

## Launch of *Dunera Lives*

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Thank you, Rebecca. I hope that what I say in launching this book shows why I feel so honoured to have been asked to do it.

Many of you will have already seen this beautiful book on the table. You will therefore want to congratulate, and more importantly, express your gratitude to Monash University Publishing for its generous and courageous commitment to the project. Thanks are owed, therefore, to Nathan Hollier, his editorial staff, and to Sarah Canon for bringing us here to celebrate the book and the lives it remembers.

The book has finely written text that introduces the sections of the book and offers insightful commentary on the images, bringing them together in a continuous narrative, but it would be nothing without the hundreds of images, which, as Jay Winter pointed out, are not illustrations, but historical documents. For the safekeeping of many of them we must thank the Jewish Museum; for their selection and inclusion in the book, Seamus Spark, co-author with Ken Inglis and Jay Winter. Carol Bunyan, also a co-author, born and raised near Hay, created, amongst other things 'a unique data base on all the internees sent to Australia on the *Dunera* and she compiled the list of the internees who changed their names'.

Most of you will know the basic elements of the story of the *Dunera* boys, a name coined affectionately by Benny Lewin and which those to whom it refers came to accept with affection. It shows in the photos recording many commemorations and get togethers. It's a name well known in Australia beyond the Jewish communities into which many of the internees who stayed in Australia became integrated after their release and in which many of their families live. Carol established that 700 former *Dunera* internees were living in Australia in 1950. Jay estimates that over half of them self-identified as Jewish.

I'll briefly sketch things you may not have known. Though most of the internees in the camps at Tatura, Hay and Orange came on the *Dunera* (some 2000 of them) some men, women and children came from Singapore on the *Queen Mary* in 1940 and lived in separate sections of the camps – sections for families and single women, and for men. You probably knew that the men on the *Dunera* – most of whom were not boys – were treated badly, but you probably don't know the degree and extent of the brutality, sometimes savagery, intended not only to humiliate but actually to degrade them. Nowadays, such treatment would fall foul of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment.

Their suffering was compounded by the bitter knowledge that they had more reason to hate Hitler than their jingoistic and ignorant tormentors, who knew almost nothing of what he was doing and had already done. That bitter knowledge stayed with many of them throughout their internment which, by comparison with their experience on board ship and what they would have suffered in Singapore after the Japanese invasion and in Britain

during the Blitz, and, of course, in the European countries from which they fled, was relatively benign.

That said, it must be acknowledged to be extraordinary that a government of a nation fighting for its survival should, while prosecuting that war, establish a committee of inquiry into the fate of people who had been designated as enemy aliens and issue an apology consequent on its findings. The passengers on the *Queen Mary* did not suffer in that way.

About 80 per cent of the internees were Jewish, at least according to Nazi racial laws. There were 'labourers, scholar, artists, writers, conmen, criminals, believers and unbelievers'. A mixed lot. They certainly weren't all professors or artists, as one internee reminds us. The category under which they all fell was enemy alien, but it did not thereby unite them: some were fascists.

I knew Benny Lewin, so I knew some of the *Dunera* stories even before he made his film. One of those stories entered seriously into my thoughts about Australia after I heard Terry Lane, an ABC commentator, tell it as he heard it, allegedly from a *Dunera* boy. According to Lane, the *Dunera* boy to whom he refers was at the back of a column as it marched to an internment camp. The Australian soldier guarding him stopped, handed him his rifle and said; 'Here mate. Hold this while I to go to have a piss.' The *Dunera* boy said that he knew then that he was in heaven.

It's a wonderful story and I often told it to English friends when I lived in London if they asked me what I valued about Australia. The story as Lane recounted it – perhaps that's why he recounted it – shows how the universal value of egalitarianism can be inflected in recognisably Australian ways – in an Australian accent one might say. Its spirit gives the distinctive character to the decency that Australians showed in, amongst other things, their treatment of immigrants after World War II. I know because I saw it in the men and women I grew up with, as an immigrant child, in Central Victoria. Especially wonderful is the guileless simplicity with which the soldier acknowledged his common humanity with his prisoner. How different things would be, I have often thought, if that soldier's spirit graced the politics of national identity in place of the jingoism that now does.

Imagine my disappointment then, when, reading *Dunera Lives*, I realised there are different versions of the story (at least three) but none as attractively quotable as the one Lane had told. I am tempted to believe that, since there are no solid grounds for treating any one of them as authoritative over the others, I should feel free to select the one that makes for the best story – but I'm afraid – puritan that I am – that sounds too much like saying that reality should never get in the way of a good story.

