar stripes were painted on the trousers.

Children in the KL retained their own clothing or else received adult garments.¹¹⁵ This is evidenced in the description of the little girl in the third painting: “She had straight plaited hair, very big eyes...a tunic over a long sleeved jumper...and she had leggings,” From the description it would appear that she was in her own clothes. In the painting Max was trying to stop the soldiers from taking her away. In the struggle she had lost one of her shoes; Max held it.¹¹⁶

All family members have agreed that Max brought a child’s shoe home to Australia. The passage of time has not diminished the accuracy of the memories for the family. Each member asked about the shoe has described it independently and with a high level of consistency. Beryl Sawyer:

Heavy kind of shoe. It was made of leather, and had more of a wooden sole. It was a bit rough; it wasn’t very big...a child’s shoe...brown colour. It wasn’t a shiny shoe; it was a dull colour.¹¹⁷

The shoe remained with Max for many years. At some time in the 1970s he burned the shoe, along with a substantial amount of paintings and other war-related items. Recalling the burning of the shoe, Beryl remarked that Max was very upset, and kept

¹¹⁴ *ibid*

¹¹⁵ Marszatck, *op cit*, 85.

¹¹⁶ BS

saying “It’s for the best...” The paintings that Max had done of the KL were also burnt, not by Max, but by his father, who Beryl remembered him saying: “You must forget all this, you must put it behind you...it’s not healthy...”¹¹⁸ It must be presumed that the piece of bone Max claimed to have brought back with the shoe disappeared at the same time. And while all members of the family agree on the shoe, there is only agreement on hearing about the bone, no one actually saw it.

It is the child’s shoe that gives us a piece of possible evidence and puts us one step closer to saying that Max Sawyer was where he said he was. In plundering the prisoners of their clothes, the Germans attempted to strip them of their identity and any links with the outside world. The universe of the KL was all encompassing.

Clothes and shoes also served another purpose: namely, enriching the Reich with the stolen goods of its victims. Auschwitz and Majdanek had huge storage barracks where the goods of the dead were sorted and sent into the Reich. *Kanada* in Auschwitz was famous for the barracks filled with prosthetics, spectacles, suitcases and all manner of clothes, but above all, womens’ hair. Upon Liberation on 27 January 1945, the Red Army found about 7000 kilograms of human hair; most of it packed into bags of 25 kgs each.¹¹⁹

The most commented-on things in Majdanek were the shoes. In August 1944, Richard Lauderbach, at the invitation of the Red Army and the Polish Council for National Liberation, visited Majdanek. He filed this report with *Time-Life Magazine*:

It was not the gas chambers where victims were snuffed out standing up, or the crematorium where they were chopped up and then burned in construction ovens. This part of the ‘death factory’ didn’t get to me somehow. Too machine-like. It wasn’t even the open graves with skeletons and skulls or stacks of fertiliser made from human bodies and manure. The full emotional shock came at a giant warehouse chock full of people’s shoes, more than 800 000 of all sizes, shapes,

¹¹⁷ BS. cf also MB, ES, VJ

¹¹⁸ BS, MB

¹¹⁹ Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz 1940-1945: Guide Book Through the Museum*, 33.

colours and styles. In some places the shoes had burst out of the building like corn from a crib. It was monstrous...I looked at them and saw their owners: skinny kids in white, worn slippers; thin ladies in black high-laced shoes; sturdy soldiers in brown military shoes.¹²⁰

Lauderbach's report appeared in *Life* on 18 September 1944, one of the first detailed accounts of the Holocaust to appear in the western press. Siminov described the same scene, adding "Nothing that belonged to the killed was to be wasted - neither their clothing, nor their footwear, nor their bones, nor their ashes."¹²¹

In 1992 Arnold Goldstein published his "diary" novel, *The Shoes of Majdanek*. In the novel Goldstein writes of a survivor returning to the KL fifty years after Liberation.

What remains are your shoes, and the shoes of 800 000 others. I walked among them and wept as I heard the silent footsteps they never took. They were all black, not in their birth, but in fifty years of aging. They smelled of death, not in my nostrils, but in my heart. Shoes, shoes, shoes, a cascade of shoes, a barrage of shoes, a shoe mortuary.¹²²

In the novel, Goldstein has the author of the diary hide the work in one of the shoes just before he dies.

In a similar vein, Ray Jones wrote in his journal *A Visit to the Camps* in July 1995:

I am now in a barracks room which contain thousands upon thousands of pairs of shoes, the infamous "shoes of Majdanek." Until you see something like this, it is hard to envision what "millions died in the Holocaust" truly means...I have just walked through two more barracks that were completely filled with shoes. The one has two

¹²⁰ Richard Lauderbach in Feig, op cit, 330.

¹²¹ Siminov, op cit, 12.

¹²² Arnold Goldstein, *The Shoes of Majdanek*, 60.

fairly large rooms, each as big as a kitchen in an average sized house, that are filled with children's shoes.¹²³

Near identical comments are to found in others sources such as the March of the Living *Virtual Tour* which was created for the *Internet* in 1995. In the "tour", the browser is taken through the KL — including the three barracks filled with shoes. The quality of the graphics is such that the viewer is given a very clear colour image of the shoes.¹²⁴

Proving that Max Sawyer was in Majdanek may never be conclusive. However, the shoe and what it meant for Sawyer is indisputable. The shoe would provide, so Sawyer hoped, the proof of terrible things being done to Jews and others in Europe. On a more general note, if a person were to take something from KL Lublin, it is not unreasonable to say that the most available or appropriate relic would be a shoe.

As 1944 progressed, the sound of the approaching Red Army grew louder every day. Concerned, but not overly so, the Germans began evacuating the prisoners to various KL across the *Gouvernementgeneral*, to KL Auschwitz and into the Reich. From March through to 19 April, 13 000 prisoners were sent out of Majdanek. Until July, there were no more significant transports. The Germans believed the Soviet advance would either be checked or seriously delayed. When the Russian summer offensive opened in June 1944, the Germans realised that Majdanek lay at the end of one of the Red Army's sweeps into Poland. Literally at the last minute, a transport of 2 500 prisoners was deported to KL Auschwitz and Mathausen.¹²⁵ By mid-July 1944, 80per cent of the KL population had been deported. Those who remained were "1500 cripples and Soviet POWs...180, mostly political, prisoners, who formed the so-called *Endskommando zum Liquidations des Lagers*."¹²⁶ For the remaining prisoners life in the KL was still a daily survival battle. The only difference lay in their being employed in building defence barriers, anti-tank devices and to commence the dismantling of the camp.

¹²³ Ray Jones, *A Visit to the Camps*, 6.

¹²⁴ March of the Living, *Virtual Tour Part 5: Majdanek Page II*, 1.

¹²⁵ Marszatek, *op cit*, 71.

¹²⁶ *ibid*, 183.

There is reason to suspect that, like most prisoners, Sawyer believed the Germans would shoot him before he could be liberated. Certainly as the war drew towards its close, Hitler, anxious that the Allies not find evidence of the KL, ordered the destruction of the camps and the murder of all surviving prisoners. Felix Kersten, Himmler's personal chiropractor, recalled the intentions concerning the fate of the KL:

If National Socialist Germany is going to be destroyed...their enemies and the criminal now sitting in the concentration camps were not going to be permitted the triumph of emerging as victors. "They will go under with us! That is the clear and logical order of the Führer, and I will see that it is carried out thoroughly and meticulously."¹²⁷

The prisoners were themselves under no illusions about their survival. Elie Wiesel's "faceless one" expressed the general feeling that the Germans would not allow KL prisoners to meet their liberators.¹²⁸ Escape became the only viable alternative.

KL Lublin had a history of escape attempts, more than a few of which had been successful. Three successful escapes by Russian prisoners of war took place in March, May and June 1942.¹²⁹ While little is known of the March escape, the May attempt has been recorded in Siminov.

In May 1942 a party of Russian prisoners of war sent to the Krembecki Woods near this camp, to bury the bodies of prisoners who had been shot, killed seven of the German guards with their spades and escaped. Two of them were caught, but the other fifteen got away. The remaining one hundred and thirty prisoners of war (the only survivors of the thousand that had been brought here in August 1941) were transferred to the civilian prisoners' block.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Cf Padfield, *Himmler*, 567.

¹²⁸ Wiesel, *op cit*, 92-93.

¹²⁹ Siminov *op cit*, 10; Hermann Langbein, *Against All Hope*, 271.

¹³⁰ Siminov, *ibid*, 10.

The third escape attempt was a direct result of the second. Russian prisoners had little to fear from an escape attempt. They had experienced the German treatment of Soviet prisoners since the previous summer, and were under few illusions as to their long-term survival prospects.

One night, at the end of June, realising that they were doomed anyhow, the Russian war prisoners - all except fifty - decided to escape. Collecting all the available blankets, they placed them five thick over the barbed wire fences and using them as a bridge managed to get away. The night was dark and only four were shot, the rest made good their escape. Immediately after this the fifty men who had remained were taken out into the courtyard, compelled to lie down on the ground and were shot with tommy guns.

After the third escape, security around the KL was tightened dramatically. *Kommandant SS Standartenführer* Karl Koch was replaced with *SS Obersturmbannführer* Max Koegel, in August 1942. Koegel promptly began improving the security of the KL by creating the *Todeszone*, “a five metre wide zone between the inner fence and the barracks” and completing the electrification of the barbed wire fences.¹³¹

In December 1943, only weeks after the *Erntefest Aktion* of 3 November, two prisoners choked their guards and then stripped them of their SS uniforms before escaping into the forests.¹³² Escape from outside working parties held a far greater chance of success, than did an attempt from within the KL itself. Nonetheless, the position of Majdanek, its proximity to forests and partisans made the option of escape a plausible alternative. Langbein observes that

The thought of flight occurred to foreigners more easily than to Germans, usually coupled with a desire to join an active group of partisan fighters. Since this desire was most likely to be realised in Auschwitz and Majdanek — where conditions made even a very great

¹³¹ Marszatek, op cit, 31, 42-43.

¹³² Langbein, op cit, 277.

risk attractive — the organisation of escapes played a greater role in those camps than elsewhere.¹³³

Escape provided many prisoners with a last hope of survival, a hope that gave them strength to undertake risks that could result in prolonged torture and certain death if the attempt failed. Secondly, escape made the prisoners pro-active rather than simply passive victims awaiting their fate. Escape also ran counter to the Nazi image of the helpless prisoner. Few of the *Herrenvolk* could imagine prisoners overpowering their overlords and escaping.

In the last weeks of the KL prior to liberation by the Red Army, escape plans were under-way in many sections of the camp. Plans had to be made with some speed as the transports of prisoners to other KL meant that the element of anonymity and surprise lessened with each evacuation. At the same time the confusion generated by the evacuation transports encouraged potential escapees to take greater risks, bargaining on a gradual breakdown in KL security. It would appear this was a major element in the escape of German Kapo Georg Arold, who escaped with nine Poles only days before the liberation. Having escaped, Arold and his group went and joined Polish partisans nearby.¹³⁴

My contention is that at about the same time, that is within a few weeks of the German abandonment of the KL, Max Sawyer and a small group of Allied prisoners made their escape bid. We have no documentary evidence to substantiate Sawyer's story; once again I rely on the memories of the family. The picture emerges along these lines: fearing that they would either be shot or transported to another KL, Sawyer and four or five other prisoners made plans to escape. The other members of the group included a Jew, Eddy Jack Glasner, who had fought with the Palestinian Corps and had been in a number of *Stammlager* including Marburg and later in *Straflager* Graudenz.¹³⁵ Despite extensive searches in Israel, Germany and Britain, along with the Red Cross, no trace of Glasner has been found.¹³⁶ The only reference

¹³³ *ibid*, 88.

¹³⁴ *ibid*, 270.

¹³⁵ ICRC, Private Jack Glasner, born in Tel Aviv 24.07.1921, AMPC 12784; RB 15320; RB 27781 M 521.

¹³⁶ Searches conducted throughout 1995-1996 to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; *Deutsche Dienststelle für die*

the family recalled was Max's comment that Glasner was his "little Jewish friend."¹³⁷ Other members of the group allegedly included a Frenchman, a British soldier, a Pole and Sawyer.¹³⁸ The starvation diet and heavy labour in the KL weakened the group. It appears that the escape was determined as much by the failing strength of the members as the fear of being killed by the Germans. Sawyer claimed that the intention of the group was to reach the forests and join the partisans. He would have gained knowledge about the partisans from fellow prisoners who must have translated details from Polish and Russian into a mix of English and German. Beryl stated that Max had learnt some Russian, though she was unsure whether it was before or after he had been liberated.¹³⁹ Language also adds to the credibility of the story. Taking a Polish prisoner with them would help in communication with both local people and partisans.

A moonless night was considered a good night for escapes since there would be less light. In the last few weeks before the Russians arrived in Lublin, the night sky was alive with flashes from Soviet artillery and the sounds of Russian planes strafing German positions, including the KL itself. On 11 May 1944, during a night raid on Lublin, Soviet bombers dropped 83 bombs over the KL, accurately hitting "the transformer, the SS goal (solitary cells), the vegetable garden and the crematorium...the bombs were aimed very accurately, with an excellent knowledge of the actual plan of the camp."¹⁴⁰

This indicates clearly the presence of Polish and/or Russian Partisans in the area around Lublin.¹⁴¹ Sawyer claimed that the partisans were watching activity in the KL from the nearby forests.¹⁴² However, caution is needed. Both partisan groups and Germans greatly exaggerated figures in order to inflate their own causes. The partisans inflated the number of Germans killed, and the Germans did the same with regard to the number of "bandits" they claimed to have liquidated.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, in

Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht, 05.08.1996; UK Ministry of Defence, 24.10.1996.

¹³⁷ ES

¹³⁸ MB

¹³⁹ BS

¹⁴⁰ Marszatek, *op cit*, 183.

¹⁴¹ David Mountfield, *The Partisans*, 41.

¹⁴² MB

¹⁴³ Walter Laqueur, *Guerilla Warfare*, 203.

the later stages of the war in the east, much of Poland was “crawling with partisans.”¹⁴⁴

Laqueur comments that the “political impact of the partisan activity was far greater than its military contribution.”¹⁴⁵ In any case, the role of the partisan fighters in Eastern Europe throughout the war played a significantly different role to the activities of underground groups in Western Europe. Leon Berk makes the difference clear:

...under no circumstances can I equate the excesses committed by the partisans with the crimes against humanity committed by Nazi Germany. The killings, however appalling they were, which took place in the forest, were an instinctive defence reaction which, with time, evolved into an orgy of vengeance exacted by free, courageous people against a vicious invader who, in the name of spurious racial superiority, intended the deliberate and systematic destruction of a great nation.¹⁴⁶

While Berk is speaking of Russia, his words may equally apply to Poland, where accounts such as *Dying We Live*, by Julian Eugeniusz Kulski, describe one teenager’s activities in the Polish Home Army.¹⁴⁷

Partisan activity has been notoriously difficult to document, a point noted by a former fighter with a group of Russian partisans, Leon Berk.¹⁴⁸ The number of texts available is limited, and most of these concern either partisan activity in the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, including a number of escaped Australian prisoners of war who fought with the Yugoslav partisans.¹⁴⁹ Since the communists were often the only group capable of resisting the Germans, the partisan groups usually had a strong communist flavour. Communist and non-communist groups viewed one another

¹⁴⁴ David Wild to POS, 19.09.1995.

¹⁴⁵ Laqueur, *op cit*, 204.

¹⁴⁶ Leon Berk, *Destined to Live*, xvii

¹⁴⁷ Julian Eugeniusz Kulski, *Dying We Live*.

¹⁴⁸ Berk, *op cit*.

¹⁴⁹ Laqueur, *op cit*, 204-205.

with suspicion and were reluctant to operate together.¹⁵⁰ Since the great partisan supporter was the Soviet Union, its support was given to the communist groups. As the Red Army rolled westwards towards the Reich, communist partisan groups joined the Soviet forces; non-communist forces either “disappeared” or were liquidated as potential enemies of the new communist regimes.¹⁵¹

Partisan forces around the Lublin region belonged to both the fiercely anti-communist *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army) and the *Armia Ludowa* (People’s Army) which took orders from Moscow.¹⁵² Many Russian POWs who had escaped from German captivity formed partisan groups that roamed eastern Poland. Several groups were known to be operative in the Lublin area.¹⁵³ The partisans were supplied by Moscow¹⁵⁴ and, on occasion, by Allied airdrops. At least one mission flown by the RAF left Brindisi for a successful mission to Lublin in April 1944.¹⁵⁵ It is known that Soviet-backed partisans were instrumental in preparing for the June 1944 summer offensive by attacking railways “with more than ten thousand minings taking place two nights before its start.”¹⁵⁶ Another difficulty in establishing their identity lies in the fact that in January 1944 Moscow officially disbanded the Partisan general staff. Whatever the case, all we know for certain is that there was considerable partisan activity around Lublin in the months prior to the Red Army’s liberation of KL Lublin.

Balawejder contends that Russian prisoners of war who had escaped from transports or camps (both Stalags and KL) often joined Polish partisan groups, “especially the People’s Guard (GL) and People’s Army (AL) or formed small units on their own, later co-operating with the said military formations.”¹⁵⁷ Further, there were some Soviet troops who were active with partisan groups in the south and eastern areas of the Lublin region, about 40 kms away from the city itself. This does not rule out the possibility that they may have been active around the KL.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, 205-206. Patsy Adam-Smith, *op cit*, 148.

¹⁵¹ David Wild to POS, 19.09.1995.

¹⁵² Harold Werner, *Fighting Back*, 194-215.

¹⁵³ *ibid*, 126-128, 134, 151.

¹⁵⁴ *e g ibid*, 197-200.

¹⁵⁵ Mountfield, *op cit*, 40.

¹⁵⁶ Laqueur, *op cit*, 211.

Max and his companions allegedly escaped from the KL after killing at least two guards, and made their way towards the nearby forests. According to family recollections, the men were sick and severely undernourished.¹⁵⁸ They had no idea where they were going, except that it was away from the KL and away from the Germans. Evidently they believed they had a better chance of survival in the forest, waiting for the Russians, than in the KL. Mary Sawyer Brown, Max's daughter, asserts that her father and the others were seen and approached by partisans. Sawyer was adamant that the men who liberated him were partisans, not soldiers, and that they were Russians, not Poles.¹⁵⁹ Upon approaching the partisans, Sawyer cried out "Australian! Australian!" which resulted in the partisans raising their rifles ready to shoot. Clearly, "Australian" must have sounded too close to "Austrian" or its equivalent in Russian, a word that was linked with the Nazi Reich. Quickly realising that the word "Australian" had been misunderstood, Sawyer yelled out "English! English" a word understood by the Russians, who lowered their guns.¹⁶⁰ What the other escapees cried out is not known. Having convinced their liberators that they were indeed escaped KL prisoners; the men were taken by the partisans and given food. Beryl Sawyer recounted:

...they carried them for weeks...don't know where, but they'd disappear and come back with some goat's milk and a bit of cheese...They didn't have much to eat but it was probably just as well after eating next to nothing....they finally got their strength back enough to walk. And then they were all given guns and expected to fight...Max thought the Russians were absolutely marvellous.¹⁶¹

Sawyer spoke of the partisans being excellent horsemen who eventually allowed him to ride one of their mounts on a number of occasions.¹⁶² Sawyer and the other men stayed with the partisans for some months, most likely from the end of June until the onset of the winter of 1944-1945, when the partisan groups in Poland were gradually disbanding.

¹⁵⁷ Balawejder to POS 18.02.1997.

¹⁵⁸ BS

¹⁵⁹ BS, MB

¹⁶⁰ MB

¹⁶¹ BS

In the meantime, the Red Army liberated Lublin and the KL on 22/23 July 1944. The Russians had surprised the Germans so much that they had no time to destroy the KL or kill the last remaining prisoners. Majdanek was the first major KL to fall into Allied hands. The Russians set up a special Polish Soviet Crimes Investigations Unit to take testimonies of survivors and local people, as well as interrogate the small number of SS guards and *Kapos* who had been caught. It published its report on 16 September 1944.

Throughout the investigation, the proceedings were open to the Western media, who wrote extensive accounts of the KL and the course of the investigations. Most of what was submitted for printing in the West was refused. The BBC refused to broadcast it and the *New York Herald Tribune* commented that “even on top of all we have been taught of the maniacal Nazi ruthlessness, this example sounds inconceivable...”¹⁶³ Australians read about KL Lublin for the first time in an article headed “Blum reported dead” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in mid-August 1944, at a time when the major concern in the country was the possible end to milk rationing.¹⁶⁴ German atrocities in Paris received full attention after the liberation of Paris, but further mentions of the killing centres in Eastern Europe had to wait until mid-October, when two camps, Oswiecim and Brzezinsky, were named.¹⁶⁵

In November, six SS men and two *Kapos* were tried and condemned to death. They had been tried before a special Polish-Soviet tribunal convened in Lublin. Two of the SS committed suicide before their executions. The remainder were publicly hanged on the gallows of the former KL in early December 1944, an event filmed by Soviet film crews.¹⁶⁶

At this point I can only conjecture that Sawyer and the other former prisoners, now somewhat restored to health, began to look for ways of getting home. Glasner left the group and went his own way, heading north and west, perhaps hoping to meet the

¹⁶² MB

¹⁶³ Werth, op cit, 898.

