

Excerpts from: THE DUNERA SCANDAL, by Cyril Pearl,
Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1986.

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On 10 July 1940, a low gray ship lay at the Pierhead in Liverpool, loading an extraordinary cargo. The ship was HMT Dunera, and her 'cargo' consisted of 2542 German and Austrian internees, most political or racial refugees and bitter enemies of Nazism. The refugees, all men, came from various English camps, where they have been interned as "friendly enemies aliens". They have been told that they were to be shipped to the United States or Canada, where they would have more freedom of movement, and their wives and children would soon join them. But in fact they were destined for austere internment camps in Australia and were soon to find that the ship that was to carry them to "freedom" was in effect a floating concentration camp.

Stripped of personal possessions, crammed below decks in appalling conditions, the internees were subject to brutal and humiliating treatment throughout the voyage. On arrival in Australia, the refugees some of whom had lived in England since early childhood, some of whom had suffered privation and cruelty at the hand of the Nazis, were treated as criminals and subversives, and held in barbed wire protected camps for years, despite British government attempts, rather late in the day, to have many of them released.

Acclaimed Australian writer Cyril Pearl fought government censorship libel threats and a wall of official silence for more than six years to write the story behind the Dunera Scandal. Even today, both British and Australian governments are unwilling to disclose all the facts and a 100-year ban has been placed on the relevant files.

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As soon as the Hay internees were settled in Tatura, Australia, they set up a number of camp schools or "universities". One in camp 4 was proudly named the "Collegium Taturense". Its first president was Dr Bruno Breyer, a slightly bald, sandy-haired, 41-year-old doctor of medicine and industrial chemist whose life epitomized the fate of the 20th-century Jewish intellectual caught up in the turbulence of pre-war Europe.

He was born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and studied chemistry at the University of Bonn, where he took his PhD and, became an assistant lecturer. In order to take a job in Germany he acquired German nationality and worked for two years for the German industrial giant A. G. Farbenindustrie. When Hitler came to power he fled first to Zagreb, where he continued his studies, and then to Italy where he took an MD, and became a research scientist at University of Padua.

Again racial laws caught up with him and he had to move to Switzerland. He continued his chemical researches at the University of Freiburg until April 1938, when, unfortunately as it proved, the Refugee Organization of British Scientists helped him to go to England. Here he joined the Colloid Science Department of the University of Cambridge. The Royal Society of Medicine and Trinity College gave him membership. He did research on local anesthetics and advised an instrument company on building England's first polarograph. (A polarograph is a machine for making swift qualitative and quantitative analysis of many organic and inorganic compounds.)

"At the outbreak of war," he told Emery Barcs when they met at Tatura, "I was engaged in vital research work with Professor E. K. Rideal, who asked me and my wife to stay with him so that we could proceed with our investigations in a quiet and secure atmosphere." But on that fateful day in May he was rounded up and moved from camp to camp until he found himself on Dunera. "Before sailing," he told Barcs, "I had received a firm assurance that wherever they took me I would be allowed to continue my work. We arrived in Australia in September and I have been here ever since."

Dr Breyer was later released from Tatura to resume his work on polarography, a subject on which he was a world authority. Both the University of Cambridge and a private firm in Sydney wanted him to help in the construction of an advanced polarograph. He chose Australia and from 1945 until 1950 was Associate Professor of Agricultural Chemistry at the University of Sydney. He returned to Italy in 1951 and was Research Professor in Pharmacology at the University of Milan until his death in 1976.

Quote by Winston Churchill, regarding the Dunera Scandal:

"A Deplorable And Regrettable Mistake"

DUNERA BOYS

Walter Travers arrived in Australia on the Dunera 1940.

"Many of us internees were still in their teens and early twenties, all virulently anti-Nazi, yet kept behind barbed wire at Hay, later Tatura, by the authorities. The great majority of us would willingly have volunteered to enlist in the fighting forces to help defeat the Axis forces. Yet we were kept interned, in spite of a memorandum received by Robert Menzies from Sir Herbert Emerson, High Commissioner for Refugees, which stated, '...truth is that the great majority of... refugees are decent well-living persons who have gone through one suffering or another, and have every good ground for hating the Nazi system...'

At the same time the Australian authorities received an official briefing from the British government, 'The internees were not interned in this country...because their reliability was open to question, but in pursuance of general internment of Germans and Austrians adopted as a precautionary measure, and their internment involved no reflection on their loyalty and disposition to this country '

So we were isolated, kept out of sight by an unwilling-to- comprehend government. Those of us, who were young, impressionable, inexperienced but willing to serve the Allied war effort, and equally keen to escape the dreary isolation of internment, were ready to accept almost any alternative to escape our predicament. I considered migration to the USA where I had uncles wilting to help, going to Palestine, or wherever. I was reluctant, however to return to Britain...From the first I loved the wide, open spaces of Australia, felt freer, more able to breathe -even whilst interned in Hay! I thought that I would like to stay in this country, a whole new world for me -a new beginning after a double rejection by the old world.