One thing is certain: the book doesn't give the impression that many of the *Dunera* boys believed they were in heaven. In their paintings, etchings and cartoons the prisoners revealed their bewilderment, indignation, sorrow, despair, loneliness, homesickness, often in fiercely penetrating satire and wry or black humour. As I said earlier, the darkness seems often to be the shadow cast by the Holocaust, even in Australia. The title 'Civilization', given to a sketch of a strand of barbed wire, seems excessive until one remembers that the victims of the Holocaust were not only abandoned by the nations of the world – as, for example, the Tutsis were – but that the nations which especially German, Austrian and Czech Jews admired as nations of high culture participated with alacrity in the German effort to wipe them from the face of the earth.

Sometimes though, enabled by their appreciation of the distinctively Australian decency of some of their guards and a growing attachment to the beauty of the Australian landscape, the internees expressed reconciliation to their uncertain fate. After their release, many of those who stayed in Australia (others went to Britain, to the United States, Israel and a small number even to Germany) came to think of Australian citizenship as one of the great political goods of the earth, for which they became clear-sightedly and justifiably grateful. Judging by their presence here, I suspect their children and other younger relatives feel the same.

You may wonder why I am launching this book; I've also wondered about it. I possess nothing that looks remotely like a qualification for doing it. I'm not an historian, nor a cultural theorist, nor an art critic. I'm not even Jewish, though I'm glad that my Jewish step-daughters take me as an honorary one, and that my wife, Yael, can't even see the need for the qualification. Still, though that's all very nice, it doesn't add up to a good reason why I'm standing here rather than in the audience.

The good reason is that Jay honoured me with the invitation to do so. I hope he won't mind if I quote what he wrote in an email: 'This book has been a long time coming, and has a meaning for me that, among my friends, perhaps only you and Yael know'. I'll speak this afternoon about the book by speaking about what it meant to Jay.

I met Jay five years ago at dinner at Mark Baker's house. Less than halfway through the dinner, I knew I had met an extraordinary man – humane in his learning and wise in his humanity. Jay Winter is a good man, I thought. Anyone who has read my work, especially *Romulus, My Father*, will know what that means to me. It matters to Jay, too. In the eulogy he gave at Ken's funeral he asked: 'How do we create a memorial to this good man? How do we create a memorial to this man who knew how to live a good life? To these questions I have no answer, other than my own grief and gratitude. That word keeps recurring to me. Gratitude.' Later in the same eulogy, quoting from a letter he had written to Ken, Jay said, 'If I want to ponder what would be a humane, decent, and correct way of handling a problem or a person, I ask myself what would Ken do?'

Jay, Yael and I quickly became friends. The character of our friendship is partly defined by the fact it was nourished by the time we spent together at our house in Central Victoria. The property on which the house stand is called *Shalvah*, a Hebrew word meaning tranquillity, calm. It is also the name of a lunatic asylum in Israel. Whether the asylum took that name as an expression of hope, or cruel irony, I do not know. At any rate, all the visitors who have come to *Shalvah* have said it is well named, but, when I reflected on why the time Jay spent there meant so much to him, I realised it had a lot to do with the fact that it had replenished a spirit inspired, but also made weary by his sorrowful work with Ken.

A botched knee operation had put Ken into a wheel chair. He was therefore unable to reach many of his books and documents that were high on shelves this very tall man had built. As much as he helped Ken intellectually, Jay, a world-renowned historian, a professor at Yale, was Ken's *schlepper*, doing a *mitzvah*, indeed many *mitzvoth*, humbly and with pleasure, but also, obedient to Maimonides, never permitting even a forward or backward glance at them.

As Ken's afflictions became more numerous and severe, Jay's sorrow deepened, and, mercifully so did his love for Ken. I'll quote again from Jay's eulogy: 'And I ask myself too what my life would have been like without our enduring encounter. A shadow of what is,

Ken. That is God's truth. Books fade away, but nothing will diminish my sense of gratitude and of pride in having had the privilege of being alongside you over these years.'

Jay came to *Shalvah* the weekend after Ken's funeral. He had previously met Alex Miller and his wife Stephanie there. I asked him if he would like to see them at Friday night dinner, or would it be too much for him. 'No, it would not be too much', he replied. 'It would be an affirmation of life.' Alex and Steph had been impressed by aspects of Jewish ritual when they visited a synagogue in Eastern Europe a year before. That Friday evening, they heard Jay read prayers from his *siddur*, speak of the significance of the occasion and sing from the Psalms in his fine voice. Exhausted by grief, he slept most of the weekend.

In my blurb for *Dunera Lives*, posted on the website, I wrote: 'It's the generous spirit of humanity that makes this book so wonderful. It infuses its content, inspired the idea of it and informs the scholarship that impressively and humbly served that idea, making it a reality.'

Like 'caring' and 'empathy', 'humanity' is a word that can generate edification while providing nothing to understanding. So, I will try to explain what I mean by it.