¹⁶⁴ SMH 27.07.1944; 11.08.1944.

¹⁶⁵ SMH 19.09.1944; 12.10.1944.

¹⁶⁶ Cf *The Liberation of Majdanek*; Mankowski, op cit, 940.

British armies heading towards Germany from the west.¹⁶⁷ For the others, the war was over. Heading towards the east, Max Sawyer, along with several hundred other Australians and several thousands of British and other Imperial ex-POWs, began making their way across Poland, through the Ukraine towards Odessa.

¹⁶⁷ Eddy Jack Glasner to EMS 28.04.1945.

Chapter Nine: Odessa and Home March - November 1945

Elizabeth Aaltje (Alice) Tarrant was born in Leura in the Blue Mountains in 1924, of Welsh and Dutch descent. Her father worked on the railways and shortly after Elizabeth was born the family moved, firstly to Scarborough, and then to Taree. As a girl she developed osteomyelitis which left her lame. A direct result of the illness was a sporadic attendance at school. Elizabeth's father was determined that his daughter would pass the Intermediate Certificate and so during 1939 — when she was hospitalised in the Taree Base Hospital for most of the year — she studied for her final exams. There is a distinct probability that while she was in hospital during 1939 she would have seen the 19-year old Max Sawyer walk past her bed on his way to visit his mother Minnie.

During the war, Elizabeth served with the local Womens' Auxiliary, completing her first aid course. During 1942, when the threat of Japanese invasion was at its height, Elizabeth along with the other Auxiliary members was put on alert in case of a possible Japanese attack. On the night Sydney Harbour was shelled by a miniature submarine, the whistle at Peter's Creamery in Taree signalled the defence militias and the National Emergency Personnel to take their appointed places. Elizabeth remembered her mother saying that she had better get to her post: "It was all very exciting." During the day Elizabeth worked in Connell's department store as a typist.

In July 1945, at a gathering in a friend's home, Elizabeth met a young returned soldier, still in uniform. She recalled that when she entered the room: "It just clicked." At the end of the party, the young soldier asked if he could escort Elizabeth home. Shortly afterwards, he asked her if she would agree to go out with him. Weeks later, he asked her if she would marry him. Max Sawyer was the perfect gentleman. "He did everything very properly. He went and saw dad and asked for my hand in marriage."¹

¹ Elizabeth Tarrant Sawyer, 19.11.1996 Hereafter ETS

Max was well liked by the Tarrant family, with the exception of one of Elizabeth's younger sisters, who seemed distinctly jealous. The wedding date was set for November.

Max Sawyer and Elizabeth Tarrant were married in St John's Anglican Church, Taree, on 16 November 1945. It was a small service due to the approaching death of Elizabeth's maternal grandmother. For the next two weeks the newlyweds honeymooned at Sawtell before returning to Taree. To most, the newly married Max Sawyer had finally and fully returned. It came as a shock to discover in the years after his marriage that the demons that he had so desperately hoped he had left in Europe had followed him to Australia.

In the confusion that swept across Eastern Europe in late 1944 as the Red Army pushed the Germans back towards the *Alt Reich*, it is not surprising that there are very few records of the fate of Allied prisoners of war liberated by the Russians. In Poland, the former POWs now found themselves set adrift and often caught between the growing fights between the pro-Soviet Lublin based Polish Provisional Government of National Unity (formerly, the Polish Committee of National Liberation) and the supporters of the London-based Polish Government in Exile which wanted to create a western style democratic state.²

Conditions in Eastern Europe were dire. Years of German occupation had left a savage mark on the civilian population. Agriculture and industry were in disarray, not only from Nazi exploitation but also from the destruction caused by the invading Red Army and the "scorched earth" tactics employed by the retreating Wehrmacht. Poland lay desolate in many parts. Food was scarce, medicine even rarer, and transport across liberated Poland spasmodic and slow. Along with economic and social crisis was the ever-increasing political upheaval, as the debate over the new borders grew more and more vindictive. Since the Red Army's primary goal was Berlin; the care of liberated prisoners from the *Stalags* and the KL was not a priority. Former POWs often had to survive on their initiative and wits.³

² Cf R J Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, 217-218; R F Lcslic, *The History of Poland Since 1863*, 280-282.

³ David Wild, *Prisoner of Hope*, 256-257.

Max and his companions, liberated by Russian-speaking partisans, remained with their liberators for some time. He spoke of the terrible winter they endured, and the constant hunger and search for food. It appears that the men survived by scrounging potatoes and food scraps, such as raw bacon, from whatever sources they could find.⁴ On one occasion, Sawyer recalled one of the partisans attempting to wring the neck of a chicken. The intense cold was so great that in the process of killing the bird, several of the man's exposed fingers, which must have been frostbitten, snapped off.⁵ Certainly the winter of 1944-1945 was the most severe in living memory in Europe.⁶

Travel was severely restricted. At the time of his liberation, Max and his comrades were sick and starving. Movement was slow since the men were in no condition to endure long distance travel. Horse and cart were the main mode of transport. The first priority was to build their strength. Most likely, the men were kept in the forests around Lublin, gradually moving further east, away from the fighting. Since we have no way of determining with accuracy Sawyer's journey through eastern Poland, we need to rely on the accounts given by others.

David Wild, in *Prisoner of Hope*, writes that upon liberation from *Stalag XX A* in January 1945, the ex-POWs were more or less left on their own by the Red Army. Little attempt was made to direct the men towards transit centres for their eventual repatriation. The men were encouraged to keep moving out of the war zone, usually a distance of about 20 to 25 kms in order to be fairly sure of escaping remnant patrols of marauding Germans. Once the men were behind the lines, personal details were recorded, and some attempts at feeding and housing were made.⁷ However, when the preliminary details were done, the Russians settled into a "maddening inertia."⁸ Repatriation and handling thousands upon thousands of Allied servicemen, along with hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and refugees, was not a Russian skill.

⁴ ES, VJ

⁵ MB

⁶ Olga Horak to MB

⁷ Wild, op cit, 251-252, 255.

⁸ ibid, 257.

The contrast between the bedlam of the East and the orderly approach of the West could not be greater.⁹

Sometimes the Russians appeared as brutal as the Germans in their treatment of former POWs. In the heat of battle and in the ensuing confusion, it was often difficult for the Russians to distinguish between fleeing German troops and the many parties of straggling prisoners.

Such men found it difficult to establish their identity with the Russians and many unpleasant, even fatal, incidents occurred. Russian local commanders had no instructions or only very hazy notions about what to do with British POWs.¹⁰

Once the Russians were ready to process Allied servicemen, the procedure ran relatively smoothly. Transit centres were established in several Polish cities, notably Lublin and Ciechocinek, near Thorn. From there, the men were to be sent as quickly as possible to Odessa in the Crimea for repatriation. Keeping in mind the atrocious conditions in Poland and Ukraine at the end of the war, the terms “smoothly” and “quickly as possible” are highly subjective. The journey from eastern Poland to Odessa in winter would have taken months because of the massive destruction of roads and railways, which the ex-POWs shared with hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and refugees.

Roy Herron of the 2/11th was one of several hundred Australian ex-POWs making their way across Poland towards Odessa. Having been liberated somewhere near Lamsdorf in Silesia in January 1945, Herron and a number of others were eventually given Red Army transit documents, providing them safe passage through the combat zone before being told to make their own way to Odessa. Travelling was mostly on foot, with the occasional farmer offering a ride in his cart. Finally they were able to board a train east of Cracow. Herron recalled:

⁹ Cf. Marcus Smith, *Dachau: The Harrowing of Hell*, especially 8-18.

¹⁰ Wild, *op cit*, 257.

Finally we got on the train to Odessa, a long crossing to the Ukraine as they hurriedly relaid lines and built temporary bridges ahead of the train. There had been some pretty big bridges destroyed. It was very cold, the beginning of March, and we scrounged every bit of coal along the railway line to build the fire up at the end of the carriage. No blankets, hard boards to sleep on.¹¹

Herron's laconic style omits the interminable delays they encountered.

David Wild made the point of emphasising the enormous nature of attempting to move thousands of men who did not speak Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, or other Eastern European tongues, who had little idea where they were going, or how they were going to get there. The Russians, he implies, did their best with the little they had.

Progress was slow...the retreating Germans had ripped up the track, and only a single line had been relaid by the Russians. The army's requirements for the drive into Germany had priority, which meant that for twenty-three hours out of twenty-four, all traffic was west-bound...Accompanying our slow progress were other trains of cattle trucks, crammed full of Germans heading for captivity, or worse, into Russia.¹²

Wild also mentions that the men did not know their ultimate destination, but "only hoped that at some stage we would be separated from the Siberia-bound trains."¹³ His train was one of many slowly snaking their way towards the Crimea. Australians were in this transport to Odessa, some of whom had joined the train having left one of the "innumerable columns of POWs being marched westwards [sic]"¹⁴

Wild's book is a valuable source for setting dates and times for the journey to Odessa. The discipline of keeping a diary while captive in *Stalag XX A*, Thorn enabled him to

¹¹ Roy Herron, in Patsy Adam Smith, *Prisoners of War*, 148.

¹² Wild, *op cit*, 262.

¹³ *ibid*, 262-263.

¹⁴ David Wild to POS 19.09.1995.

keep track of the passage of time, but even his usual accuracy was lost in the mayhem of the journey to Odessa. Nonetheless, he says the journey from Wrzesnia, near Poznan, to Odessa took ten days, and he arrived sometime in early March 1945.¹⁵

At no time was there a full guarantee for the safety of the ex-POWs. It was the fear for the fate of Allied servicemen who were liberated by the Russians that caused the Australian and British governments to approach Stalin in October 1944. For Australia, this uncertainty reflected the nature of Australian-Soviet relations since the establishment of diplomatic missions in late 1942. It is important to understand the development of this aspect of Australian foreign policy, since Australian prisoners of war could have easily been made political pawns in the power broking between Stalin and the Western Allies. It is also important to keep in mind that “at the level of high policy and strategy, Australia simply lacked adequate status: her limited military strength and diplomatic standing confined her, for the most part, to the role of petitioner to Britain and the United States.”¹⁶

Australia’s official relationship with the Soviet Union had been all but non-existent until the German invasion on 22 June 1941.¹⁷ Following *Barbarossa*, and the growing fear of Japanese aggression in South East Asia, the Australian Government made moves to establish contact with the Soviet Government. In a submission to the War Cabinet on 14 October 1941, the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt, discussed the possibility of opening diplomatic relations with Russia.¹⁸ Evatt again proposed the opening of an Australian Mission to the War Cabinet on 4 November, citing public support for Russia and the common Australian-Russian interests in the Far East.¹⁹ Later in the year, as hysteria over Japan increased, Prime Minister Curtin urged Churchill to give Russia *carte blanche* in Eastern Europe in return for Soviet military assistance in the Pacific. Churchill gave a firm “no.” Australia would follow British and American policy, not create it.²⁰

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 261-263.

¹⁶ W J Hudson and Wendy Way, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-1949*, Volume V (July 1941-June 1942), xv Hereafter, DAFP, volume number, page and cable reference.

¹⁷ The Australian Communist Party had reasonably close links to the USSR.

¹⁸ DAFP V.139, War Cabinet Submission by Dr H V Evatt, Minister for External Affairs, Canberra, 14.10.1941.

¹⁹ DAFP V.160-161, War Cabinet Submission by Dr H V Evatt, 4.11.1941.

²⁰ DAFP V.391 Cable 12, 30.12.1941; DAFP V.598-600 Cable unnumbered, 4.03.1942; DAFP V 612-618, especially “Memoranda Statement A”, 614-617.

Cabinet at first nominated Stanley Bruce, then Australian High Commissioner in London as the first Minister to the Soviet Union.²¹ However, Cabinet eventually chose William Slater, Speaker of the Victorian Legislative Assembly, and after consultation with the Russians, the exchange of ministers took place.²² On 2 January 1943, Slater arrived in Kuibyshev where the diplomatic missions were located after the evacuation of Moscow in October 1941.²³ He remained in the USSR until illness forced him to return to Australia in April 1943.²⁴ The former President of the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council, John Joseph Maloney, replaced him.²⁵

Maloney's time in the Soviet Union was fraught with the difficulties caused by Australia's offer to represent the interests of Poland to the Soviet Government. These grew all the more serious after the severing of diplomatic relations between the Poles and Russians in the wake of the discovery of the murdered Polish officers and soldiers in the Katyn forest.²⁶ Britain suggested that either Canada or Australia would be suitable choices to act in Polish interests. Canada was not interested; so Australia accepted the responsibility, having first consulted with both Churchill and Roosevelt.²⁷ The delicacy of the Australian position was reflected in the comment made by Dr Evatt to Lieutenant Colonel Hodgson at the Australian Legation in Washington:

The essence of the situation is the need to act most prudently and avoid trouble with the USSR. The primary duty of our mission is to maintain good relations with the USSR. The duty of watching Polish interests, though very important, is secondary.²⁸

²¹ DAFP V.544-545, Cable 1590, 21.02.1942.

²² DAFP VI.3, Cable 226, 2.07.1942; DAFP VI.70-71, Cable SL55, 1.09.1942. The Soviet Charge d'Affaires in Canberra was A.A. Soldatov.

²³ Peter Heydon, "Protecting Polish Interests in the USSR 1943-1944: An episode in Australian representation", *Journal of Australian Politics and History*, 18, 189.

²⁴ DAFP VI.356-357, Cable E55, 6.05.1943.

²⁵ Maloney was appointed to Moscow on 23.12.1943, after the Federal Election of 21.08.1943.

²⁶ DAFP VI.344-345 Cable S76, 28.04.1943; Heydon, op cit, 193-195.

²⁷ DAFP VI.369, Cable E81, 13.05.1943; DAFP VI.371-372, Cable E86, 14.05.1943.

²⁸ DAFP VI.403, Cable E138, 5.06.1943.

Three days later, Prime Minister Curtin informed Stanley Bruce that the Poles would have to accept the reality that “their destiny is inevitably that of a State within the Soviet sphere of influence.”²⁹

Throughout the remainder of 1943 and the first half of 1944, Australia pressed the interests of Poles living in the USSR upon a generally unsympathetic Soviet government.³⁰ This state of tension was intensified when the Soviet Government announced in January 1944 that it would no longer deal with the London-based Polish Government in Exile.³¹

As the Red Army continued to push westwards, the position of the non-communist Polish political groups deteriorated. Australia’s protection role ended after the Soviet Government informed Maloney that with the establishment of the Lublin Polish National Committee of Liberation on 21 July 1944, there was no longer a need for Australia to represent Polish affairs. Australia officially withdrew her powers of protection on 26 August.³² Feeling the hardening attitude of the Soviet Union towards the West, and anxious not to antagonise the Russians, Australian diplomats were counselled to be discreet and not “over emphasise” Soviet actions in Poland or Greece.³³ Events such as the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944 were ultimately matters of “relative unimportance.”³⁴ Australia had learnt to tread warily in Russia.

It is not surprising that Australia had been anxious about the fate of Australian servicemen liberated by the Russians. A cable from the Dominions Secretariat in London sent on 1 February 1945 outlined the situation:

At the Moscow Conference last October the Foreign Secretary [Anthony Eden] obtained from Marshal Stalin a personal assurance that every care and attention would be given to ex Prisoners of War from the British Commonwealth as soon as they were freed by the Red Army. Since then the United Kingdom Government has tried

²⁹ DAFP VI.408, Cable 86, 9.06.1943.

³⁰ DAFP VII.26, Cable 366, 13.01.1944; DAFP VII.34-35, Cable 5[A], 14.01.1944.

³¹ DAFP VII.66, Cable 510, 19.01.1944.

³² DAFP VII.489, Cable C176, 23.08.1944; DAFP VII.491, Cable C173, 26.08.1944.

³³ DAFP VII.508-509, Cable C165, 26.08.1944.

through the Military and Diplomatic Representatives in Moscow to work out with the Soviet Authorities a plan for giving effect to this assurance.³⁵

From the tone of urgency in the cable, it can be assumed that there was considerable anxiety over the status of Allied and Imperial servicemen in the Soviet areas of Eastern Europe.

In the cable Viscount Cranborne, Secretary of State for the Dominions informed the Australian Government of the Soviet Union's intention to put former POWs to work "in aid of the common war effort."³⁶ Canberra replied with a terse "no." "It would be impossible to justify it to public opinion in Australia if, on their release from a rigorous and in many cases prolonged captivity, they were subjected to compulsion to labour service for whatever purpose."³⁷ As far as the Australian Government was concerned the only course of action was for the Soviet authorities to recognise the military status of Australian prisoners and to aid in "arranging their immediate repatriation."³⁸

In Australia there had been reports in the press expressing the same worries: that in the Soviet occupation zone, there were many unaccounted Australian prisoners of war. The *Sydney Morning Herald* put it thus, a week before the Cable from London.

The British and American military missions in Moscow today [24.01.1945] asked the Soviet Government to keep a special look out for hundreds, possibly thousands of British and American prisoners of war confined in German prison camps in those parts of Western Poland and Silesia overrun by the Red Army. It is believed in Moscow that although the Germans may have moved some camps, many Allied prisoners remain in these areas.³⁹

³⁴ DAFP VII.511, Cable S25, 31.08.1944.

³⁵ DAFP VIII.35, Cable D193, 01.02.1945.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 36

³⁷ DAFP VIII.39, Cable 29, 05.02.1945.

³⁸ *ibid.*

Two days later the *Herald* announced that Russian troops were close to liberating “Oswiencim [sic] which equals Maidenek and Buchenwald as a human slaughterhouse.”⁴⁰ By the middle of the following week, the *Herald* told of the encirclement of Thorn and the liberation of the Graudenz area.⁴¹ In Tinonee, Ernest Sawyer waited impatiently for news of his son.

Canberra was still not satisfied that Australian servicemen would be treated appropriately by the Soviet Union, and once again expressed its concerns through Cranborne to the British Government. Canberra attempted to apply pressure by urging the conclusion of an “agreement with the Soviet Government” to “secure repatriation at the earliest possible moment.”⁴² This point was made with even greater force on 9 February in a cable from Dr Evatt to the Australian Legation in Moscow. In the message, Evatt directed J J Maloney, the Australian Minister, to handle the question of Australian servicemen “with the Soviet authorities on highest necessary level” to ensure adequate care and preparations for repatriation. Further, Maloney was himself to organise visits to “camps where Australians are accommodated.”⁴³

Several days later, Maloney cabled the Department of External Affairs in Canberra and reported that the Soviet officials had been sympathetic towards the Australian request. Maloney added that the Soviets sought clarification of the repatriation logistics, in particular of the willingness of the Australian Government to provide ships for the former prisoners.⁴⁴ One day before, on 11 February 1945, the Soviet Government signed an agreement with the Australian Legation whereby the Soviets would relay to the Australian Government all details of Australian servicemen in Soviet collecting camps. In paragraph four of his message, Maloney wrote, “There are no Australian Prisoners of War among the Allied citizens so far liberated according to information available.”⁴⁵

What emerges from the above correspondence between Canberra, London and Moscow is the simple realisation that the Western Allies did not have a very clear

³⁹ *SMH* 25.01.1945.

⁴⁰ *SMH*, 27.01.1945.

⁴¹ *SMH*, 29.01.1945; 31.01.1945 The fortress of Graudenz did not surrender until 3 March 1945.

⁴² DAFP VIII.40, Cable D227, 06.02.1945.

⁴³ DAFP VIII.43, Cable 2, 09.02.1945.

⁴⁴ DAFP VIII.48-49, Cable 29, 12.02.1945.

⁴⁵ DAFP VIII.78-79, Cable 44, 01.03.1945.

idea at all as to the situation facing former POWs in Eastern Europe. Further, it demonstrates the different sets of priorities that occupied both Western Powers, namely repatriation, and those of the Soviet Union, the continued successful prosecution of the war against Germany. It also demonstrates the different understandings of the war itself. For the Western Allies, the war was being fought according to international agreements and protocols, shown in the documents above. For the Soviet Union, the matter was much simpler: destroy Germany at whatever cost. Everything else was of secondary importance.