The opportunity, and the first possibility of freedom came with the Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor, in December 1941. Australia found herself short of manpower, and we were given the choice to volunteer to serve in the Australian army."

Horst Jacobs arrived in Australia on the Dunera 1940.

President Hay-Tatura Association

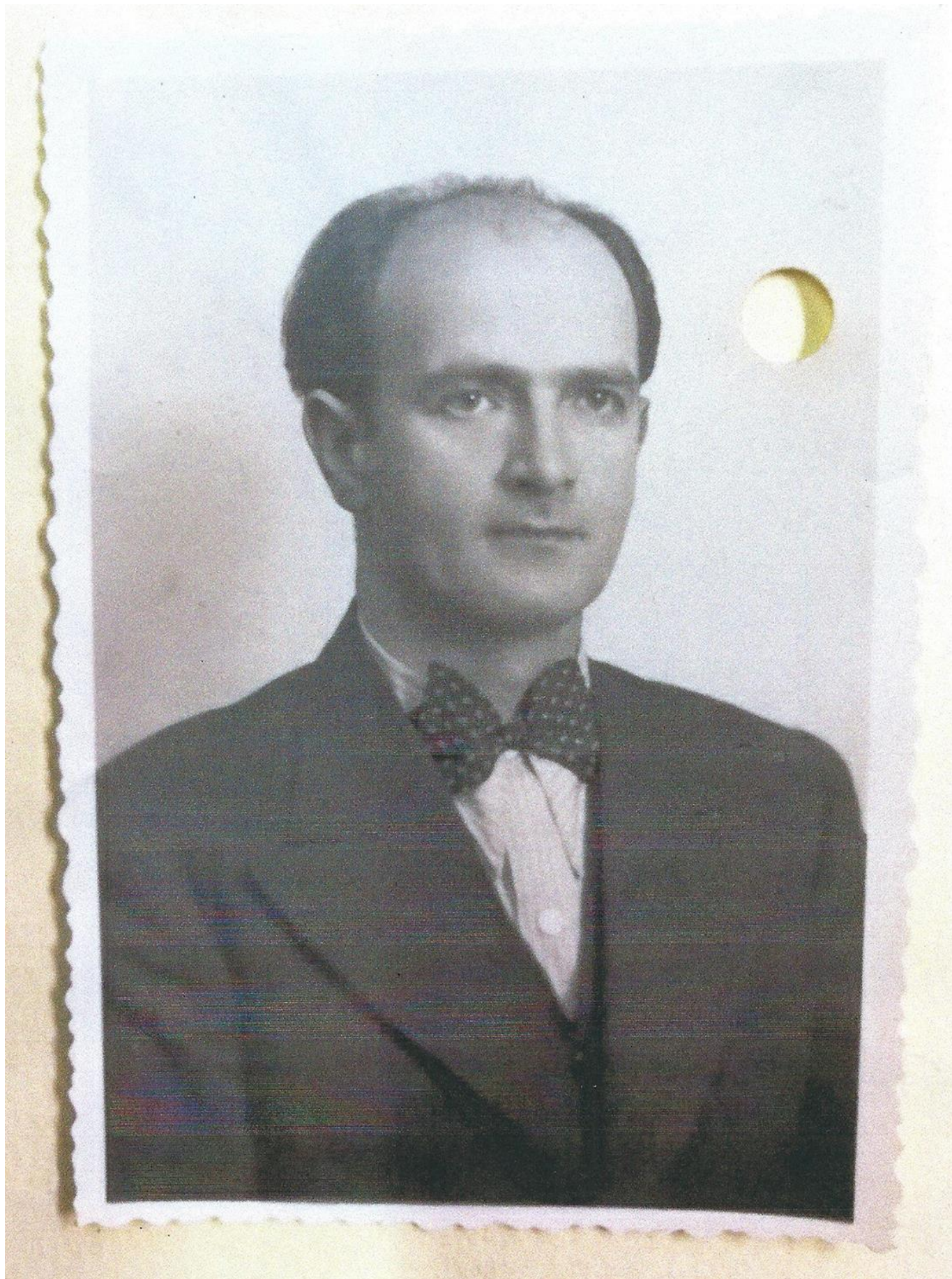
"We who arrived in Sydney on HMT Dunera on September 6th 1940 have indeed been lucky. Had we traveled in peacetime on a scheduled P&O liner, our shipboard friends, who became our extended family, would have been but acquaintances; we would have been more shallow and narrow-minded. The experience was a great leveler -we were all equal in misfortune.

We could hardly have had a less promising start in a new land: uninvited, unwanted many of us unskilled and penniless, in tattered clothes, without kith or kin, strangers to its language and customs.

Yet the thousand who stayed can look back with pride on the contributions they have made to this country, unique for so small a group.

Australia has been good to us like good wine, given the right soil, climate and time we have matured and improved with age.

We have been able to repay our debt with interest -and gratitude."



BZB in Australia 1945