Ken and Jay, historians of war, knew that human beings can suffer greatly, without bitterness, resentment, or anger, if they see meaning in it, especially, of course, if the meaning is given by a cause. But suffering that is compounded by humiliation is different. Humiliation is an assault on dignity in two senses of the word dignity. The first is the most common; it refers to the indignities that the *Dunera* boys suffered, especially while on board ship and to a lesser extent in the camps. Visiting those indignities on them was also an assault on the Dignity (capital D) of their humanity, dignity of a kind that has no degree and does not have a plural form. In 1948, three years after the release of the last internees, upper case Dignity found its way into the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit wrote a book called *The Decent Society*. A decent society, he says, is one in which none of its members is humiliated. That is at least as important as justice – or, perhaps better – without it, there can be no justice. Only when we respect a person's need for ordinary dignity, can we respect the Dignity of Humanity in them.

I do not know how it came about, that Ken, perhaps together with Jay, decided that Volume I of *Dunera Lives* would be made up almost entirely by the works of the internees, allowing them to show through their works, which was seldom their words, what it was like for them. To show us how they retained their dignity through their work, is itself an expression of respect for the Dignity of their humanity, which of course, they never lost, but which was too often unacknowledged. Their works included a constitution written on a roll of toilet paper on the *Dunera*, which, when accepted by the internees, created a polity in the camps that was in some respects finer than existed in the countries from which they had been deported and the one to which they were exiled. Many, as noted before, were artists, scholars and intellectuals. They put on an astounding number of concerts, plays and lectures, creating in the camps a life of art, ideas and scholarship whose spirit would shame most universities. It was food for their souls.

The many images reproduced beautifully in this book are, as one would expect, of mixed quality. Some are fine, very fine in fact. Some are not. Some are by artists who were already

famous and who became more so after their release. Most are not. It would be invidious to mention names, I think. But something struck me about the images that I think is worth saying: what we can learn from them is not in proportion to their artistic merit.

In fact, we can sometimes learn more from the ones that have less artistic merit, precisely because they reveal, more interestingly, that their failures are less a function of an absence of talent, as of the bemused, amused, frustrated, bewildered responses of their creators to a land so foreign to their aesthetic sensibility, often harsh, with strange, but eventually captivating, trees whose beauty, one gets the impression they thought, was given only to generous eyes; a land with weird creatures – kangaroos, kookaburras and, of course, galahs who provoked even old Aussies to coin that withering put down – ‘You stupid galah!’ A wonderful drawing depicts crazed men swatting and spraying flies. And not even the best artist could reproduce faithfully the light and the colours it made.

I will, however, speak briefly about one sketch and name its author – Fritz Schonbach. It haunts me. It’s of the camp at night. Around its perimeter men are seated or standing in couples. Some have their arms around each other. Others are leaning into one another. Two huts form one part of the perimeter. On their steps two couples are sitting. Between the huts and the semi-circular perimeter formed by a dozen or so couples, in a space that takes on the character of an arena, a man sprints with manic energy. His eyes are directed past two men on a bench, but they look nowhere. The drawing speaks to our creatureliness; it reminds us that as human beings we are not just person or agents, but beings whose personhood and agency can never be separated from the fact that we are creatures of flesh and blood, and therefore creatures who need the warmth and comfort of other bodies, for otherwise we tend to wither.

It is now fashionable to scoff at need and to valorise autonomy. The person who has rid himself or herself of need who longs and grieves for no one, is not someone who is positioned to see things most clearly.

One of the wisest men I have known told me that we all need someone who will cry for us when we are dead. I remembered that when I saw Schonbach’s drawing, because it depicts our creaturely vulnerability with delicacy and humane pity. And I remembered it again last night at the launch at the Jewish Museum, when people shed tears for their relatives who suffered in the camps, many of whom are now dead. The drawing is called, ‘He’s missing his girl’.

The more I reflected on the *Dunera Lives*, on Jay and Ken’s work as historians, especially Ken’s magisterial *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, and on Jay as I knew him working on this book, the more I began to think that ‘humanity’ is not the best word to express the character of their service to the internees. I think that word is piety. You don’t have to be religious to use it seriously. You need only think that every life is a miracle (as parents think their newborn child is a miracle), inalienably precious, and that that only a deadened sensibility fails to find the disappearance of a human personality inconsolably mysterious.

These two distinguished historians of war have revealed in other writings that the work of memory that produces history such as theirs can be a work of piety that honours the dead, works of reverence, but nonetheless truthful in their spirit – or better, works of true piety and reverence only because they are uncompromisingly truthful. The spirit of their work, perhaps even more than the letter of it, tells us that jingoistic lies dishonour dead soldiers

because no one wants to die in cloud cuckoo land and no one with self-respect wants to mourn there.

Truth, therefore is one of the most precious gifts we can offer dead soldiers and the dead generally. By trusting that truth is never alien to anything precious and by gently turning aside protests that half-truths and lies will allow the dead to rest in peace, we honour the dignity of the dead. I'm sure shared understanding nourished the friendship between Jay and Ken and enabled them to work so fruitfully together on *Dunera Lives*. It infuses its spirit, a spirit of truth in love, to borrow a phrase from Simone Weil.

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