On 3 March 1945, the Melbourne *Sun* published news that it had been “confirmed in Moscow that British and US prisoners of war released in the Russian drive through Poland have reached Odessa where a transit camp has been set up.”⁴⁶ The following day, the Australian Legation in Moscow notified the Department of External Affairs by cable of the arrival in Odessa of NX1488, Max Sawyer.⁴⁷ On 6 March, LOC Melbourne advised the Sydney Military District of Max’s arrival in Odessa and authorised notification of Max’s next-of-kin.⁴⁸ Fourteen months of silence was ended, and five years of waiting was over.

Max Sawyer spent only a few days in the transit camp in Odessa. Although finally free and back under Australian military jurisdiction, conditions in the camp were primitive. It was very much a waiting place. On arrival at Odessa with three other men, Privates C L Thomas and O Walker, and Gunner D Hancock, Sawyer weighed about 53 kgs.⁴⁹ The Red Cross was notified of his arrival and the Army ordered the forwarding of records and paybooks by the quickest possible means.⁵⁰

I have not been able to find the men who arrived in Odessa at the same time as Max Sawyer. Because of the Australian Privacy Act, access to veterans’ files are, naturally enough, restricted. The Department of Veterans’ Affairs willingly obliges researchers by forwarding letters to veterans. However, it is then up to the individual veteran to reply as he so wishes. At the time of writing (June 1997), there have been no replies

⁴⁶ Melbourne *Sun*, 03.03.1945.

⁴⁷ AA Melbourne, B:3856, 144/1/205, Cable 04.03.1945. Hereafter, AAM

⁴⁸ AAM Lines of Communication (LOC) to Sydney Military District (SMD), Telegram, 06.03.1945.

⁴⁹ VJ In imperial measurements, roughly 5 stones.

⁵⁰ AAM Cable to Red Cross Melbourne 10.03.1945; Cipher Message from Midcast to Landforces Melbourne

from the six veterans who were still in contact with the Department.⁵¹ Contacts made with returned services organisations have also not succeeded, despite the help of the RSL.⁵²

Events continued to move quickly. Perhaps the rapidity of being forced to readjust to Australian Army discipline after the years of imprisonment allowed Max an opportunity to suppress the recent past. Routine and the return to Australian ways, the hearing of English with Australian accents and talk of home made many men begin the process of sublimation of the war years. Max boarded the *Moreton Bay* on 7 March with nine other AIF personnel bound for Port Said, arriving there on 13 March.⁵³ Along with fifty other AIF personnel, Max then boarded the *Esperance Bay* on 15 March for repatriation to Australia. This group appears to have been the only one that sailed directly to Australia. From April onwards, most seem to have been repatriated via Britain.⁵⁴

News that prisoners of war from Germany were returning to Australia was reported in the Melbourne *Argus* on 22 March.⁵⁵ A week later, the Melbourne *Herald* announced:

Freed POWs on way home. Names of the 52 Australian prisoners of war who were freed on the Eastern front by the Russians and have now reached Cairo camp, were announced today by the Acting Minister for the Army (Senator Fraser). He said the early return of the men to Australia could be expected. Next of kin would be advised of the place and date of the men's arrival in Australia as soon as security requirements made it possible. The names of the men are... NX1488, E.M. Sawyer...⁵⁶

11.03.1945.

⁵¹ Diane Faddy, FOI Officer DVA to POS, 25.06.1996.

⁵² Keith Rossi, RSL Victoria to POS 11.06.1996.

⁵³ AAM Cable from Australian High Commissioner, London, no date. Cipher Message from Midcast to Landforces Melbourne, 15.03.1945. This Cipher Message says the men disembarked in Port Said on 12.03.1945.

⁵⁴ AAM Cipher Message from Midcast to Landforces Melbourne, 18.03.1945.

⁵⁵ *Argus* 22.03.1945.

⁵⁶ *Herald*, 29.03.1945.

Max Sawyer disembarked in Melbourne on 14 April 1945.⁵⁷ There were no cheering crowds to welcome him home, as there had been to farewell him in January 1940. The war with Japan was still proceeding. It was a quiet, unobtrusive arrival. Max had been away from Australia for 1920 days. He probably received a copy of *A Guidance to ex-Prisoners of War*, which had been published by the army in order to facilitate the return home. Former POWs from New South Wales were advised that they were to be sent to hospitals for medical checks before being given leave. The men were told their families had been notified of their return “and everything is being done to have them there to meet you.”⁵⁸ Sixty days leave with pay up to £50 would be provided along with transport home. “Arrangements have been made by the Australian Red Cross to convey you and two near relatives to your home by private car when you are ready for leave.”⁵⁹

Max was placed on a train north to Sydney and reached Ingleburn on 16 April.⁶⁰ Here he was reunited with his father and sister Enid.⁶¹ Max was “dreadfully fat”, his sister recalled, a not uncommon phenomenon among prisoners who had lived on starvation diets for years, and who then ate practically continuously for days and weeks after: “He was all puffed up; didn’t look healthy at all.”⁶² Once back in Australia, Max was placed in the 103 Convalescent Depot. He remained here until he was judged healthy enough to be discharged on 13 June 1945, by which time he had lost much of the excess weight.⁶³

At the same time as the former POWs were acclimatising, the Polish Consul General in Sydney Dr Gruszka was attempting to get army permission to question the men about what they had seen on their way to Odessa. Dr Gruszka wrote to Major General Plant, General Officer Commanding NSW LOC. In his letter the Consul General wrote:

⁵⁷CARO 17.04.1945.

⁵⁸Mitchell Library MLQ 355.113/1 *A Guidance to ex-Prisoners of War*, 1945.

⁵⁹ibid

⁶⁰CARO 17.04.1945.

⁶¹ES, VJ

⁶²VJ

⁶³CARO, 30.05.1945; 06.06.1945; 13.06.1945.

A few days ago I was asked by my Government to get in touch with these former Prisoners of War and to try to obtain from them information about their activities in the Polish Underground Army, the destruction of Polish cities and villages and the conditions of life in occupied Poland. All their impressions will be forwarded to London in order to increase and compare all available material which we now possess in this respect.⁶⁴

Gruszka asked Plant's help in locating the men and for permission to interview them "off the record."

A week later Plant replied that since the men had "already been closely interrogated by Intelligence Officers" the information gleaned in this process "would be available to your Government's representatives in England."⁶⁵ Plant added that the men were in

the course of medical rehabilitation after their experiences in prison camps...It is felt that, to have them closely interrogated at this stage about those experiences would undo much of the medical rehabilitation which has now been done.⁶⁶

Consequently, the army believed it was "doubtful whether you would be able to obtain any material information."⁶⁷ Getting the men away from their war time traumas was a major part of the repatriation process. Distance and silence were deemed to be the most effective agents.

At some point between arriving in Odessa and returning to Sydney, Army authorities officially interrogated Sawyer. Attempts to locate these records have been unsuccessful. Staff at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra were unable to locate possible archival sites for a search to be done, and suggested that the records may have been lost or destroyed, an unlikely possibility given the Army's detailed records

⁶⁴ AA Sydney 489/6/703 Dr S. Gruszka to Major General Plant 24.05.1945.

⁶⁵ AA Sydney 489/6/703 Major General Plant to Dr S. Gruszka 31.05.1945.

⁶⁶ *ibid*

and archival systems.⁶⁸ The only evidence of the interrogation is a card, which states that Max Sawyer, was “Officially Interrogated. Allied Interrogation Section (I.S.9) C M F.” The signature of the Staff Sergeant is illegible.⁶⁹ What was said at the interrogation can only be surmised, but it would be accurate to say that Max would have related something of his extra-ordinary circumstances Graudenz and Majdanek. Whether or not he was believed is another matter. It would appear that from the outset, Sawyer had difficulty convincing Government agencies that he was not concocting his story.

Thirty-four years later, in August 1979, Max Sawyer petitioned the Department of Veterans’ Affairs for recognition that his osteoarthritis and heart condition was a result of his wartime experiences. In the Department report of 24 August 1979, the claim for osteoarthritis was refused, but the claim for the heart condition was allowed. In the report appears the following information:

Service documents reveal that on enlistment, the member declared he had not previously suffered from any significant illness or injury...the medical classification was “1”. At reclassification in June 1945, he stated that he had escaped from a German prison camp on **22 January 1945** (emphasis added)...He was reclassified “B2” because of a nervous condition...⁷⁰

Why did he say that he had escaped from a German prisoner camp on 22 January 1945? The date corresponds to the liberation of Thorn, where Max had not been held. Graudenz, a fortress city, where Max had been, was not liberated until 6 March, six weeks later. It is only conjecture that by mid-1945 Max had learnt that his stories of Majdanek would be greeted with suspicion, if not disbelieved without investigation. Beryl stated clearly that the disbelief of the various Government agencies was a source of constant anxiety and pain to Max.⁷¹ Perhaps it was wiser to say nothing. The emphasis on Australian repatriation was the quick processing of men and the

⁶⁷ ibid

⁶⁸ War Memorial Staff to POS, 25.01.1997.

⁶⁹ Collection of BS.

⁷⁰ Repatriation Board File MX5118 24.08.1979 Hereafter RBF.

⁷¹ BS

equally quick facilitation of their return to “normal.” The experience of the KL was still being revealed in the middle of 1945, and the war against Japan was still to be won. It would appear that Sawyer gave the most convenient excuse in order not to impede his journey home.

Evidently Max did not wait around in Sydney. He headed home to Tinonee and was living on his uncle’s farm by the end of June, as his father had remarried, and the family found the new situation somewhat tense.⁷² His sister Enid brought him home to the Manning Valley. During the journey she recalled that her brother tried to tell her some of the terrible things he had seen in Majdanek and during his journey to Odessa. It seems that he showed her the child’s shoe and the bone he had brought back from Europe. The horror of the story must have registered on Enid’s face. “I had children of my own, and the look on my face must have made him clam up.”⁷³ Afterwards, her brother said nothing more, except to an old childhood friend whom he met again once he was home. To his sister, Vera, Max confided, “they have slaughterhouses in Europe.”⁷⁴ Max also said similar things to cousin Dorothy.⁷⁵ The shock of what he was saying must have been so great that his family either found it impossible to believe what he was telling them, or blocked out the terrible stories. In any case, the result for Max eventually realised it was easier to say nothing. It was as though he came from a different planet.

Here is another parallel with the experiences of Holocaust survivors. On the one hand, survivors needed to “find a place among the living once again.”⁷⁶ There was a desperate, almost frantic attempt to re-connect with family and the familiar environments that confirmed there had been a pre-war life. Alongside the desire to “re-connect” was the urgency to find a partner and found a family. Survivors often experienced guilt and depression at having survived.⁷⁷ A major difference is that Max was not Jewish. Had he been so he would have had at least the solidarity of others who had shared the same trauma, even if it was a solidarity of silence. As a non-Jew

⁷² ES, VJ

⁷³ MB to POS 23.01.1997.

⁷⁴ MB

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Martin Bergman and Milton Jucovy, *Generations of the Holocaust*, 4.

in the Manning he lacked the most rudimentary support network. This isolation eventually resulted in a breakdown of social behaviours that was also reflected in his health, both physical and mental.

Sawyer soon discovered that people did not want to hear of his experiences. Most Australians knew only of the Japanese atrocities and did not or could not believe that such barbarism occurred in the heartland of civilised Europe.⁷⁸ They were too “abnormal”, so outside the standard reference points for traumatic stories, that people simply could not believe them. Often in the telling of the story “a listener would occasionally express some doubt, in word or gesture” and this would be enough to create a self-doubt.⁷⁹ Silence also promised a psychological barrier that could hold back the overwhelming grief. Elie Weisel recounted:

Had we started to speak, we would have found it impossible to stop. Having shed one tear, we would have drowned the human heart. So invincible in the face of death and the enemy, we now felt helpless...We were mad with disbelief. People refuse to listen, to understand, to share. There was a division between us and them, between those who endured and those who read about it, or would refuse to read about it.⁸⁰

Silence became a habit, and the habit lasted until shortly before Max’s death in June 1984.

Silence did not mean that the trauma was hidden completely. Psychosomatic illness dogged Max. In particular, nightmares became a regular part of his sleep every night.⁸¹ Bergman notes:

The situation of helplessness and the inability to protect oneself seemed to require a reliving and a mastery of the traumatic event in

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 5-6.

⁷⁸ Colin Burgess to POS, 05.03.1997.

⁷⁹ Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 294.

⁸⁰ Elie Weisel, in Bergman, *op cit*, 7.

⁸¹ BS, ETS

the dreams of those affected by traumatic neuroses. To the degree that Nazis assaulted their victims and rendered them helpless, survivors also suffer from recurring dreams of persecution.⁸²

Other traumatic symptoms became manifest within ten years of his liberation. It is argued the symptoms that Max Sawyer claimed between the late 1940s up until his death are identical to those identified by Leo Eitinger as belonging to the “Symptomatology of the Concentration Camp Syndrome.”⁸³

Eitinger argued that the survivor went through a number of phases in the development of the Syndrome. The first was a deceptive re-integration into a stable environment. Eitinger described this stage as “deceptive” because the trauma was present; but the euphoria of liberation and the activity of re-connection were sufficient to keep it deep within the subconscious. With five to ten years many survivors

began losing their ability to work and became to some extent socially maladjusted. Normal daily work taxed them unduly, mental and physical breakdowns frequently occurred without any external change in living conditions and life situations.⁸⁴

Many survivors felt they were not understood by their physicians or by Government agencies responsible for war pensions and allowances. It also appeared that the younger the survivor was, the more prone they were to the development of the Syndrome because they had lacked sufficiently mature defence mechanisms against the trauma of the KL.⁸⁵

William Niederland characterised the Syndrome as the presentation of

an inability to work, even to talk. There were anxieties and fears of renewed persecution... feelings of guilt... even for having

⁸² Bergman, op cit, 46.

⁸³ Leo Eitinger, “Psychosomatic Problems in Concentration Camp Survivors”, in *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 13, 185. See too Zdzislaw Ryn “Survivor’s Syndrome: Transgenerational Evolution”, in *Genocide Perspectives I*, 289-302.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, 184.

survived...thoughts of death, nightmares, panic attacks and other psychosomatic symptoms...an inability to experience pleasure...⁸⁶

A survey of the Repatriation Board documents detailing Sawyer's medical condition from the 1960s and 1970s reveals every one of these symptoms. Dr P N Winter of Concord Repatriation Hospital wrote in 1974 that Max expressed feelings of persecution; he was withdrawn and dejected, "but his expression swung from depressed and retarded to aggressive and nearly paranoid."⁸⁷

Max began manifesting symptoms of this nature shortly after the birth of his first child Mary, in 1947. At first these were nightmares, but emotional instability punctuated with moments of violent behaviour, compounded with frequent drinking bouts, became more and more common.⁸⁸ From the early 1950s Sawyer changed jobs at an ever-increasing rate.⁸⁹ Years later, in 1997, Sawyer's sisters commented that "he was a broken man when he came home from the war. We just didn't know what was wrong; and if we did, we wouldn't have known what to do."⁹⁰ The feeling of helplessness gripped Sawyer, his immediate family and his children. It was a legacy that remained till the day he died.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 186.

⁸⁶ William Niederland, "The Clinical After effects of the Holocaust in Survivors and Their Offspring", in Randolph Braham, (Ed), *The Psychological Perspectives of the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, 45-46.

⁸⁷ RBF 28.06.1974.

⁸⁸ ETS

⁸⁹ RBF 28.06.1974.

⁹⁰ ES, VJ

Chapter Ten: Donald Watt and *Stoker*

In relation to Australian servicemen caught in the Holocaust vortex, there are two extremes: first, the highly detailed “investigation” of a Max Sawyer; second the “off-the-top-of-the-head” memoir of a Don Watt. Both have a place in the literature of Australian war history and of Holocaust historiography. But veracity has to be the basis of all genres. It is veracity that demands an excursus into Watt’s book, *Stoker*.¹ The uncritical acclaim accorded Watt and his story is disturbing. Several reviewers have gone so far to say that doubt “would look like moral callousness” placing one in the ranks of David Irving!²

Don Watt himself said that the memories of what happened during those months in Auschwitz “will never leave me.” He told his story to “try to make the world know the Holocaust did happen.”³

Previous research had shown Australians to have been in Theresianstadt and Buchenwald, but none in the KL that came to symbolise the epitome of Nazi evil, Auschwitz.⁴ The narrative is told in what the author described as his “Aussie style.”⁵ And to the general reader, *Stoker* is “a good read”: it connects with so much that is stereo-typically Anglo-Australian. But a closer reading reveals serious problems.

It is now contented that *Stoker* is not a true account. That is not to say that anyone is accusing of Don Watt of lying or deliberately setting out to falsify the truth. Rather, it appears from research undertaken by Darren O’Brien and myself at the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, that Don Watt has “blended” a number of memories from a variety of sources, among which appear references to a Jewish woman who actually survived Auschwitz. She became a close

¹ Donald Watt, *Stoker An Australian in Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Originally published in early 1995, it was reprinted later the same year.

² Robin Gerster, “War Horrors merge Reality and Fiction”, *SMH* 22.04.1995.

³ Donald Watt to POS 28.04.1995.

⁴ Paul Rea “Diggers Who Wait After 35 Years” *National Times* 18-24.05.1980; “Australians in the Living Grave” *National Times* 24-30.05.1985; “The time for compassion” *Newcastle Herald* 8.02.1986; Video: *Where Death Wore A Smile* (1985); Colin Burgess, *Destination Buchenwald* (1995).

⁵ Donald Watt to POS 28.04.1995.

friend of Don Watt.⁶ Scholars from both Australia and overseas have questioned the authenticity of *Stoker*. Professors Colin Tatz and Konrad Kwiet agree that the work cannot be a true account.⁷ Kwiet sent Watt's account to three internationally recognised Holocaust scholars: Werner Renz, Gideon Greif and Franciszek Piper. All three expressed the opinion that Don Watt could not have been in Auschwitz; there were too many errors.⁸ *Australian* journalist Brian Woodley undertook the most public questioning of *Stoker* in his article "Shadow of Doubt."⁹ Wood's article owes much to research undertaken by O'Brien, even if the tone and conclusions are less stringent.

Stoker needs close examination and critique if only because such a story would be "grist to the mill" of Holocaust denialists and revisionists. Since, I lack sufficient documentary evidence to say with certainty that Max Sawyer was in KL Lublin-Majdanek, it is all the more necessary to conduct research into the history of Australian servicemen in the KL with great rigour.

VX 8006, Donald Watt, enlisted in Mildura on 8 January 1940.¹⁰ He then proceeded to the 2/7th Battalion at the Melbourne showgrounds on 11 January 1940. He did his basic army training at Puckapunyal before sailing to the Middle East on 15 April 1940.¹¹ Watt's service record shows that he was stationed in Egypt for most of 1940. In many respects his war service resembles that of Max Sawyer. He saw action at Bardia and Tobruk and was promoted to acting corporal on 14 January 1941. On 9 April he embarked with the 2/7th aboard the *Cameronia* for Greece.¹² The battalion arrived at Pireaus two days later and on 13 April was sent to defend the Domokos Pass south of Larissa.¹³ Watt escaped Greece through Kalamari and was evacuated

⁶ Darren O'Brien to POS, 08.07.1996.

⁷ Colin Tatz is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney. Konrad Kwiet is Professor of German at Macquarie University, Sydney

⁸ Werner Renz is the Librarian of the Documentation Department of the *Fritz Bauer Institut*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany; Gideon Greif is a member of the Education Department of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; Franciszek Piper is Director of Research at the Auschwitz State Museum, Oswiecim, Poland. Cited in Darren O'Brien, "The Perils of Testimony", *Newsletter*, 3.3, 4-5.

⁹ Brian Woodley, "Shadow of Doubt", *Australian*, 29-30.03.1997.

¹⁰ Donald Watt, Attestation Form, Central Army Records Office.

¹¹ Donald Watt, Service and Casualty Form, Central Army Records Office, VX 8006 Hereafter VX8006

¹² AWM 52 8/3/7 War Dairy of the 2/7th 09.04.1941.

¹³ *ibid*, 13.04.1941, 16.04.1941.

on the ill-fated *Costa Rica*.¹⁴ Crete was invaded in May and the Germans captured Watt along with most of the battalion.¹⁵ He was reported “missing in action” on 6 June 1941 and was officially confirmed as a prisoner of war on 25 January 1941 (sic), clearly a clerical error. “January” should most likely read “June” which was when Max Sawyer’s Service and Casualty Record was adjusted.¹⁶

From Crete, Watt was taken to the transit camp at Salonika before being transported into the Reich. The descriptions of POW life appear to have drawn heavily upon the stories contained in *The Fiery Phoenix*, the battalion history.¹⁷ He was incarcerated in *Stalag XIII C Hammelburg*, north of Nuremberg from 17 August 1941.¹⁸ According to his Service and Casualty Record, Watt was transferred to *Stalag 357, or XX A, Thorn*, on 14 April 1944.¹⁹ The next notation is marked 21 April 1945: “Recovered POW arrived UK ex Western Europe.”²⁰ It is the twelve months between April 1944 and April 1945 that are problematic.

I will concentrate on the parts of *Stoker* which refer directly to KL Auschwitz, since an attempt to examine the entire work would take me beyond the parameters of the area of interest.

Watt claimed *Grenzpolizei* (Border Police) arrested him near the Swiss border, following a failed escape attempt that had originated from *Stammlager XX A, Thorn*.²¹ By his own reckoning, Watt says he was re-captured on 26 April 1944, a mere two weeks after arriving in Thorn, and after covering a distance of close to 2000km.²² After being interrogated in Nuremberg by members of the Kripo and/or Gestapo, for a period of about a week, (28 April to 6 May 1944), Watt was told: “If you do not want to talk, I will send you to a place where you won’t have to talk. You

¹⁴ *ibid*, 26.04.1941.

¹⁵ VX8006 The 2/7th was the most badly mauled battalion in the Greek/Cretan campaign. The War Diary records that of 33 officers and 726 men only 7 officers and 65 men escaped capture and returned to Egypt. WD 2/7th 04.06.1941.

¹⁶ Cf. EMS, CARO NX 1488.

¹⁷ W P Bolger and J G Littlewood, *The Fiery Phoenix*, especially pp146-157.

¹⁸ ICRC: DGB 13.640/DO 9.05.1988.

¹⁹ VX 8006

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Donald Watt, *Stoker*, 76-77. Hereafter *Stoker*.

²² *Stoker*, 76.

will go to Auschwitz. For a year. We will see how you like talking then.”²³ This is the first anomaly. By mid-1944, Auschwitz’s primary purpose was as the extermination centre for the Jews of Europe as well as the nucleus of a massive industrial complex. Escaped prisoners were being sent to *Konzentrationslager* at this time but the question arises: why would the Kripo or Gestapo send a confessed escaped Australian prisoner all the way across Germany from Nuremberg to Auschwitz? Buchenwald or Dachau were much closer, and were known destinations for escaped prisoners.²⁴

From Nuremberg, Watt says he was sent by train to Auschwitz. Because of air raids the train was diverted to Belsen, about 325 km to the north.²⁵ The journey to Auschwitz from Nuremberg would have followed a regular route beginning in Munich, one of the major transit centres.²⁶ Another question arises; on what type of train was the prisoner travelling. Watt does not mention if he was the only prisoner, but since he mentions no one else, we can assume that he was the sum total of a special transport.

Raul Hilberg’s exhaustive study of the *Reichsbahn*, and its part in the Final Solution, makes it clear that prisoners being despatched to the KL were sent in groups of about 1000 to 2000.²⁷ The reason? Economics. The cost of transporting anyone on the Reich railroads had to met by the competent authority had ordered the train and the itinerary. In the case of *Sonderzüge*, (Special Trains) a category invented to cover all *sonderbehandlung* (special handling), the *Reichsbahn* charged a flat rate of half the third class fare for transports of 400 or more people. For less than 400, the full third class fare would be expected. Accordingly, it made sense to fill a transport with as many people as possible in order to secure the optimum fare.²⁸

²³ *Stoker*, 81.

²⁴ Cf. Burgess, op cit 95ff, Distel and Jakush, op cit, 176-179.

²⁵ *Stoker*, 82-83.

²⁶ Cf. Gilbert, (1988), facing page, 148, 161.

²⁷ Raul Hilberg, “German Railroads/Jewish Souls”, in “*The Final Solution*”: *The Implementation of Mass Murder*, Volume 2, in (Ed) Michael Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 530.

²⁸ *ibid*, 527-528.

Having arrived at Belsen on or around 9 May 1944²⁹, Watt spent a week in the KL wearing a French uniform and apparently at liberty to wander about. He says he “watched Russian prisoners burying Jews, which is unusual since the standard practice in all the KL was to use Jews to dispose of Jewish bodies, and at this stage the method was cremation.”³⁰ The great mountains of bodies that came to characterise Belsen were not prominent until the last stages of the war just prior to liberation.³¹ Finally, on or around 17 May, Watt was taken and placed on a train to Auschwitz.

The journey to Auschwitz took two days (17 May -19 May 1944) and upon arrival Watt says he was put into an underground cell with a group of other prisoners for seven or eight weeks.³² In almost all the literature written by survivors, the first mention of the KL is the arrival at the platform where they were “greeted” by the SS and went through *Selektion*.³³ Watt’s narrative makes no mention of his arrival. Upon admission to Auschwitz, prisoners not slated for death were registered, and had their KL number tattooed upon their lower left forearm.³⁴ Watt does not have this. The mention of the underground cell is also curious. The only underground cells in Auschwitz were in Block 11 of Auschwitz I, the original KL, and were only used as punishment cells as well as for prisoners detained by the Camp Political Section.³⁵

After the stay in the cells, Watt continues his story with a brief description of the Triangle identification system operative throughout the KL. This is the prelude to his narrative describing his transfer to the *Sonderkommando* unit at Birkenau. However, at no point does Watt explain how or if, he was moved from the punishment block in Auschwitz I to Birkenau, some 5 km away.³⁶ He says he was placed with a mixed group of Jews and political prisoners. This was not the standard German practice,

²⁹ Watt’s internal chronology is inconsistent. He says he arrived at Belsen at the end of April. *Stoker*, 86.

³⁰ *Stoker*, 85-86 Cf Marco Nahon, *Birkenau: The Camp of Death*, 99.

³¹ Gilbert (1986), 793-795.

³² *Stoker*, 87.

³³ E.g., Biderman, op cit, 175-180; Richard Vrba in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Film*, 40-43; Weisel, op cit, 39-45.

³⁴ Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, passim. Hereafter Czech. Cf also Jadwiga Bezwinska, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 39n16. Hereafter Bezwinska.

³⁵ Cf. Bezwinska, 39n17.

³⁶ *Stoker*, 90.

although in Auschwitz I Jews and non-Jews were sometimes placed together in Block 11 for work purposes.³⁷

After two nights with the mixed group, Watt says he was transferred to another wooden hut “containing about 100 men, all Polish.”³⁸ This group expressed surprise that a “genuine prisoner of war was there.”³⁹ This in itself is surprising, since Auschwitz had been a *Kriegsgefangenenlager* since 1941.⁴⁰ Watt claims he found himself in a barrack of stokers, men who fed the furnaces at the nearby crematoria. “When I asked the Poles what they burnt in the furnaces, there was a silence, and then, eventually, one of them said, Juden - Jews.”⁴¹ There is another problem with Watt’s narrative at this point. In June, *SS Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll ordered all members of the *Sonderkommando*, including the stokers, to be housed in the Crematoria.

Some in the lofts of Crematoria II and III, while the majority were housed in the changing room of Crematoria IV. This was done in order to “put an end” to any contact between the general prisoner population and the *Sonderkommando*.⁴²

This happened at least four or five weeks before Watt joined the stokers according to his own chronology. At this point it is possible to say that most, if not all Watt’s story is “fanciful”: there are simply too many errors.

SS Hauptscharführer Moll, usually for reasons of physical fitness personally selected members of the *Sonderkommando*, which included the stokers.⁴³ Stokers belonged to a special group of exempted labourers, which included mechanics and prison functionaries, who were kept alive because of their skills. Evidently it was considered too much trouble to train a new group when the *Sonderkommando* was liquidated.⁴⁴ As far as can be ascertained, the Stokers were not separate to the *Sonderkommando*.

³⁷ Bezwinska, 40.

³⁸ *Stoker*, 90.

³⁹ *Stoker*, 91.

⁴⁰ Czech, *passim*.

⁴¹ *Stoker*, 91.

⁴² O’Brien, *op cit*, 6-7.

⁴³ Bezwinska, 107n30.

Filip Müller, a survivor of the *Sonderkommando*, says that the term “Stoker” was interchangeable with “*Sonderkommando*.”⁴⁵ Available evidence also points to the *Sonderkommando* being almost exclusively Jewish, except for the *Kapos* who were Poles.⁴⁶

The numbers Watt cites also create problems. Darren O’Brien — in *The Perils of Testimony* — says 169 men worked in the *Sonderkommando* of Crematorium II in mid-1944.⁴⁷ Watt claimed to have been in working in Birkenau at this time. He gives a total of 17 men: 12 Jews and 5 Poles. There is no other reference to non-Jews being a part of the *Sonderkommando*, except for the *Kapos*.⁴⁸ The notable exception was at the Crematorium at Auschwitz I where there was a mixed Polish-Jewish *Sonderkommando*. Some of the Polish *Kapos* went to Birkenau: Mieczyslaw Morawa, Kapo of the Stokers at Crematoria IV and V, and Jozef Ilczuk and Wacław Lipka. All three were later sent to KL Mauthausen and shot.⁴⁹ The only other reference to non-Jews working in the SK was of a group of 19 Soviet prisoners of war who joined the Birkenau SK from KL Lublin on 16 April 1944.⁵⁰ However, it is important to keep in mind that the number of *Sonderkommando* fluctuated according to the number of Jews being murdered and cremated.

Birkenau was using about 200 *Sonderkommando* from 24 April 1944. This was about half the regular SK. 200 were sent to KL Lublin where they were shot, apparently as a reprisal for an unsuccessful escape of five members of the SK.⁵¹ In order to cope with the extermination of the Hungarian Jews in the summer of 1944, the SK was once again increased. On 29 July 1944, there were 873 members of the Birkenau SK.

This was increased to 903 on 1 August. At the end of August, the number was stable at 874.⁵²

⁴⁴ Czech, 278.

⁴⁵ Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, 48. Hereafter, Müller.

⁴⁶ Czech, entry for 04.03.1943.

⁴⁷ O’Brien, op cit, 9n75.

⁴⁸ Bezwinska, 42. Cf also “Salmen Lewental’s Document found near Crematorium III on 17.10.1962”, in Bezwinski, 138. Lewental stated that there were only Jews working in the Crematorium, although he had heard of Russians and Poles at various times.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 42nn28, 29,30.

⁵⁰ Czech, 612; Bezwinska 77n5.

⁵¹ Czech, 24.02.1944, 588.

⁵² Czech, 29.07.1944; 01.08.1944; 29.08.1944, 672, 675, 699.

Watt notes that from May 1944 until the end of November 1944

Crematorium 2 and Crematorium 3 disposed of 5000 corpses every 24 hours, seven days a week. I can't speak for the other two gas chambers-crematoria complexes, numbers 1 and 4, because I didn't work at them. I did hear, however, that they were somewhat smaller than numbers 2 and 3, and less capacity.⁵³

Watt has made an understandable error in the numbering of the crematoria. The crematorium in Auschwitz I, was known as Crematorium I. The plants in Birkenau, were numbered II, III, IV and V. So when Watt speaks of "Crematorium 2 and Crematorium 3" he is actually referring to Crematoria III and IV. And here he has made another error. Crematoria II and III were identical, effectively "mirror copies" of each other. Although they were the largest cremation plants in Birkenau, they had not been originally intended to consume large numbers of corpses.⁵⁴ Crematoria IV and V were smaller facilities, but they had been functionally designed as killing centres.⁵⁵ Crematoria II and III had a daily incineration rate of 3604, while the smaller Crematoria IV and V handled about 1152 corpses, making the daily total for Birkenau, 4756.⁵⁶ During the extermination of the Hungarian Jews the daily quota reached 12 000.⁵⁷ The highest number of bodies cremated in one day reached 24 000 in August 1944.⁵⁸ Watt's figures are dubious and his knowledge of the Crematoria faulty.

Between 15 May and 9 July 1944, 438 000 Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz. The vast majority were gassed and incinerated in gas chambers and Crematoria II, III and V.⁵⁹ It is curious that Watt does not mention by name the fate of the Hungarian Jews, or the extermination of the Gypsy camp in August 1944.

⁵³ *Stoker*, 94.

⁵⁴ *Dwork*, 270, 321, Plates 14, 15.

⁵⁵ *Dwork*, 321-322, Plate 18.

⁵⁶ *Dwork*, 321, 332.

⁵⁷ *Rudolf Höss*.02, in Ken McVay, *The Nizkor Project*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Auschwitz: Crematoria*, in Ken McVay, *The Nizkor Project*, 1.

⁵⁹ Randolph Brahm, "Hungarian Jews", in Gutman, op cit, 466; Jean Claude Pressac and Robert Jan van Pelt, "The Machinery of Mass Murder at Auschwitz", in Israel Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of Auschwitz Death Camp*, op cit, 238 Hereafter, Pressac.

The *Sonderkommando* of Crematorium II shared accommodation with the SK of Crematorium III in Barrack 2, a closed section of Camp B-1b.⁶⁰ From the summer of 1944, the *Sonderkommando* lived in attics above Crematoria II and III, until the autumn when they were moved to the attics of Crematoria III and IV.⁶¹ At no point in any of the available evidence is there reference to SK accommodation that matches the description given by Don Watt. Further, since the SK lived in such close and well-guarded quarters, it seems odd that an English speaking, non-Jewish prisoner of war, sent to work as a stoker, is not mentioned in the literature. Müller, who worked in the crematoria for three years until the demolition of the plants in late 1944, does not mention any English speakers, let alone an Australian. Müller's account of his life in the SK is very detailed, and matches other accounts of the SK. For an Australian to have worked on the SK and gone unnoticed is beyond plausibility.

In July 1944, Watt claimed that 450 Greek Jews were gassed for refusing to work in the SK.⁶² There is no evidence of this claim. There was a *Selektion* on 21 July among 446 Greek Jews who had been in Quarantine Camp B-IIb since 30 June: 434 were sent to Camp B-IIId.⁶³ No record of a gassing of 450 Greek Jews can be found at this time. The only large groups of Greek Jews that were present during Watt's alleged time in Birkenau were 2044 Jews from Athens and Corfu who arrived on 30 June, and 2500 Jews from Rhodes who arrived on 16 August 1944. Of these, 1423 of the Athenian and Corfu Jews, and 2000 of the Rhodes transports were gassed upon arrival.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most questionable of Watt's details concerning the *Sonderkommando* at Birkenau is the reference to the actual work of stoking the furnaces. He writes that he spent his day "throwing logs in to keep the fires going, while other men working alongside me threw dead bodies in."⁶⁵ Coke was used in all KL throughout the Reich. At no time is there any record of the Germans using wood as incineration fuel. Müller recounts that two wheelbarrows of coke were needed every half-hour to keep

⁶⁰ Czech, 344-345.

⁶¹ Franciszek Piper, "Gas Chambers and Crematoria", in Gutman 168, 172 Hereafter Piper.

⁶² *Stoker*, 96.

⁶³ Czech, 668.

⁶⁴ Cf. Czech, 30.06.1944; 16.08.1944.

the furnaces burning at the required temperature.⁶⁶ In each crematoria there was a storeroom that was replenished regularly by prisoners dragging carts filled with the coke.⁶⁷ In 1944 the only time wood was used for the incineration of bodies was during the killing of the Hungarian Jews. So great was the number of bodies to be cremated that the furnaces were overworked. *Hauptscharführer* Moll ordered the digging of cremation pits to dispose of the bodies. With the frenzy of work to destroy all traces of the victims,

the basic organisation of work was changed frequently, especially when additional hands were wanted elsewhere. Thus it often happened that some of the stokers were ordered into the crematorium at short notice to help with the clearing of the changing rooms or with removing corpses.⁶⁸

Further, as O'Brien has noted, "a 'Stoker' in the *Sonderkommando* was one who cremated corpses, not one who stoked fires."⁶⁹ Again, Watt has made serious errors in his narrative.

Another survivor of the Birkenau *Sonderkommando*, the Greek Jew, Marco Nahon, described 200 freight cars of wood that were brought into Auschwitz II for the destruction of the bodies in Moll's pits. Nahon added: "This wood however, is used only in the trenches; the Cremas (sic) burn coal."⁷⁰ Watt claimed that the wood he and his fellow stokers used came from forests north west of the KL. They were supposedly felled by Russian prisoners of war who then dragged the wood carts back to Birkenau.⁷¹ I have noted that wood was not used as fuel for the crematoria, and besides, the area to the north west of the KL was not covered in forest, but was a heavy industrial area.⁷² By the time Watt claims to have been in Birkenau, the population of Soviet prisoners of war had been reduced from the original 16 000 to barely a few hundred. At the time of the liberation of the Camp in January 1945, 96

⁶⁵ *Stoker*, 91.

⁶⁶ Müller, 82.

⁶⁷ *ibid* 40 Cf also. Dwork, 269-270.

⁶⁸ Müller, 137.

⁶⁹ O'Brien, *op cit*, 7.

⁷⁰ Nahon, 99.

⁷¹ *Stoker*, 103.

Soviet soldiers remained.⁷³ Given the brutal treatment meted out to the Russians, it would be highly unlikely that many would have been in any fit state to cut timber and haul logs.

Watt asserts that once the cremation was completed, the ashes were taken out and disposed around the local countryside where

You might think that all this ash would have made good fertiliser, but in the quantities Birkenau was producing every day, it was simply toxic. Apart from the forested areas, the land surrounding the camp became more like a lunar landscape by the day, a scene of utter desolation where nothing would grow.⁷⁴

The disposal of ashes at Auschwitz was different to that practised at Majdanek. In Majdanek, ashes were used to fertilise the cabbage fields in the KL gardens. According to survivor evidence, the cabbages grew without any trouble at all.⁷⁵ There is no mention of toxicity regarding the ashes, and since Majdanek employed Zyklon B as the preferred killing agent, as did Auschwitz, there is no evidence to support Watt's claim. In Auschwitz, the method of disposal of the ashes was largely dumping them into the Sola River, or in one of the swampy pits near the camp. Some ash was used for the nearby KL farms.⁷⁶

Auschwitz was designed not just as an extermination centre, but as part of a the much larger plan for the "Germanisation of the East." Once the local Poles were expelled, the Auschwitz area, including the *Konzentrationslager*, was to be a major centre of industry and agriculture.

⁷² cf Dwork, 181.

⁷³ "Auschwitz: How many people died at Auschwitz?", in Ken McVay, *The Nizkor Project*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Stoker*, 96.

⁷⁵ Alexander Werth, *Russia At War*, 892-893.

⁷⁶ cf Piper, 171; Andrzej Strzelecki, "The Plunder of Victims and Their Corpses", in Gutman, 261.

Located between an industrial area to the north and the west, and a rural region to the south, the camp became an agricultural centre to help ethnic Germans adjust to local farming conditions.⁷⁷

Throughout the history of Auschwitz, farming and animal husbandry were as much a part of the KL as was genocide. If the ashes were toxic, they would not have been used on one of the pet projects of the *Reichsführer SS*.⁷⁸

On 7 October 1944, the Birkenau SK rose in revolt. A group of 200 SK had been gassed in late September, and rumours of the impending liquidation of the SK prompted efforts to die fighting.⁷⁹ Müller asserts that the SK plans for resistance were well known among the prisoners within and without the SK.⁸⁰ A *Selektion* was made to take a group of 300 prisoners, ostensibly to an Upper Silesian town, to act as rubble clearers. No one believed the story, but the list was prepared, this time by the *Kapos*, not by the SS.⁸¹ When the SS did arrive to take the 300 prisoners, the men set them upon. Crematoria IV was set on fire, and an attempt was made to destroy Crematorium II and in Crematorium III the Russians prisoners of war killed their hated *Kapo*, grabbed their cache of weapons, and made for the electric fence.⁸² The SS responded quickly by calling for reinforcements who arrived and began to reassert control over what they must have thought was an easy situation. When grenades were thrown, the SS were caught off guard, giving the prisoners extra time to make the break through the fence. Although none survived, they died fighting as they had wished. At the end of the *Aktion*, around 250 SK lay dead, along with several of the SS. All remaining SK were brought to the grounds of the destroyed Crematorium IV where 200 were executed. The *Kommandant's* representative warned that any repetition of rebellious behaviour would result in all prisoners in the camp being shot.

⁷⁷ Dwork, 181.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 188-196.

⁷⁹ Czech, 26.09.1944 Accounts of the uprising vary from one source to the next. The account followed here draws heavily on the memoirs of Müller, the Chronicle of Czech and several secondary sources. The author does not claim this to be in any way definitive.

⁸⁰ Müller, 91.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 153-154.

⁸² *ibid* 158. Czech argues that Crematorium III along with Crematorium V was not involved in the revolt. Cf. 07.10.1944, 724.

After this, work resumed in Crematoria II, III and V.⁸³ The following tables illustrate the unequal battle between the SK and the SS.

Table 6: KL AUSCHWITZ II SONDERKOMMANDO⁸⁴

7 October 1944		9 October 1944	
Crematorium II	169	Crematorium II	53
Crematorium III	169	Crematorium III	53
Crematorium IV	169	Crematorium IV	53
Crematorium V	156	Crematorium V	53
Total SK:	663	Total SK:	212

Table 7: SS FORCES IN THE AUSCHWITZ “AREA OF INFLUENCE”

8 September 1944⁸⁵	
Auschwitz I	1119
Auschwitz II Birkenau	908
Auschwitz III Monowitz	1315
Buna	439
Subsidiary Camps	876
Total SS	3342

Don Watt claimed he was working at Crematorium II when the revolt broke out. Even allowing for his inaccurate numbering of the Crematoria, he would still have been in one of the main areas of the fighting. He claims that he watched the revolt in action in Crematorium III from his position in Crematorium II.⁸⁶ This is impossible, unless he was outside, in which case he would have run the enormous risk of being hit by an SS bullet; or if he were inside, he would have had to somehow get away from the guards and *Kapos* in the crematorium and get to a window. Neither scenario seems viable. From the evidence examined by Czech, and the recollections of Filip Müller, it is very difficult to accept Watt’s story. Further, he makes no mention of the

⁸³ Czech, 726.
⁸⁴ Figures taken from Czech, 724, 728.
⁸⁵ Figures taken from Czech, 705.
⁸⁶ Stoker, 98-99.

slaughter that followed in the yard of Crematorium IV, the regrouping of the SK after the revolt and the range of activities undertaken by the SK. Müller describes the work after the revolt:

It was at this time that work began in connection with covering all traces of the summer's mass exterminations. A newly formed demolition team was engaged in filling up pits, levelling sites, removing huge heaps of ashes, taking away camouflage hurdles, planting trees and laying turf.⁸⁷

If Watt had been there he would have taken part in these activities. There is no mention of covering up the killings of summer 1944.

Without doubt the most perplexing problem of Watt's testimony is of his release from Birkenau. He wrote:

At the end of November 1944, I was suddenly taken off the furnaces. Two guards came along one day and told me to put down my shovel, then escorted me to an office in the administration building, where I was told to wait. I didn't know what to think...I was left standing for two hours, and when the guards came out they told me bluntly that I was being sent to an Australian POW camp...I must have looked stupid...The guards started shouting at me: "Do you understand Englishman? You are leaving here. You are going to a prisoner of war camp. You will be with your own people. You are leaving Auschwitz!"⁸⁸

We need to dissect this part of Watt's story, line by line.

On order of the *Reichsführer SS*, gassing at Auschwitz ceased on, or about, 30 October 1944. The last transport gassed were Jews from Theresianstadt. The next

⁸⁷ Müller, 160.

⁸⁸ *Stoker*, 118.

transport, Jews from Sered, were registered in their entirety.⁸⁹ Martin Gilbert disputes this, claiming that the Sered Jews who arrived on 3 November 1944 were put through a *Selektion* and the majority killed, after which the gassings stopped.⁹⁰ Czech argues that the gassing ceased on 1 November 1944.⁹¹ What is certain is that the gassings stopped. From Müller's account, the killing machinery lay relatively unused. The SS began to destroy documents from the KL Administration.⁹² One crematorium (V?) was used to dispose of the bodies of prisoners who had died in Auschwitz I and its subsidiary camps.⁹³

Demolition squads began dismantling Crematorium II on 25 November 1944. On the following day, Himmler ordered the dismantling of all the Crematoria.⁹⁴ The Squad for the dismantling of Crematorium III was formed on 1 December 1944, and the Squad for Crematorium IV, on 5 December.⁹⁵ As the demolition teams began dismantling the furnaces, the fate of the SK grew more precarious. Müller relates:

At the same time there was a final selection among members of the *Sonderkommando*. All prisoners in the team were lined up in the yard of Crematorium 2. This time the camp authorities had taken precautions to prevent a repetition of events during the previous selection. Hundreds of armed SS guards with a large number of police dogs stood behind the barbed wire fence. The political department was represented by *Unterführers* Boger and Hustek who, together with the *Kommandoführers* were in charge of the selection.⁹⁶

The SS selected one group of thirty men, the SK from Crematorium V. Another seventy were to be the demolition squad. With them went a number of pathologists and their assistants. The remainder, approximately 100 men, were told they were

⁸⁹ Cf Pressac, in Gutman, 174.

⁹⁰ Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, 331.

⁹¹ Czech, 743.

⁹² Müller, 160-161.

⁹³ *ibid*, 162.

⁹⁴ Czech, 754.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, 757, 759.

⁹⁶ Müller, 161.

being transferred to KL Grossrosen. “What happened to them we never learned, but we all realised that their time had come.”⁹⁷

Don Watt asserts that he was released from Auschwitz II after working as a member of the *Sonderkommando* for nearly seven months. This is unheard of in any of the literature published concerning the *Sonderkommando*. Release from Auschwitz I was rare in any case; release from Auschwitz II came only through death. Hermann Langbein observes aptly:

There are statistics to indicate that the stop of releases was due to a desire to keep events in the camp from becoming public knowledge. In the first half of 1942, 952 prisoners were released from Auschwitz, but in the second half there were only 26.⁹⁸

Czech notes the release of 216 Czech prisoners on 13 June 1943.⁹⁹ There are no recorded releases from Birkenau. Escapes were more common, but even here, of the 667 escapes from all the Auschwitz Camps, 270 were recaptured and killed. Most of the others made it to partisan groups operative in the local area.¹⁰⁰ Watt’s story simply does not correlate with the known data of Auschwitz.

At the end of his book, Don Watt writes that he has no wish to debate with Holocaust deniers. Speaking of David Irving, Watt directs comments to him:

Mr Irving, I am not Jewish and I am not part of the so-called “Jewish conspiracy”. But I was in Belsen, and in Auschwitz, and I can tell you that mass extermination of Jewish people did take place. For you to claim otherwise is insulting. I know this because I was there, stoking the fires. And I saw it happen.¹⁰¹

It is this conclusion that perhaps gives us an insight into the mind of Don Watt.

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ Langbein, 12.

⁹⁹ Czech, 418.

¹⁰⁰ M R D Foot, *Resistance*, 293.

¹⁰¹ *Stoker*, 171.

He is clearly not an evil man; nor is he seeking money out of the Holocaust. The question arises, Why does Donald Watt believe he was in Auschwitz? It is not such a bizarre question when one considers that the phenomenon of non-Jews outside of Europe feeling an enormous sense of guilt at the fate of the Jews of Europe has been a relatively unexplored aspect of the impact of the Holocaust. How can one explain the sight of Korean Christians, men and women weeping outside the Childrens' Memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem; or the many Australian Christians who gather in the crypt of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney for an annual Holocaust Memorial Service? It is fair to say that for most of these people, the sense of guilt and enormous sorrow is understandable as Christian culture was, in part, responsible for the events in Europe between 1933 and 1945. What we have here are good people responding to the evil that confronts them in the Holocaust, attempting to understand, and working so that it does not happen again. For many, the Holocaust is a clarion call for vigilance against antisemitism, racism and any form of indignity perpetrated by one group of people on another.

Watt's case is different. He may well have begun feeling some sense of sorrow over the Jews, and as a prisoner of war may well have witnessed terrible crimes committed against Jews. Certainly, Max Sawyer's experience is valid here. However, I contend that at some point in his life, Don Watt, began to *believe* that he was in Auschwitz. And within his mind he saw himself as a prisoner slaving in the Crematoria of Birkenau. *Stoker* is perhaps a vicarious act of suffering with the Jews and other persecuted peoples of Europe, born of a sense of profound helplessness in the face of overwhelming evil and human, and specifically, Jewish suffering. If this is the case, Don Watt needs to be judged gently. Here is a man of compassion, who has blended his own war-time experiences with those of the *Sonderkommando*, and produced a story that may well have assuaged his feelings of helplessness and guilt. But he has also created a tale that is dangerous.

The phenomenon of delusion is described as "an unshakeable belief or system of belief based on a faulty premise and maintained in spite of rational evidence to the

contrary.”¹⁰² *Stoker* appears to fit into this category. Watt’s experiences appear to fall between the two extremes of delusional manifestation, that is, between transitory and fragmented experiences to “highly systematised and superficially convincing” patterns of behaviour. Delusion often serves the need to counteract feelings of insecurity or inadequacy, and allows the deluded person a modicum of stability. Looking into the history of the deluded subject one usually encounters a “severe sense of personal vulnerability and unrecognised fears that they ‘project’ outwards.”¹⁰³ When Watt’s book was published, the author experienced enormous unexpected pressure from many sources eager to hear this incredible story. Perhaps he felt he had to “stick by his tale in the light of the huge publicity.”¹⁰⁴ Don Watt’s delusion is an uncommon one of close identification with the victims of great persecution, in this case the Jews and the *Sonderkommando* of Birkenau.¹⁰⁵

Watt is certainly not alone. History is filled with people who sincerely believed that they were someone other than the person they actually were. Perhaps the most famous deluded person of the twentieth century was Franziska Schanzkowska, the woman who claimed from the early 1920s to be the Grand Duchess Anastasia, youngest daughter of Nicholas II. Her story is one of gradually coming to believe in a more exciting and grand life than was ever possible for the daughter of an alcoholic Polish farmer. Rescued from a Berlin canal, *Fräulein Unbekannt* (Miss Unknown), spent two years in Dalldorf asylum. Bearing a close resemblance to Anastasia, Franziska Schanzkowska fuelled the hopes of many that some of the Romanovs had survived the massacre at Ekaterinburg.

Here was an interesting new life. People paid attention to her; some bowed and curtsied and called her Your Imperial Highness. In time, her mind absorbed this alternative identity and she was transformed.¹⁰⁶

Franziska Schanzkowska had found her role, and until her death in 1982, she played it without fault. She reached the point very early in her new life where she did not have

¹⁰² Ada Kahn and Ronald Doctor, *The Encyclopedia of Phobias, Fears and Anxieties*, 126.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 127

¹⁰⁴ Colin Burgess to POS, 05.03.1997.

¹⁰⁵ It must also be remembered that Watt applied for, and received, the \$10 000 ex gratia payment from the Commonwealth Government on the basis of his story.

to convince others about who she was. “Instead it was others who adopted her cause, took her claim to court and demanded of the world that she be recognised.”¹⁰⁷ In some ways the excitement, created by *Stoker* bears similarities.

In similar ways delusion played prominent roles in the lives of other prominent people, though with negative consequences. Ingo Hasselbach, a former “neo-Nazi” from eastern Germany, wrote in the early 1990s he came to see the “dark” side of Nazism and its *Weltanschauung*, confessed; “I had literally created things, people and places to fit into my world view.”¹⁰⁸

Was Max Sawyer a victim of delusion? The lack of concrete evidence to prove his story that he was in KL Lublin means that the question needs to be asked. There are similarities with *Stoker*. Sawyer had a strong affinity with the Jewish people. He claimed that they were always kind towards him, even in the camp.¹⁰⁹ The identification with Jewish suffering in the Holocaust remained a deep current throughout the rest of Max Sawyer’s life, and was passed on to his daughter, Mary, who found expression for this in the naming of her second son, Reuben, a distinctively Jewish name.¹¹⁰

Max Sawyer’s story, like *Stoker*, is an intrusion into Australian military history so beyond the “normal” experience of war, that there is next to no mention of the KL in Official Histories of the Australian military forces. Both men forcefully remind us of the danger of uncritically accepting the popular “Hitler-arrived-from-outer-space-in-1933” rationale of the Holocaust.¹¹¹ Likewise, both men confront us by their stories with the truth that the nature of the Holocaust goes beyond simplistic arguments of the type employed by Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.¹¹² Yet, both men are very different. Watt’s story is so fraught with error that one can not accept its

¹⁰⁶ Robert Massie, *The Romanovs: The Final Chapter*, 250.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 251.

¹⁰⁸ Ingo Hasselbach, *Führer-ex*, 325.

¹⁰⁹ BS

¹¹⁰ MB

¹¹¹ Colin Tatz, “German Antisemitism and the X Files”, in *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide*, 11.5, 8.

¹¹² Henry Friedlander, “They Know (Not) What They Do”, in *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide*, 11.5, 12.

credibility. Sawyer's story is fraught with a frustrating lack of concrete conclusive evidence that one can neither confirm nor deny.¹¹³

It is the silence of Sawyer that has proved most difficult to penetrate. Since he so rarely spoke about his war-time experiences, even the relatively positive times in Austria, the evidence we do have is so limited. However, unlike Watt, the fragments of Sawyer's story we do possess show a high degree of plausibility, and when placed next to the known data reveal an equally high degree of correlation. The silence of the post-war years is understandable; indeed Australians were familiar with the silence that surrounded the veterans of the Great War.¹¹⁴ This was not the silence or amnesia of Rudolf Hess, but the silence of trying desperately to forget the horrors witnessed.¹¹⁵ We must also keep in mind that the silence descended only after Sawyer found that the few people he did attempt to tell could not bear to hear the accounts he gave. Watt's story is similar in this respect; but for various reasons, he felt the need to publicise his story, albeit with perhaps the best of intentions.

A final observation about the question of memoirs and reliability is apt. Sawyer attempted to tell a number of his family and close friends of the horrors he claimed to have witnessed in Europe. It was only after they reacted with such revulsion at his story that Sawyer stopped speaking, and remained silent until the last year of his life. Sawyer was not a great writer until much later in his life. Unfortunately, he did not write of his war-time experiences.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, Sawyer's family asserts that he was consistent in the fragments of story he did relate, and to date attempts to verify the story have met with a success that *Stoker* simply cannot attain. Don Watt "clammed up" as soon as he left Auschwitz. He refused to speak of his time in Auschwitz, preferring to tell his comrades in the unidentified POW camp near Hanover, "I had become seriously ill and had spent several months in hospital...From that day on, for 44 years, I didn't mention a word about Auschwitz to anybody."¹¹⁷

¹¹³ The same frustration is shared by journalist Paul Rea who has attempted to determine how many Australians had been sent to, and killed, at the Little Camp in Theresianstadt. Colin Burgess to POS, 5.03.1997.

¹¹⁴ cf Gammage, *op cit*, 275.

¹¹⁵ cf Padfield, *Hess*, 313-314.

¹¹⁶ While working as a carpenter on the Sydney Opera House Sawyer kept a record of what he observed. The account has not been found. MB

¹¹⁷ *Stoker*, 120.

At the end of my examination of *Stoker* it is impossible to accept Don^Watt's claims as true. It is equally impossible to dismiss Max Sawyer's claims as false.

Chapter Eleven: *Weltanschauung* and Genres

Sawyer's post-war history can be summarised into two distinct parts. First, his life immediately upon returning to the Manning Valley in mid-1945, his marriage to Elizabeth Aaltje Tarrant in November 1945, and the years until what can be described as the first major breakdown and the leaving of his wife and children, Mary, Bill and Helen, in 1957. Second, the part of his post-war life which runs from the end of his first marriage, the time he spent in New Guinea and then his life with his second wife, Beryl and his two sons, Tim and Robert. What emerges is a desperate attempt by a young man to return to some sense of "normality" in environments that had no idea of understanding of his trauma. What we see is a man returning from the Holocaust of Europe to the "backwater" of Anglo-Australian life — only to find that the horrors he had left behind in Poland were firmly embedded in his mind.

His sister Vera and cousin Dorothy remembered Max saying "they have slaughterhouses in Europe." The family have memories of a man effectively "broken" and "difficult to live with."¹ As with all human recollections, these are hindsight memories. In the late 1940s, it was beyond the understanding of most Australians to begin to comprehend the enormity of what such men had suffered. Even as the last flames of Berlin were dying, the reaction to the Nazi crimes had set in process a pattern of "seeing, but not-seeing." A cloud of amnesia settled: the Holocaust was too big to grapple with. Peter Padfield gives an excellent example of this "amnesia" in the case of former *Stellvertreter*, Rudolf Hess. At his trial in Nuremberg, Hess appeared to suffer increasing bouts of memory loss. Many considered this to play-acting, but American Army psychiatrist, Colonel W H Dunn, believed it to be genuine, saying that because of the "mounting evidence of the crimes and cruelties perpetrated by Nazism: '[Hess] took flight into amnesia to escape the dreadful reality presented.'"² It is not unreasonable to say that a similar "flight into amnesia" became part of the post-war world's attempt to cope with the Holocaust.

¹ ES, VJ, MB

² Padfield, *Hess*, 314.

Australians were not alone in their non-comprehension of this catastrophe. Cinemas showed unimaginable atrocities perpetrated by people who looked alarmingly familiar. Scenes of piles of distorted and emaciated corpses bulldozed into mass graves were distressing and sickening, but most people did not see beyond the evil of Hitler and Nazism as the cause. Hitler was responsible: Hitler was gone and so such a horror would not happen again. The demonisation of the Nazis had well and truly begun. Herein lies a major problem, namely, the fundamental misunderstanding of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. Max Sawyer had first hand experience of it and the fact that most non-Jewish Australians did not have any notion of what this meant became a source of great anxiety for the rest of his life.

At the end of this research exercise I am left with the question: what have I written? The answer is more than simply Max Sawyer's war history. It goes beyond that. I have been forced to literally comb through material that has never addressed the possibility of an Australian soldier in a KL. In the process, I have had a number of suspicions confirmed and made some discoveries. First, my suspicion that many, if not most, western historians of the Second World War do not understand the fundamental nature of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* has been confirmed. Second, literature on the Holocaust and related Nazi atrocities has such a focus on Jewish suffering that other groups are relegated, if they are mentioned at all. I am in no way denigrating the suffering of European Jewry: I observe that so little has been written on other victims of the Nazis.³ Third, because of the above, the reconstruction of Sawyer's history took me into a re-examination of the various genres of war and Holocaust literature.

We need a critique of these areas in order to locate my study of Max. First, a brief background survey leads to an examination of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and its implications in my research. This then moves into an analysis of the literary genres of war and Holocaust history.

³ The most comprehensive treatment of non-Jewish victims is Michael Berenbaum, *Mosaic of Victims*.

World War One claimed a significant number of civilian victims in air raids, deaths at sea, naval blockades, famine, civil war and military brutality. Gilbert closed his study with the remark “The destructiveness of the First World War, in terms of the number of soldiers killed, exceeded that of all other wars known to history.”⁴ Gilbert notes that an average of 5600 soldiers died every day between 4 August 1914 and 11 November 1918, creating a total of 8.6 million war dead not including civilian deaths.⁵ Charles Bean estimated Australia’s war dead at 59 342 dead and 152 171 wounded. These figures amounted to 64.8per cent of all Australian troops in the field, the highest ratio of any belligerent nation. The war that followed built upon the legacy of the first but was fuelled by a new, more deadly force.

The Second World War went further and forced political ideology, racial bio-politics and total war upon great tracts of Europe, Africa and Asia, not as adjuncts of the military conflict, but as integral parts of the whole war. The military dimensions, in their turn, were intimately related to the political, social and economic worldview, the *Weltanschauung*, of the state. Gilbert’s study of the 1939-1945 War points out the sobering fact that an estimate of the dead will never be accurate. Millions died with no record of their deaths. Gilbert suggests a minimum of 46 million.⁶

In Hitler’s *Weltanschauung* there existed a foundation built on a bio-politics that girds the whole Nazi edifice. This has been a greatly misunderstood and sometimes ignored area of National Socialist ideology. Cameron-Swift, writing in the Introduction of the 1992 reprint of *Mein Kampf*, outlined Hitler’s principles:

Firstly, history is the record of the rise, conflict and fall of racial groupings...the founders of culture, the bearers of culture and the destroyers of culture, the Aryans representing the first group, the Jews the last group. These events are governed by the iron logic of nature which forbids cross-breeding among animals and intermarriage between racial stocks, punishing such transgression by the curse of

⁴ ibid 540.

⁵ ibid, 541.

⁶ Martin Gilbert (1989) 746.

inferior stock and the weakening and final disappearance of the superior group of Aryans who first broke that “iron law.” Thus the first law of nature was for the “higher” races to preserve their racial purity, the second to protect and maintain their own dominance.⁷

Extending this, Hitler argued that the natural growth of the Aryan *Volk* necessitated its legitimate taking of land from inferior races. Realising that this would result in the use of force, Hitler romanticised about the other great nations created by Aryan genius, Britain and the United States.

Hitler, long envious of the British Empire, looked at the English with a mix of hope for an eventual alliance⁸, and distrust at the power of the Jew who “exert an almost unlimited dictatorship indirectly through [English] public opinion.”⁹ Hitler’s foreign policy moves between 1933 and 1938 were fundamentally anti-French and, it appears, in part, deliberately designed to be palatable for Britain.¹⁰ On 18 June 1935 the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was signed. Hitler described it as the happiest day of his life. The date was the 120th anniversary of the great Anglo-Prussian defeat of the Napoleon and the French at Waterloo.¹¹

While the British were motivated by reasons of establishing a political and military balance in Europe as well as wishing to quarantine Bolshevism¹², Hitler was deliberately creating a climate of tension that would eventually lead to conflict. His overtures towards Britain may have had a sheen of racial fraternity, but were also governed by the *realpolitik* of an eventual showdown between the two nations over hegemony in Europe.¹³ The conflict was biological in origin, and Britain was living proof of a crumbling and decadent culture destroyed by the nemesis of all culture, the

⁷ D Cameron Watt, Introduction to *Mein Kampf*, xxxv.

⁸ Hitler, op cit, 564.

⁹ *ibid*, 582.

¹⁰ Fest, op cit, 486.

¹¹ *ibid*, 492.

¹² cf E H Carr, *International Relations Between the Wars 1919-1939*, 151.

¹³ Weinberg, op cit, 91.

Jew, whose ultimate goal was the annihilation of Germany.¹⁴ Of like stature was the United States of America.

America was “a decayed country, with problems of race and social inequality, of no ideas...half Judaized, half Negrified with everything built on the dollar.”¹⁵ The “nordic” United States of the antebellum years had been diluted and polluted by massive immigration of “Alpine, Latin and Jewish blood” after 1870.¹⁶ Hitler tended to be contemptuous of all things American, believing the country had allowed itself to falter “due to its racial deterioration” because the Confederate forces — the standard bearers of “a great new social order built on slavery and inequality” — had been defeated.¹⁷ Still sparks of Aryan fortitude could be found in the United States, especially in that “single great man, Ford”, the middle classes and the farmers who shared a truly National Socialist aversion “to Negroes and Jews.”¹⁸ America’s entry into the war in December 1941 was, in Hitler’s eyes, the act of a weak Roosevelt, manipulated by American Jewry in a vain attempt at “world domination and dictatorship.”¹⁹ Yet the irony lies in recalling that it was Hitler who declared war on the USA on 11 December and not *vice versa*.

Preferential treatment of Western prisoners of war can be seen in a new light. British and white Commonwealth and Imperial prisoners, along with American prisoners, were enemies of Germany in a conventional sense, not racial enemies. These men had been sent to fight a war that was, according to Nazi ideology, started by international world Jewry. Therefore the prisoners were, in one sense, victims of the common enemy, the Jew. Nonetheless, we have also seen enough evidence to assert that ideology was never so clear cut or precise that even so-called “conventional” enemies were not exempt from the treatment applied to the *Untermenschen*. Once the restraining norms of international law, morality and ethical principles with regard to the weak and defenceless had been abrogated for the “higher” law of “blood and

¹⁴ Hitler, op cit, 569.

¹⁵ Hitler, in James Compton, *The Swastika and the Eagle*, 17.

¹⁶ Compton, *ibid*, 8.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 18.

¹⁸ Hitler, op cit 583; Compton, op cit, 18.

¹⁹ Hitler in Compton, op cit, 18.

soil”, it would only be a matter of time before atrocities would be committed against those technically outside of the “purification” processes of the Nazi crusade.

The same “logic” could not be applied to the prisoners from the East. Polish and Russian prisoners of war were racial enemies of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. They were the biological antithesis of the Aryan *Volk* and had to be destroyed. Countless stories of horrific brutality towards Russian prisoners witnessed by Australian and British prisoners bear out the Nazi “logic.”²⁰ That such treatment was not generally administered to them appears to have been considered a matter of luck, or evidence of the illogicality of German thinking.

Jewish prisoners of war among the Western soldiers could therefore only rely on an allied victory to guarantee long-term survival. Enough instances of Jewish prisoners being segregated and “disappearing” suggest that the *Endlösung* applied to Europe’s Jews would, sooner or later, be applied to the all Jews wherever they may be.²¹ As agents of a racial state, the Gestapo were — alongside the SS — active implementers of state policy. Their increasing presence in the supervision of the *Kriegsgefangenenwesens* after 1941 strengthens the argument employed above.²² This scenario is one attempt to argue an explanation of Max Sawyer’s experiences and the experiences of hundreds of other Australian prisoners of war.

This leads me to make a very brief examination of the Holocaust itself. Much has already been said about Max’s unwitting role in the Final Solution. By looking at the deliberate systematised attempt to murder the Jews of Europe, we find that the Holocaust is not a monolithic event emerging from the mind of Hitler and his paladins. It was a highly complex and widespread series of events that were united often only by tenuous links to the official ideology. It must be remembered that most Jews who died in the years 1939-1945 were killed outside of the KL. Attempting to pinpoint the exact moment of the beginning of the slaughter of Europe’s Jews is perhaps to miss the nature of the Holocaust. We may well be heading towards a more

²⁰ Cf. Adam-Smith, op cit, 154, 185; Barrett, op cit, 261; Goyder, op cit, 75; Pape, op cit, 136-138; Wild, op cit, 233.

²¹ cf. Chapter 5.

accurate assessment by looking at the myriad of competing factions within the Byzantine labyrinth of Hitler's court and the radicalising force of Hitler himself, in a model of Holocaust understanding that Colin Tatz describes as "inevablist."²³

Tatz argues that a long history of pre-Christian antisemitism provided a fertile soil for the Christian variant of what was already, to borrow Wistrich's phrase, "the longest hatred."²⁴ Antisemitism evolved from a theological deviation into a pseudo-scientific racialism that reflected the changes within European society as it became less identifiably Christian and more obviously technological and scientific. Modernity, and especially the social dislocation brought about by the Industrial Revolution, caused a significant shift in the cultural landscape of Europe which encouraged a variety of "Golden Age" romanticisms. Gone was the stable society that had existed, with its equally stable class structure for upwards of a millennium. In its place was a far less stable society that was rapidly urbanising, that relied on industry and mechanised manufacturing rather than labour intensive agriculture and small artisan and guild-based industries. Alongside the changes in the social and economic orders were significant changes within the political order.

Nation states began to emerge, replacing the old concept of Christendom and the universality of the Christian estate. Loyalty to one's own people and nation took precedence over all other loyalties, including religious ties. One was German or British first, then Catholic or Protestant.

Part of the elaboration of theories of nationhood in the modern period lay in defining a set of attributes as the 'national character' of the people. Such properties could provide the answer to questions of the type 'What is it to be German?' or 'How does nationality manifest itself in personal and political behaviour?' Describing character

²² Gellately, op cit, 58, 133, 156-157.

²³ Colin Tatz, Holocaust Seminar Day, Temple Emanuel Woollahra, 10.05.1996.

²⁴ Robert Wistrich, *The Longest Hatred*, 3-12 Cf also Menahem Stern, "Antisemitism in Rome", in Shmuel Almog, *Antisemitism Through the Ages*, 13-25; Petra Heldt "Antagonism Towards the Jews in Christian Tradition", 31.12.1991, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem (Video).

invariably involves idealisation and a substantial amount of myth making.²⁵

A significant part of the myth was answering the question of who belonged to the nation. For the newly emancipated Jews of Western Europe, the benefits of belonging to the new nation states outweighed the possible threats, which few could foresee. Europe as the fountainhead of civilisation was the signal to the world of eternal progress. The days of the ghetto were surely gone, at least for the Jews of Western Europe.

Lying below the surface of such wonderful enlightened humanity and progress were the slowly reforming hatreds of the past. Science —especially pseudo “racial science” — had replaced religion in the minds of most of Europe’s intelligentsia. Likewise for those who dabbled in the new “sciences” of racialism — which found a voice in the violently nationalist political movements of the late nineteenth century — ancient hatreds were reshaped into more “modern” guises.

Interwoven into this tapestry of myth and half-truths was a bastardised version of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Observation of nature revealed a “system” that was not “ordered” according to reason but according to survival. It was only by returning to the primal forces of nature and the “laws” determining survival that a people, a race, would acquire its true identity. Failure to do that would lead to destruction and extinction. Parallel to this “inequality” of peoples was the equally spurious notion that *Blut und Boden* (“blood and soil”) formed the foundation of the life of the *Volk*. Consequently, the carriers of a superior blood must ultimately destroy those outside this “primordial purity, integrity, rootedness and uniqueness”.²⁶ It was from this mish-mash of rambling *volkish* romanticism and “science” that the origins of Nazi antisemitism can be traced.

²⁵ Harold James, *A German Identity 1770-1990*, 9.

²⁶ J L Talmon, “European History as the Seedbed of the Holocaust, Jewish Perspectives-25 years of Jewish Writing”, 14-19, 28 in *Readings 1996-98*, 71-74, 78 Hereafter, *Readings*.

The pseudo-science of Chamberlain, de Gobineau, Nietzsche, Strauss and Wagner argued vehemently that the Jew, unassimilated, forever different and outside, was the source of humanity's ills.²⁷ It is in the realm of the academicians that racial "science" developed and became "respectable." By the late nineteenth century there were 164 de Gobineau Societies in Germany.²⁸ In 1902 the first *Journal of Racial Hygiene* was published. By 1933 there were 140 journals dedicated to this subject along with 33 university institutes devoted to its study in Germany alone.²⁹ Racism and antisemitism were now moved from the popular culture into the scientific culture of European academic life, thus gaining an aura of respectability that lent itself to large sections of the general population. Broszat and Carsten add to this brew the fears of the nationalistic German bourgeoisie and the growing insecurity they felt towards socialism and a growing politically active working class. Alongside this was the psychological and ideological impact caused by the sense of national humiliation at Versailles and its after effects, and the ever-frequent collisions of national interests in the last years of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth.³⁰

Before the "guns of August" had roared into life in 1914, the seeds of modern antisemitism and bio-politics were firmly established in European culture. Nowhere is this typified more dramatically than in the hysteria that descended upon Paris in 1894 when Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused and convicted of treason against France. Dreyfus declared, "my only crime is to have been born a Jew."³¹ In the subsequent investigations, the depth of antisemitism within the French military was partially revealed. But of far greater danger was the unleashing of violent antisemitic behaviour across all sections of French society, vocally led by anti-republican Royalists and ultra-conservative French Catholics.³²

²⁷ *ibid* 97-98. Cf also, Colin Tatz, "The Responsibility of Peoples: The Role of Academia in the Movement Towards the Final Solution", Paper to Conference "Why Germany?" 20-22 July 1990, University of New South Wales, *Readings* pp141-148.

²⁸ Colin Tatz, "Overview of the Shoah", Holocaust Seminar Day, Temple Emanuel, Woollahra, 16.04.1993 Hereafter Tatz 1993.

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Martin Broszat, *Hitler and the Collapse of Weimar Germany*, 37-50; F.L. Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 10-11.

³¹ Norman Finkelstein, *Captain of Innocence*, 49.

³² Howard Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History*, 264-268.

World War One killed the myth of “unending progress.” Lost in the killing fields of Verdun, the Somme and Ypres was a measure of certainty and surety about the world. Even as the last shots died away on 11 November 1918, many people were searching for reasons to explain the bloodletting. No country experienced the soul-searching that engaged thousands of Germans after the loss of the war. The *Kaiserstaat* that had held such great promise for Germany was gone. In its place was an unloved and unwanted republic made up of moderate leftist Social Democrats and Catholic Centrists.

Weimar Germany was fraught with division from its conception. In the great crowd of detractors were those who believed that the *dolchtoss* had been delivered by the November criminals, behind whom lurked the sinister Jew. What more evidence of Jewish hatred for Germany was needed when one listened to the capitalist Jew Rathenau speak of fulfilling the reparation obligations? And not just those Jews of the republic, but Jews of the revolutionary groups and the Bolsheviks, such as Rosa Luxemburg, and Lev Bronstein (Trotsky). To many Germans, it seemed as if Germany was surrounded by Jews intent upon her destruction.

Cultural antisemitism, mixed with the growth of political extremism within Germany and Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, meant that the ideas of the racialists of the nineteenth century began to find political expressions. Even among members of Europe’s intellectual elite, there was a feeling that “evil agents” had been released by the War and were now attempting to destroy Europe from within. T S Eliot and Oswald Spengler were among those who asked “who gained from the 20 million dead between 1914-1918?” Increasingly the answer became “the Jews.”³³

What was needed to turn cultural antisemitism into a political force? Tatz argues that Hitler was not the originator of Nazi antisemitism, rather, Hitler was the radical agent who activated what was already present. Hitler provided the necessary energy and determination to set in motion Nazi antisemitism. It is therefore arguable that the “machine” did not depend upon Hitler to create it: it was already complete. What the

³³ Shalmi Barmore, “Modern and Nazi Antisemitism” 1.1.1992, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

“machine” or “engine” needed was to have its power connected. Hitler provided the power source.³⁴

The history of the Third Reich has been extensively examined and there is no need to repeat it here. What comment can be made is related to the development of Nazi antisemitism. Wistrich supplies an excellent summary of its virulent nature:

The Nazis took over all the negative anti-Jewish stereotypes in Christianity but they removed the escape clause. There was no longer any way in which even fully assimilated or baptised Jews could flee from the sentence of death which had been passed by the inexorable laws of race. In that sense the ‘Final Solution’, the purification of a world that was deemed corrupt and evil because of the very existence of the Jews went beyond even the most radical Christian solution to the ‘Jewish Question.’³⁵

It is this “no escape clause” which makes the Holocaust of European Jewry unique in human history.³⁶ It was Max Sawyer’s misfortune to have become a part of this tragedy.

Another vexed question needs to be addressed. Throughout his life after the war, on the odd occasions when he openly reflected about his experiences, Sawyer would wonder how people could act in such a way to others.³⁷ The cruelty and barbarism inflicted upon him by other men was perhaps understandable as a part of a country at war. However, Sawyer could never understand what it was that drove seemingly “ordinary men” to commit acts of senseless sadism against defenceless people, especially the Jews. He was not the first to ask such questions.

³⁴ Tatz 1993.

³⁵ Wistrich, op cit, xxii.

³⁶ Cf Emil Fackenheim, “Holocaust and Weltanschauung: Philosophical reflections on why they did it”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 3.2 (1988) 197, in *Readings* 57; J L Talmon, op cit, 2, *Readings* 65.

³⁷ BS

One of the enduring myths of the Third Reich has been that resistance to the regime, especially in the execution of the Final Solution, was futile. The history of German resistance to the Nazis is a relatively minor area in the overall scheme of the history of the Third Reich.³⁸ Resistance was difficult, but not impossible. The example of the demonstration of the non-Jewish women on Berlin's *Rosenstrasse* in February 1943 demanding the release of their Jewish husbands and sons, illustrates a powerful example of how "ordinary" people in one instance publicly objected to the racial politics of the regime and succeeded.³⁹ That myth of futility has been successfully destroyed in several works, prominent among which is the work of Christopher Browning. A major part of the myth has been the frequently cited excuse that to disobey orders was impossible because of the culture of duress that had been created under National Socialism. To refuse to obey would have been to court a term in a KL or worse. Browning observes that in the years since 1945 "no defence attorney or defendant in any of the hundreds of postwar trials has been able to document a single case in which refusal to obey an order to kill unarmed civilians resulted in the allegedly inevitable dire punishment."⁴⁰

In *Ordinary Men*, Browning attempts to answer the simple question of "how was it possible for ordinary men to do such extraordinary acts of murder?" In recounting the history of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in the Lublin region, he describes what he called "Initiation to Mass Murder." In mid-July 1942, Reserve Police Battalion 101, made up of about 420 men, was sent to the village of Józefów, about 120 kms southeast of Lublin. The commanding officer, Major Trapp was informed that his men were to kill about 1800 Jews; the orders were precise and without ambiguity. Browning describes the events preceding the massacre:

Trapp assembled the men in a half circle and addressed them. After explaining the battalion's murderous assignment, he made his extraordinary offer: any of the older men who did not feel up to the task that lay before them could step out. Trapp paused, and after some

³⁸ Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death*, especially Ch 1, "The Resistance the never was."

³⁹ Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart*. After a week of continual non-violent protest the Reich Chancellery ordered the Gestapo to release the prisoners. Virtually all survived the war.

moments one man from Third Company, Otto Julius Schminke, stepped forward...some ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.⁴¹

No action was taken against the men who declined to participate in the killings. The men still had a measure of choice. It is inescapable then, that most of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 chose to kill the Jews of Józefów. This point remains the chilling finale to Browning's exploration of the reasons, motives, psychological and social implications of the mens' backgrounds and war histories.⁴²

I come to the third area that has arisen in my research: the question of war and Holocaust historiography. By examining the various genres in these categories it becomes obvious that there is a need for a re-appraisal. As outlined above, most western historians have separated the two events of the "conventional" war and the Holocaust. The Holocaust usually being an adjunct to the war, or a barely acknowledged footnote, or even ignored altogether. By examining and critiquing different genres of related war and Holocaust history I intend to highlight some of the problems before proposing a new model of historiography that integrates the two different wars which were fought alongside each other. It is by doing this that we can see the problems of specific genres and move towards the creation of a more inclusive and historically accurate form.

Global World War II Histories

The fundamental problem with many second world war historians is a lack of understanding of the National Socialist *zeitgeist*. Hitler's foreign policy is reduced to a territorial war designed to reclaim lost German lands seized after Versailles. Jews, along with all other non-military groups are ignored or relegated to footnotes. There is virtually no mention of Nazi ideology, and what there is tends to be simplistic. Having mentioned the "indigestible" Nazi theory, it is time to "get on with" the "real

⁴⁰ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 170.

⁴¹ *ibid*, 45, 57.

history” of the war: famous generals, clever strategy, amazing weapons and great operations. It is a romantic view of the war and an unrealistic approach to its victims.

In 1970, Basil Liddell-Hart published the 713-page *History of the Second World War*.⁴³ The work had taken over twenty years and Hart had interviewed many former belligerents from both sides. Liddell-Hart has written an impressive military history of the 1939-1945 war, but, it is not complete. He rationalises *Lebensraum* into a legitimate exercise in German reclamation.⁴⁴ *Lebensraum* was part of the broader biopolitical reality of Nazi hegemony in Europe. Subsequently, Liddell-Hart makes no mention of the persecution of the Jews: they are simply not relevant to his military history. There are no references to the *Konzentrationslager*, prisoners of war, Nazi terror and the oppression of the civilian population. Göring, the Reichplenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan and executor of Hitler’s desire for the *Endlösung*, rates sixteen references, all to do with the Luftwaffe.⁴⁵ Himmler has two references, and the Minister of Propaganda, Dr Goebbels, none.⁴⁶ Hitler’s generals, on the other hand, do quite well, especially Liddell-Hart’s “favourite”, Field Marshall Rommel, with 8 citations.⁴⁷

Liddell-Hart is not being accused of deliberate omission, as is the case with revisionist, David Irving, but of a flawed understanding of Nazi *realpolitik*. This problem of not understanding had made Liddell-Hart one of the strongest advocates of a negotiated peace with Germany in 1940.⁴⁸ His history is an example of attempting to push Hitler and the war through a sieve of “conventional” war. The problem is that we end up with a grossly distorted account: a problem that becomes more apparent with the man known to generations of school students as the “master” of twentieth century European history in the English language.

⁴² *ibid*, cc 17, 18.

⁴³ Basil Liddell-Hart, *History of the Second World War*.

⁴⁴ Liddell-Hart, *op cit*, 7-8.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 746.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 747.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 758-759.

⁴⁸ Padfield, *Hess*, *op cit*, 109, 114-115.

A J P Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961) — used throughout the English speaking world as an authoritative textbook — demonstrates perhaps the highest form of academic blindness to the Nazis. In his introduction, "Second Thoughts", included in the 1963 edition, he writes:

People regard Hitler as wicked and then find proofs of his wickedness in evidence which they would not use against others. Why do they apply this double standard? Only because they assume Hitler's wickedness in the first place.⁴⁹

For Taylor, Hitler and Nazism must be understood in the light of the "slave treaty" of Versailles. Everything else is comprehensible. Nonetheless, it is still astounding that Taylor makes no mention of antisemitism, concentration camps, Nazi terror or even the word "Jew." Nazi ideology was "the ordinary chatter of rightwing circles" not to be taken too seriously.⁵⁰ Taylor's last sentence in the Introduction leaves one gasping at the mental gymnastics and tunnel vision needed to say "in international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German."⁵¹ Again, omission of the bio-political aims of Nazi war policy renders Taylor's work flawed and misleading and trivialises the sufferings of non-military victims. They are simply not worthy of mention.

Alan Bullock's study, *Hitler: a study in tyranny* (1952) fares a little better than Taylor. Bullock tries to grapple with Hitler's *Weltanschauung* but does so as an aside to his discussion of Hitler's hatred of Marxism. Even while admitting antisemitism as "one of the most consistent themes of his career, the master idea which embraces the whole span of his thought" Bullock gives it less than two out of 801 pages.⁵²

⁴⁹ AJP Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, xii.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, xxi.

⁵¹ *ibid*, xxiv. AJP Taylor's relationship with Lord Beaverbrook may have influenced his thinking on British attitudes towards Hitler and Appeasement in the 1930s. Beaverbrook belonged to a circle sympathetic to reaching a rapprochement with Hitler. Cf. Adam Sisman, *AJP Taylor*, chapter 11 "In the Presence of the Lord"; Padfield, *Hess*, op cit, 366-367.

⁵² Alan Bullock, *Hitler: a study in tyranny*, 406-408.

Ironically, the American journalist, William Shirer, whose book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960) predates Liddell-Hart by more than a decade, and Taylor by one year, has a far greater understanding of the truth of Nazism. This undoubtedly derives from Shirer's years living in Germany both before and during the war, where he saw the New Order at work. Indeed Reuth — in his biography of propaganda minister, Dr Goebbels — notes that the foreign correspondents who lived in Germany before the war were all too familiar with the attitude of the regime to Jews, homosexuals and other undesirables. Liddell-Hart appears to have succumbed to Goebbels's propaganda machine.⁵³ Shirer's history makes no dichotomy between the military war and the bio-political war that was executed via the military. Nonetheless, these authors are representative of two distinct approaches to German history between 1933 and 1945, and which still exert a significant influence in the 1990s.

The expression "two distinct approaches" does not do adequate justice to later thought on Nazism. Since 1945, official histories have waxed eloquent over the causes, course and consequences of the war. Official war historian, Gavin Long, explained Australia's involvement in the war against Germany in terms of Anglo-centricity. He wrote, "the eyes of most Australians were fixed on a war in which they might have to shoulder their rifles and defend the status quo against Germany."⁵⁴ Throughout the rest of *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, there is no mention of Nazi bio-politics. It is as if it did not exist, and it is not unreasonable to say, that in the minds of the historians, it did not.

German historians have battled with the legacy of the Third Reich from a far more intimate angle. Koppel Pinson admitted Hitler was the radicalising force in Nazism. However, he entitled his chapter on the Third Reich, "Germany goes Berserk", as though the reasons for Nazism were so unusual and unreal as to say they could have come from outer space, or out of the inferno.

⁵³ Ralf Georg Reuth, *Goebbels*, 214.

⁵⁴ Gavin Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Volume 1, 35.

The thirteen years of Nazi rule opened up a chasm of primitive drives and animalistic forces that seem to separate the world before and after Hitler by a time span of thousands of years.⁵⁵

Once the demons had been cast back into hell, Germany returned to the real world.

Pinson and historians like Karl Schleunes, Hans Mommsen, Eberhard Jäckel, Martin Broszat and Jürgen Habermas have attempted — with various measures of success — to wrestle with the past constructively and honestly, refusing to omit, repress or trivialise the past.⁵⁶

Much of the “historians’ debate” in Germany in the 1980s arose over how the Nazi era should be presented. On the one hand, there were those who wanted a “revisionist” history that spoke the truth in clear and unequivocal terms. Confronting this approach were men like Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hilgruber who sought to relativise Jewish suffering within a context of German suffering during the war. Hilgruber argued that the actions of the Soviet troops in eastern Germany during the winter of 1944-1945 were as bad as anything that happened to the Jews! “The German people...should ‘identify with the valiant German soldiers who defended their countrymen and the Reich’s eastern territories.”⁵⁷ Nolte went so far to argue “National Socialism must be seen as a reaction against what he termed the ‘Bolshevik actions of annihilation’ in the 1930s...every Nazi atrocity...had been committed by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s.”⁵⁸

In more recent years has there been an attempt among German historians to grapple with the “problem” of Hitler and seek reasons for the public support of the regime. Joachim Fest — in his work on the German resistance movement — points out clearly that Hitler had won the tacit support of the German people through great shows of

⁵⁵ Koppel Pinson, *A History of Modern Germany*, 479.

⁵⁶ I am indebted to Richard Breitman and Judith Miller for their succinct summaries of the “historians debate” contained within *The Architect of Genocide*, 18-28, and *One by One: Facing the Holocaust*, 32-51.

⁵⁷ Miller, 34.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 35.

propaganda, glorious promises and resurrection of national pride. The “excesses” would soon pass. Fest notes that only a few Germans undertook a critical study of the regime and reached the conclusion that the “‘excesses’ of the Nazi regime were not excesses at all but its real nature.”⁵⁹ Fest and historians of like mind are making a start to probe deeper into the history of the German people and their passiveness throughout the Reich years. However, it will take time to reap the benefits and more time to change the years of myth and legend that surround the Third Reich.

Is it too cynical to say that amongst many historians there was a will not to know? Hitler and the Third Reich had to be made to fit recognisable historical parameters. It was too disturbing otherwise. And yet among the “greats” — such as Liddell-Hart and A J P Taylor — a dogged determination to make Hitler fit conventional historiography has created a distorted history. This is all the more startling when one considers there had been a number of well-written assessments of Nazi Germany published before and during the war and widely available, even in Australia.

Nora Wahn’s *The Approaching Storm* (1939) recalled her four years in Germany between 1934 and 1938. Wahn wrote that from 1935 onwards “life in Germany was punctuated by events, great and small, which keep the thought of war recurrent.”⁶⁰ Her descriptions of people she met in Germany and Austria, create the impression of a growing “inoculation” of many Germans and Austrians towards the Jews and others who had no place in the Third Reich.⁶¹

More academic in tone was Australian Stephen Roberts’s *The House That Hitler Built* (1937/1939). Roberts was in Germany on sabbatical leave from Sydney University. It was his intention to make an academic assessment of Nazism. In his section on Foreign Policy, he observed that Germany would continue to expand in an essentially negative and destructive manner.⁶² Roberts’s chapter on Nazi philosophy gave a chilling insight into bio-politics. It is amazing to think major historians could have simply ignored or downplayed works like these.

⁵⁹ Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler’s Death*, 174.

⁶⁰ Nora Wahn, *The Approaching Storm*, 283.

⁶¹ *ibid*, *passim*.

Other books that gave accurate contemporary interpretations of Nazism were available in Australia. Victor Gollancz's *The Yellow Spot* (1936) had as its subheading, *The extermination of the Jews in Germany*. Using extracts from *Der Stürmer* and other contemporary sources, the work gives a highly accurate portrait of life for German Jews, and the future was not painted in optimistic hues. The Bishop of Durham wrote in the introduction: "I cannot believe that the hysterical nationalism which has swept over Germany, violating fundamental principles of civilised human intercourse, and openly menacing the peace of the world, will continue much longer."⁶³ One wonders if the bishop had read the book before he wrote those words.

In June 1939 the English translation of Hermann Rauschning's book was published. *Germany's Revolution of Destruction* was a serious analysis of Nazism written by a former National Socialist living in exile in Paris. Rauschning elaborated the theories of *Lebensraum* and gives a sober, but chilling expose of the Nazi *drang nach Osten* which is considered no less a threat than the prospect of "making an end of the military power of France."⁶⁴ Nazi foreign policy is "a struggle for existence, brutal and lawless – the right of the stronger to eliminate or subjugate the weaker."⁶⁵ It is through the application of this "natural law" that the German *Volk* will reclaim its vitality and so the "sacrifice of another two million young men may yet become justifiable – so the Führer has declared, in discussing the eastern territorial policy with his colleagues."⁶⁶ Extending from the discussion over *Lebensraum* comes the allied topic of antisemitism.

Towards the Jews anything less than "absolute cruelty" is a "sign of unfitness to rule."⁶⁷ Rauschning wonders if the harsh treatment meted out to Germany Jews is a foretaste of some future racial settlement for other groups.⁶⁸ Yet it would be a misuse of hindsight to suggest that the "Final Solution" could be envisioned in this work.

⁶² Stephen Roberts, *The House That Hitler Built*, 295.

⁶³ Victor Gollancz, *The Yellow Spot*, Introduction.

⁶⁴ Hermann Rauschning, *Germany's Revolution of Destruction*, 196-197.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 197-198.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 199.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 219.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 220.

Nonetheless, we do see the “footprints” of something sinister and deadly, points expounded in other works such as Konrad Heiden’s *A History of National Socialism* (1934), and his 1936 biography of Hitler.⁶⁹ Lord Vansittart had no such queries when he wrote *Lessons of My Life* in 1942. His almost “prescient” work was published in New York in 1943 at a time when the major powers were extremely reluctant to admit knowledge of the “Final Solution.”⁷⁰ He stated bluntly: “The Germans...are totally exterminating their Jews...”⁷¹ And lest there be any attempt to retreat into some grotesque rationalisation, Vansittart commented: “Hitler is no accident, but a deliberate and inevitable outcome. We are at war not only against Nazism but with the German nation.”⁷²

Martin Gilbert stands virtually alone as an historian who has attempted to write a global history of the war that includes the Holocaust as an integral part of the conflict. In *The Second World War* (1989), he employs the method of weaving personal testimony from a wide range of sources into the historical narrative. No other significant historian has done this to such a degree. What he creates is a holistic impression of the war that gives the reader a global picture. A cursory glance at the index reveals the breadth of work Gilbert has done to ensure maximum coverage. All the omissions noted in Liddell-Hart, A J P Taylor and the German writers are present in Gilbert. One striking example is the 21 entries for Gypsies, absent in most of the works cited above.⁷³ From the global-incorporated model of Gilbert one can proceed to specific details.

There is no question that the world knew of the Holocaust. Why so many major historians have chosen to ignore, repress and trivialise it is a cause of bewilderment, and testimony to the school of thought that urges “them”, the victims, “to get over it.”

Holocaust Historiography

⁶⁹ Konrad Heiden, *A History of National Socialism, Hitler: A Biography*.

⁷⁰ Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret*, chapter 3.

⁷¹ Lord Robert Vansittart, *Lessons of My Life*, 157.

⁷² *ibid*, 243.

⁷³ Gilbert (1989), 806.

Shirer's *Rise and Fall* remained virtually alone among general histories of the Reich and the war until the major Holocaust histories began appearing in the 1960s. Most Holocaust works follow a familiar pattern. Beginning with the emergence of modern antisemitism, they proceed to detail the rise of the Nazis, the *Machtergreifung*, the implementation of the anti-Jewish measures, the outbreak of war and the "Final Solution." Within each history there is a further subdivision that is developed according to the author's particular interest. Again, this tends to follow a regular format. Jews and Jewish responses to the Holocaust come under a general category of "victim history." Hitler and the Nazis, along with their allies, are dealt with under the heading of "perpetrator" while those who were neither victim nor perpetrator are classified as "bystanders." These divisions provide a helpful structure and allow the reader a wide perspective.⁷⁴

The first seminal work — which remains the standard text for serious scholars of the Holocaust — is Raul Hilberg's three volumned history *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961). He recorded the history of the Holocaust in exhausting detail to impress upon the reader not only the evil that was perpetuated but the rationality and use of reason that was needed for its execution.

Fourteen years later Lucy Dawidowicz published her appropriately titled opus, *The War Against the Jews* (1975). Dawidowicz moves from the element of descriptive history to reflect further upon the bio-political nature of the Holocaust. She argues convincingly that

The conventional war of conquest was to be waged parallel to, and was also to camouflage the ideological war against the Jews. In the end, as the war hurtled to its disastrous finale, Hitler's relentless fanaticism in the racial/ideological war ultimately cost him victory in the conventional war.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Annette El-Hayek, "The Major Texts of the Holocaust" in *Holocaust Literature*, 3-20; Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945*.

⁷⁵ Dawidowicz, *op cit*, xix-xx.

Alongside Hilberg and Dawidowicz are Martin Gilbert's volumes, *The Holocaust* (1985) and *The Second World War* (1989). Gilbert places both the war and the Holocaust in a strict chronology, forcing the reader into a "psychologically harrowing experience." At the end of both books, one is left in no doubt as to the murderous intent of Adolf Hitler towards the Jews and other *Untermenschen*.

Holocaust historians have had a near universal focus on the Jewish experience since the first major works appeared in the 1950s through to the 1990s. What we see is an ever-increasing depth of study on all aspects of the organised state-sponsored murder of European Jewry. From Hilberg's monumental study of train timetables to Brian Harmon's excruciatingly detailed chemical analysis of prussic acid and its effects on the human respiratory system, there is barely an angle on the Holocaust that has not received some academic attention.⁷⁶ Even Australia has been included. Paul Bartrop's *Australia and the Holocaust* (1994) examines the impact of the Australian government's policy towards refugees and Jewish refugees in particular, and makes particular comment on the general indifference to the tragedy unfolding in Europe during the 1930s.⁷⁷

Among recent Holocaust works, none has aroused a greater storm than Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996). In a thesis startling for its simplicity, Goldhagen admits that his work runs "contrary to what much of the scholarly literature suggests."⁷⁸ Indeed it does, but not necessarily in the way this author wants. Goldhagen argues in a selective fashion. His thesis is built upon a belief that the Holocaust was caused by what he describes as "eliminationist antisemitism."⁷⁹ "Germans killed Jews because that is what German do" becomes the logical reduction of this line of thinking. And the Germans killed the Jews because Adolf Hitler told them to do it. Goldhagen avoids the difficult questions of explaining the state conducted murder of its own citizens in the euthanasia campaigns or of the

⁷⁶ Hilberg, "German Railroads/Jewish Souls" in *The Nazi Holocaust, 3 The "Final Solution": The Implementation of Mass Murder* Volume 2, 520-556; Brian Harmon, *Technical Aspects of the Holocaust: Cyanide, Zyklon B and Mass Murder*.

⁷⁷ Paul Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust*.

⁷⁸ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 171.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 80-127.

other victim groups by relegating them to asides or generalities. The murder of 2.8 million Soviet prisoners of war is explained away in terms of a change in German labour requirements!⁸⁰ He also avoids mentioning the killing of Jews by “ordinary” Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians or Croats. Jacob Suhl makes the point that “ordinary types” have always performed genocidal behaviour.⁸¹ Goldhagen’s book is bad history quite simply because it is wrong. Further, the use and misuse of creditable historians, such as Christopher Browning, adds nothing to his argument.

What Goldhagen has done, unwittingly, is show in stark relief an example of one of the great pitfalls in Holocaust historiography. By creating focusing on German “genocidal antisemitism”, Goldhagen writes out of history the persecution of every non-Jewish group. And this is arguably the greatest *lacuna* in this genre. Where are the Gypsies? Where are the Soviet prisoners of war? Where are the Polish intelligentsia? Where are the trade unionists? Where are the Catholic and Protestant clergy? Where are the German homosexual men? Where are the Jehovah’s Witnesses? Where, however few in number, are the Australians imprisoned in KL? And the list goes on. Why have they been omitted? And why when evidence is irrefutable, are they still omitted from many texts, museums and memorials?

David Young attempts to deal with this issue in his essay “The Trial of Remembrance: Monuments and Memories of the *Porrajmos*.”⁸² Although focussing on the fate of the Gypsies, his observations are valid for other groups. It is estimated between 200 000 to 500 000 Gypsies were murdered by the Nazis. In Holocaust histories there is little, but more often no mention of the *Porrajmos*, the “Great Devouring.” Why? Young suggests a number of reasons. First, Gypsies have been faced with a highly discriminatory host environment since their arrival in Europe in the mid-thirteenth century. Second, the focus on the “uniqueness” of the *Shoah* has encouraged in some circles a “competitive” rather than a “comparative” genocide study. Third, continuing prejudice towards Gypsies has developed a political aspect whereby there is a climate which says there are “fitting” victims who are to be

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 207.

⁸¹ Jacob Suhl, “Goldhagen and ‘Ordinary’ Germans”, in *Newsletter*, CCGS, 3.4, 10.

⁸² David Young, “The Trial of Remembrance: Monuments and Memories of the *Porrajmos*”, in

remembered, and “unfitting” ones who can be safely forgotten.⁸³ Those who have tried to remedy this imbalance have found institutions extremely reluctant to yield.⁸⁴

Young’s essay is an important reminder for historians. Valid and truthful Holocaust history must take into account all aspects of the event. To deliberately falsify, omit, ignore or repress one or more parts of results in the creation of a bastard account, encourages revisionists and denialists, and promotes “competitive” Holocaust historiography. This is not a positive development.

Standing on its own as the most authoritative and informative history of the non-Jewish victims of the Nazis is Michael Berenbaum’s *Mosaic of Victims*. Admitting the dearth of literature on non-Jewish victims, he has produced a valuable documented source that helps locate both Jewish and non-Jewish victims within a global context. Other Holocaust historians who have attempted to make an inclusive account include Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, and Henry Friedländer’s, *The Origins of the Final Solution*. These have not only mentioned groups other than the Jews but have attempted to locate the various persecutions within the context of the development of Nazi bio-politics. Works such as these stand in marked contrast to the simplistic contribution of Goldhagen

Australian War Historiography

Australia, geographically remote from the killing centres of Europe, complacently accepted the conventional military explanation of World War Two. It was far easier to ascribe war crimes and brutality to the Japanese than to the Germans. Australia’s traditional xenophobia towards Japan encouraged the popular attitude that the Japanese were capable of anything. Photographs of emaciated Australians in Changi, drawings of living skeletons from the Burma-Siam railway, a scene of Australian nurses released from a Japanese POW camp, and medical sketches of ulcerated legs

Genocide Perspectives I, op cit, 109-137.

⁸³ *ibid*, 111-120.

⁸⁴ Sybil Milton’s attempt to recognise Gypsy suffering in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum was successful only after a long struggle with the Museum administration. Colin Tatz to POS. The Sydney Jewish Museum simply refuses to discuss the question.

left untreated in prison hospitals were more potent to many Australians than the sights that emerged from the wreckage of the KZ.⁸⁵ Memories of Greece, Crete and North Africa paled before Singapore, Borneo and New Guinea.

Australia's war histories have been exclusively focussed on the conflict with Japan. This is not unreasonable since most Australians who fought in the Second World War did so in the Pacific theatre. However, there is a subliminal racial factor in the recounting of the war. Japan was always the "other" in terms of race. Misunderstood by Australia since she emerged on the international stage in the 1890s, Japan was seen as a dark and brooding force that would eventually pose a significant threat to Australia. Japan was difficult to reconcile in the Anglo-Australian mind. Industrially well-developed, militarily strong and imperially aggressive, Japan, a "non-white" country, acted just like a "white" power. War histories imply that the barbarity of the Japanese stemmed from their total "otherness" to Europeans. Germans were "different", but they were not so unlike Australians as to be "other." The Japanese, on the other hand, were not only "different"; they were so unlike "us" that they were something else altogether. Therefore, "they" were capable of anything, whereas the Germans might do monstrous things, but are still recognisable as similar to "us."⁸⁶ All of this is what Raphael Ezekiel describes as an integral dimension of racism.⁸⁷ I argue that this largely unreflected racism forms a very strong undercurrent in Australian war history.

Fifty years of emotional and faulty history has proved to be a difficult area to reform. In the years after 1945, Australia's fears of communism, whether Soviet or Chinese, kept the "horror focus" on Asia. Nineteenth century myths of the "Yellow Peril" were still potent in the 1950s and 1960s. Australia's official war history was written during these years, so it is not surprising that racial undertones emerge from time to time. Under Menzies's premiership, Britain and, by association, the rest of Europe, was to remain Australia's cultural and racial patrons. If it had not been for the fear of communism, it would have been as though Asia did not exist.

⁸⁵ Patsy Adam-Smith, op cit, 257-258; 406, 409, 411; 469; 494.

⁸⁶ See Colin Tatz, "Genocide and the Politics of Memory", in *Genocide Perspectives I*, 314-319.

⁸⁷ Raphael Ezekiel, *The Racist Mind*, xvii.

Australian War Memoirs

Of the thousands of Australians who served in the Second World War only a small handful have written anything. The whole genre of memoir is a difficult one. Memoir is essentially personal and subjective. Events and their interpretation rely on the personal disposition of the author and are not necessarily answerable to the academic demands of the historian. If the veteran does verify his or her account with a reliable historical record, a more accurate document is ensured.

Memoirs are valuable documents. They do give an insight into the personal responses and emotional states. This helps the historian gain a more intimate understanding of the impact of events than is possible from more formal records, such as Battalion diaries. Richard Roberts's diaries fall into this category. But, by themselves, memoirs are not sufficient. Roberts's *Frontline* gives us a valuable understanding of the feelings of the men fighting in Greece in April 1941. He does not give the overall picture: this is not the role of memoir. The historian's role is to bring the two elements together. This argument applies even more forcefully to prisoner of war memoir where faulty history arises because the collaboration between veteran and historian has not been undertaken with rigour.

A related area in the "faulty" history has been the enduring myth of the treatment of prisoners of war from the Western allied armies, a generally overlooked and under-researched area. Here I am forced to rely on the work of non-Australian historians to create a paradigm to locate prisoners of war who fell outside the regular *Stalag* experience. Raul Hilberg asserts that, generally speaking, the treatment of Western Jewish prisoners was far better than the treatment accorded to prisoners of war from Eastern Europe and Russia.⁸⁸ Bartov's authoritative *Hitler's Army* (1992) speaks of prisoners of war almost exclusively in respect to Russian prisoners.⁸⁹ Most historians of the war follow this pattern.

⁸⁸ Hilberg, op cit, 400-401.

⁸⁹ Bartov, op cit, 44,83,89,92.

Research in the 1990s has revealed evidence to demonstrate the non-uniformity of German policy towards Western POWs. Mitchell Bard's work, *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps*, claims that at least 5000 Americans were interned in the KL of the Third Reich. His book examines the cases of American soldiers taken prisoner. "Many of them were interned in POW camps but many others, especially those who were Jewish, were transported to slave-labour camps..."⁹⁰ We need to be reminded, however, that much of Bard's research here deals with prisoners who were captured in the last months of the war at the time of the Ardennes breakthrough. The more radical elements of the German military machine, especially the Waffen SS, were becoming more desperate and brutal as defeat loomed ever larger, facts confirmed in Claire Swedberg's *Work Commando 311/I*.

Swedberg's anecdotal narrative describes the fate of a group of American paratroopers captured by the Germans throughout July-August 1944 during Operation Market Garden, the premature and unsuccessful attempt to liberate Holland in order to move rapidly to the Rhine. Captured, the men were taken to *Stalag XII-A*, near Linberg. From here, they were selected to work as a part of an *Arbeitskommando* on a farm. Instead, the men found themselves working as a part of a railway maintenance crew. Surviving on near-starvation rations, subject to the abuse of the local population, the men were also harassed by guards who were searching for Jews. Swedberg relates that the men had "heard what the Germans did with Jewish American soldiers", but does not elaborate.⁹¹ The only Jew in the *Arbeitskommando*, Phillip Kleppe, managed to avoid detection — no mean feat considering he was the only American in the *kommando* who could speak German.⁹²

Discussion of prisoners from particular national groups, such as Australians or New Zealanders, has largely been left to the historians of these states. In these works, the accepted thesis is that Western prisoners were treated in a far different way to the Russians. Why this was so does not appear to have been queried — beyond a German

⁹⁰ *SMH* 25.01.1997 At the time of writing (June 1997) this book was not yet available in Australia.

⁹¹ Claire Swedberg, *Work Commando 311/I*, 80-81.

⁹² *ibid*, 80, 94.

fear of reprisals that might be taken against German civilians in Western countries.⁹³ I argue that the main reason for this avenue not being explored in depth lies with Western historians' fundamental misunderstanding of Nazism. Further, since so little academic work has been done on the history of Australian prisoners of war in the Third Reich, much of the detail is anecdotal and rumour.

Australia's handling of known Nazi war criminals does not help research. Detailed exposure of Australians held in places other than *Stalags* would severely compromise a government and High Court that has a record of allowing war criminals a safe haven in this country. I can only wonder how Max Sawyer would have felt at the magnanimity Attorney-General Garfield Barwick showed to Ervin Viks in 1961. The Soviet Union wanted Viks for war crimes committed in Estonia. Barwick expressed his "abhorrence" at war crimes, but felt that Viks deserved the opportunity to turn his back on "past bitternesses" and begin a new life for himself. Tatz sums up the ugly case: "One can only wonder about Barwick's concerns for Vik's bitternesses, the ones he should be free to turn his back on: was it that Jews existed, or that he had killed them, or that he hadn't killed enough of them."⁹⁴ It was another twenty-six years before the government recognised Australian servicemen who had been incarcerated in the KL. As the last decade of the century continues, much information will continue to be lost as former prisoners die and memories grow dim.

What the legal *magesterium* effectively admitted was the danger of memory. Men like Max posed problems to the officially received history of the war. No greater contrast between the "let us forget" and the "lest we forget" mentality is Anzac Day. Australia's history celebrates and commemorates the sacrifices of the Anzacs at Gallipoli in 1915 and it has long been enshrined in the national psyche. Virtually every square inch of Anzac Cove has been written about and the events of 25 April are recorded in excruciating detail. Australians will never be allowed to forget. And to make sure, articles about the 1914-1918 War appear with a predictable regularity in the week before "the one day of the year."⁹⁵

⁹³ Konrad Kwiet, *1996 Abraham Wajnryb Memorial Lecture*, 14.11.1996.

⁹⁴ Tatz, *op cit*, 327-328.

⁹⁵ eg *SMH* "Good Weekend" 19.04.1997.

Australian governments persisted from 1945 up to 1987 with the myth that no Australian serviceman was ever in a KL. The evidence suggests that when faced with irrefutable proof, the government finally agreed to provide compensation, if only to silence critics such as Newcastle journalist Paul Rea. He had campaigned for years to have the claims of several Australian ex-POWs officially recognised.⁹⁶ In the same way, Colin Burgess took up the cause of Australian servicemen held in Buchenwald.⁹⁷

Survivor Testimony

The genre of survivor testimony is invaluable for understanding the effect of the Holocaust on the individual. In many different narrative styles, ranging from well polished English prose to conversations peppered with Yiddish and other non-English phrases, the survivor story communicates something the academic historian cannot. Primarily, the survivor declares “I was there”, and writes from a variety of motives.

Reclaiming the past and “redefeating” Hitler appears as a common thread. Many discovered they were the last remnant of centuries of Jewish presence in various parts of Europe. By committing their story to paper they preserved the memory of family, *shtetl* life, communal organisation and culture, thus making a defiant gesture to the Nazis. They are fraught with great personal pain as the author recalls the murder of family members and the humiliations that accompanied life in the ghettos and KL, the forests and hiding places. Accordingly, testimonies are highly subjective narratives. Yehuda Bauer once said he would never challenge a survivor on the historical veracity of their testimony.⁹⁸ Their testimonies are true in as much as their story is the result of the effect of the Nazi persecution upon them. Problems arise when testimony is used as a basis for history, let alone as a basis for war crimes trials.

Testimony is a part of historical dialogue. It is one aspect of the overall history of the Holocaust. In fact, it may well be the most important element in understanding the

⁹⁶ See note 4, page 247.

⁹⁷ Colin Burgess, *Destination Buchenwald*.

⁹⁸ Yehuda Bauer to POS, Yad Vashem, January 1991.

victim. However, testimony on its own is not enough. Martin Gilbert demonstrates the power and effectiveness of personal narratives in *The Holocaust*. He has interwoven the testimonies into the general history of the Holocaust. By so doing he has allowed the survivor to speak, thus making the historical narrative of the Holocaust all the sharper and more shocking.

Mark Baker in *The Fiftieth Gate* (1997), the story of his parent's lives during the Holocaust, reveals the difficulty of combining testimony and historiography. Meticulous research into his parent's background, their lives under the Nazi occupation and finally their experiences in the KL has given Baker an extremely detailed documented history. In his attempt to place his parent's testimonies alongside the data, he comments on the discrepancies that emerge. In response to one of his father's statements that do not match the facts, Baker simply adds "my facts from the past are different."⁹⁹ *The Fiftieth Gate* demonstrates in a highly personalised account the conflict between memory and fact. Baker's parents are not lying, nor are they necessarily mistaken. Their memories are real and valid for them. It is the task of the historian to accommodate them within the framework of the known and proved facts.

Australian War "Faction"

Into this category are the novels that use an historical event as their pivot. A recent Australian example is *Schindler's Ark* (1982). Thomas Keneally uses the war-profiteer Oskar Schindler and the story of his factory in Poland as the basis for his "faction." Keneally's story is a dramatic and vivid depiction of events in wartime Poland that takes liberties with the historical truth in order to propel the story line. Details of minor importance to the storyteller are omitted or changed to fit the needs of the narrative. Keneally did not pretend that *Schindler's Ark* was an accurate history of a Holocaust episode. But the success of the novel cemented Keneally's "faction" as truth in large parts of the popular imagination. When the film version *Schindler's List* was released in 1995, Australians by the thousands filled cinemas. And while

⁹⁹ Mark Baker, *The Fiftieth Gate*, 36.

this may create a greater awareness of the Holocaust, there remains the problem that this genre, whether literary or filmic, has no accountability to the truth.

Australian Fraud - 1

The Hawke government established the Concentration Camp Committee to investigate the claims of former POWs who said they had been incarcerated in the KL. An *ex gratia* payment of \$10 000 was to be made to those who could satisfy the Committee. Max Sawyer died three years before the payments were made. Don Watt received \$10 000 on the basis of his Auschwitz story. The issue that arises is an ethical and moral question concerning the appropriation of history and the perpetuation of “historical” fraud.¹⁰⁰

Don Watt is not an evil man. He was not attempting to defraud or make money out of a “good story.” *Stoker* is a story of false memory; a fiction created in the mind of a man seriously disturbed by his experiences as a prisoner of war. It is a new development in Holocaust literature: and a disturbing one. Watt’s story needs the attention of the historian to delve into the narrative and place it alongside the historical record. In the process Watt’s story is discredited, but something else is revealed. The Holocaust continues to exercise a strange fascination for many people so much so that they identify with it to the extent of claiming they too are survivors.

Australian Fraud –2

Stoker constitutes one type of Holocaust fraud. In Australia there has been a more pernicious fraud that has had a more damaging effect and constitutes a theft of Holocaust history for dubious motives.

¹⁰⁰ Documents obtained under Freedom of Information reveal that the interviewer who spoke with Don Watt was greatly impressed by the unhindered way Watt recalled his war time experiences. So unfettered was Watt’s monologue that the interviewer was convinced that there was only a minimum chance of fabrication. Further, the interviewer admitted in his written report on the session with Watt that he could not comment on the veracity of some details because he was not familiar with them. The “details” concerned the descriptions of Belsen. This raises serious questions about the professionalism and academic rigour of the investigation. FOI Documents obtained through the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies, Macquarie University, March 1997.

Helen Demidenko became a *cause celebre* with her 1995 prize-winning book, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. A supposedly fictional story based on family memoirs; Darville's book soared to national and international prominence. Darville/Demidenko's story revolves around a family of Ukrainians whose war time was spent, in part, involved in the killing of Jews at Treblinka. Her novel contains a barely concealed rationalisation of Jew-hatred in the Ukraine and a distinct aversion to the idea that perpetrators should be brought to justice, even if it is half a century after the events and in another land.

The scandal that erupted when the Ukrainian Demidenko was in fact the very English Helen Darville should have at least raised questions about Darville/Demidenko's integrity and honesty, especially since large parts of her book appear to have been "lifted" from other fictional sources. Helen Darville, suggests Andrew Riemer, felt her Anglo-Saxon Australian background was too boring. She wanted "colour" and gradually developed the fantasy of Helen Demidenko.¹⁰¹ Darville's wanting "to be different" is similar to the need that other deluded pretenders have felt. Darville seems set to remain in her delusional role, if for no other reason than she has discovered a very lucrative remuneration for her brand of story telling.¹⁰² And this despite her recent sacking from the Brisbane *Courier Mail* after admitting to plagiarising material from the *Internet* and publishing it under her own name(s).¹⁰³

More than a few Anglo-Australians have developed a penchant for appropriation and theft of other peoples' histories. Throughout most of March 1997 the country witnessed a series of "unmaskings." Well known indigenous artist Eddie Burrup, and novelists Mudrooroo and Wanda Koolmatric were revealed as Anglo-Australians who had posed for years under literary pseudonyms.¹⁰⁴ *Eddie Burrup* was Elizabeth Durack, descendant of the wealthy pastoral family from the Kimberly region of Western Australia. *Mudrooroo* was Colin Johnson, and *Wanda Koolmatric* was in

¹⁰¹ Andrew Riemer, *The Demidenko Debate*, 176, 179, 183, 187.

¹⁰² See Darren O'Brien and Richard Tidyman, "The High Price of Fiction", in *Readings 1996-98*, 425-431.

¹⁰³ Cf *Courier Mail*, 01.02.1997; 04.02.1997; 05.02.1997; 10.02.1997 See too "Who put the hell in Helen" by Alan Close, *Australian* 29-30.03.1997.

¹⁰⁴ *SMH* 08.03.1997; 25.03.1997.

fact a male, Leon Carmen. Durack publicly admitted through a third party that she had created *Eddie Burrup* “from a composite of many old men she met in the Kimberly where she grew up.”¹⁰⁵ This was not an admission of wrongdoing or fraud, but rather a voluntary act that “shows there was no evil design at work- only the creative excitement of making *Eddie Burrup* seem more and more real, until an uneasy conscience called a halt.”¹⁰⁶ At no point has Durack even conceded that her appropriation of Aboriginal art design and motif could be interpreted in a negative fashion. The rush of friends who have howled her innocence suggests that no apology will be forthcoming.

The appropriation of history by various groups and cultures has been a constant part of human history. Adoption and adaptation of aspects of another culture can be ennobling and positive, creating a healthy cross-fertilisation of human ingenuity. However, appropriation is tantamount to theft since it does not seek to emulate or imitate but rather reinterpret the source to suit other agendas. The recent controversies mentioned above in relation to Aboriginal Australian culture highlight this.

Other examples that have attracted international attention include the Polish government’s reluctance to tell the full story of Auschwitz, implying that the main victims of Nazi extermination at the *Vernichtungslager* were Poles, not Jews. A Carmelite Convent set up in a former barracks, which used to house Zyklon B, aroused passions across the world with demands both for the removal of the convent and calls for it to stay. At the heart of the conflict was the interpretation and deliberate misinterpretation applied to the former camp.

Scientific Omission

Another area of concern for Holocaust scholars is the question of what I have labelled “scientific omission”: the deliberate avoidance of one or more groups of victims because of stated or unstated prejudice. Polish psychiatrist Zdzislaw Ryn has

¹⁰⁵ SMH 08.03.1997.

¹⁰⁶ SMH 12.03.1997.

undertaken a massive study of KL survivors over a period of thirty years. His work on what he calls “Survivor’s Syndrome” is impressive for its meticulous detail and depth of analysis.

It is not immediately apparent that Ryn avoids reference to Jewish survivors. The general reader could be forgiven for thinking that it was only Poles who suffered in the KL. The word “Jew” appears once in his article “Survivor’s Syndrome: Transgenerational Evolution”, which gives a summary of his findings. The reference is contained in a general comment on the losses experienced by the Polish people during the war.¹⁰⁷ The huge ghetto of Lodz which had a Jewish population of about 144 000 (1941) is referred to as the “Lodz concentration camp”, and the implication made is that its inmates were Poles.¹⁰⁸ Ryn’s highly valuable work is rendered “tainted” because of the failure to name the primary victims of the Nazi occupation of Poland — the Jews.

Dubious but Valuable

Leon Berk survived the Holocaust by joining a band of partisans in the forests of eastern Poland. He recounted his life in the forests in *Destined to Live* (1992). It is an exciting tale of great heroism and courage against enormous odds. His style is laconic and anecdotal. Recorded partisan history is sparse, in no small part because of the conditions under which they lived. Consequently, Berk’s account is next to impossible to verify. Harold Werner’s *Fighting Back* (1992) is the same genre as Berk. We have little way of verifying any but a few of the events Werner describes. What we have are records written by men who are survivors of the Holocaust. In this respect, their memoirs are similar to those of other survivors. The greatest problem is the scarcity of material.

Partisan bands usually operated in small local areas, sometimes as parts of a larger umbrella organisation. The danger of German infiltration and denunciation meant operations were carried out independently and in ignorance of other groups. When

¹⁰⁷ Zdzislaw Ryn, “Survivor’s Syndrome: Transgenerational Evolution” in *Genocide Perspectives I*, 289.

the Red Army swept through eastern Poland in the summer of 1944 the partisan groups largely disappeared. Subsequently, from the historians' point of view, the reconstruction of this period of Holocaust history is fraught with so many difficulties as render the likelihood of a definitive history impossible. There are too many gaps. And since there are so few records from the partisans, Berk's and Werner's autobiographies become a major source for historians.

Max Sawyer: Integrated History

Where does Max Sawyer fit into this discussion of war and Holocaust genres? What I see with each genre is a problem of trying to encompass the global nature of the war and the Holocaust with the personal experiences of one man. War historians, such as Liddell-Hart, have tried to explain the war in terms of military conflict to the neglect of the bio-political war aims of the Third Reich. Holocaust historians like as Hilberg and Dawidowicz discuss the destruction of Europe's Jews almost without mention of the war. Long and other Australian military historians have not grasped the ideological nature of the war and have naturally enough focussed on Japan. Ex-servicemen's memoirs give us an insight into the reality of war from their position in the field of battle as a member of a belligerent power, but do not usually link it to the broader aims of the war. And it would be unfair to demand it of them. Holocaust survivor testimony forms an isolated genre because of the extreme nature of the literature. It is highly subjective and does not follow a general principle of fact or concept and, like the war memoirs, there is no demand that it should. The same is true for what I call the "Dubious but Valuable" class of writing. Historical "faction" and fraud present their own problems, reflecting personal prejudice and bias in an explicit and usually unaccountable fashion — leaving it to others to mend the damage. Genres that omit, repress, deny or trivialise aspects of the Holocaust for whatever reasons compound problems rather than solve them.

I see my research into Max Sawyer's war and Holocaust experience as a genre I call "Integrated Experience." I believe that his war history puts him in a unique position. Here was an Anglo-Australian, non-Jew in the middle of the Holocaust. He was

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 292.

totally removed from the bio-political ideologies that consumed Europe's Jews. He fell into no other category that was slated for extermination: he was not a German homosexual, Soviet prisoner of war, Pole, partisan, or any other undesirable group on the Nazi agenda. If it is possible to speak of a "pure" victim, then Sawyer is such. He was caught in the vortex of the Holocaust by being in the wrong place at the wrong time and witnessed the "Final Solution" from the perspective of the victim. This man's experience reveals a new aspect of the Holocaust that draws together the general history of the war and the particular history of the extermination processes employed by the Nazis.

I believe that Max's case provides a way forward in Holocaust research. His story has demanded research into the minutiae of the experience of the Australian prisoner of war in Austria and the factors that made up his life prior to his arrest in early 1943. Following Max's trail across eastern Europe has meant inquiring into the details of relatively obscure facets of the war. General histories have helped provide skeletal frameworks for Majdanek, but it has been the intricate piecing together of the puzzle that has allowed me to reach my conclusions. Lack of documentary sources and the *lacunae* in most war and Holocaust resources forced me into a paper chase across the globe, linking one thread to another. And yet I am convinced that Max's story has found a place in the literature of the Holocaust.

19 June 1984

On 19 June 1984, Ernest Maxwell Sawyer died. Many family and friends attended his funeral before his remains were taken to Wooronora Cemetery for burial. Presiding at the funeral was a Uniting Church minister, accompanied by priests and ministers from a number of Christian denominations, testimony to Max's continued quest to find answers for the questions he had asked since 1945. Whether or not he felt he had found them is something we will never know. In the twelve months before he died, Sawyer had begun to talk more about his experiences during his years of captivity.

Unfortunately a proposed taping of reminiscences either was never completed or was lost.¹⁰⁹

Reconstructing Max's history between 1944 and 1945 has been made all the more difficult through lack of sources. What I can say with confidence is that Max Sawyer, an Anglo-Australian, was witness to events of the Holocaust in central and eastern Europe between the years 1941 and 1945. What it was that he saw left an indelible mark on him. In his life during those years, Max Sawyer extended, by virtue of his physical presence in the midst of the systematic attempt to exterminate Europe's Jews, the impact of the Holocaust into the lives of ordinary Australians. Just as the families of thousands of Jews and many non-Jews were directly destroyed by the events in Europe during those years, the Sawyer family was also touched and damaged by those same events. Distance has proved to be no barrier for the Holocaust.

Sadness permeates the story of Max Sawyer. This man died wondering if his country believed him, struggling for years with the shadow of mental and physical disintegration and the rare distinction of having been a non-Jewish observer of the Jewish tragedy. For the vast majority of Australians, the events were too traumatic, too far away and too large to grasp. For Max, these events were integral. The constant nightmares and psychosomatic illnesses that plagued him were his relics of the *Stammlageren* and the *Konzentrationslager*. It was his near unbearable burden to carry them for the rest of his life. This history is a belated attempt to acknowledge the suffering of one man, and offer an explanation of the now incontrovertible fact that the Holocaust indeed touched "ordinary" Australia. It remains for future researchers to attempt to gauge how many other "ordinary" Australians were also touched by the Holocaust.

¹⁰⁹ MB

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Vera Sawyer Joyce (sister) Wherrol Flat, 27.04.1996, 8.01.1997
Beryl Sawyer (widow) Mona Vale, 14.07.1995, 19.01.1996
Elizabeth Tarrant Sawyer (widow) Normanhurst, 19.11.1996, 24.11.1996
Enid Sawyer Steele (sister) Taree, 10.04.1996, 8.01.1997

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Harry Bell (NX) 2/2nd, Sydney, 3.07.1995
Bill Jenkins, 2/3rd, Sydney, 14.06.1995
Burt McGrath (NX 8409) 2/2nd, Sydney, 3.07.1995
Leo Murnane (NX 2195) 2/2nd, Sydney, 3.07.1995
Wilson Myatt, Fellow POW, (British Army), Wollongong, 29.07.1995
Jack Sawby (NX 9260) 2/2nd, Sydney, 14.07.1995
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