

## **Fragments of my father**

Simon Liebesny

My dad died suddenly aged 54. Heart attack. In our bathroom, just before going to bed. He fell and cracked his head on the enamel bath, so there was a mess which made it difficult to establish what had happened, until the post-mortem.

I had just turned 14 and my older brother and I had not yet worked ourselves out, far less our parents. Like many of his generation, my dad never talked about his past. Not to my knowledge or memory. It was only years later, 36 years to be precise, when I found a small notebook of his in a dusty drawer, that I discovered a complex story of cruelty and loss.

In July 1939, three weeks after his eighteenth birthday, my father got out of Vienna. By any yardstick his departure was late. The annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany (known as the 'Anschluss') had taken place in March 1938. The lives of all Jews, indeed all who did not fit the 'Aryan' profile, became even more precarious. My father's parents did not or could not leave – on top of physical violence the Nazis were adept at emotional and psychological torture. At some point they were deported, first to Theresienstadt and ultimately on to extermination camps in Poland and what is now Belarus (my grandfather to Belzec, my grandmother to Maly Trostinets).

My father arrived in England alone. How much English he knew then, I have no idea. I do know he worked as a farm labourer in Scotland, before Churchill issued the order to 'Collar the lot!' The press had whipped up a frenzy about 'enemy aliens' and the threat they posed to Britain. All foreign nationals were now regarded as a threat, as potential 'fifth columnists', and a vigorous exercise began to round them up and place them in internment camps – regardless of the fact that many of them were refugees fleeing persecution by the Nazi regime or the Italian fascists. So my father was interned – remaining in Vienna would have led to a far worse fate.

What came after that is a story British wartime history tries very hard to forget. So many 'enemy aliens' were interned, on the mainland and the Isle of Man, that the decision was made by the government to deport them. They were to be sent to internment camps in Canada and Australia. The chief reason for this order was heightened fear of a German invasion following the fall of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk. But there were other more prosaic reasons: there were now over 80,000 people interned<sup>1</sup>, Britain was facing food shortages and shipping off this mix, of those who had sought sanctuary from Hitler and Mussolini and those who were indeed Nazi sympathisers, was considered the most practical solution.

The *Arandora Star* left Liverpool for Canada on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1940. On board were 1,600 people, three times her peacetime capacity, including some 1200 internees, 200 soldiers plus the crew. The ship had no armed escort and no markings to indicate that she was carrying civilians. To prevent any escape, access to the lifeboats was obstructed by heavy barbed wire, and layers of barbed wire were placed between the decks. There were no extra lifeboats, nor boat drills in case of emergency. Early the next morning off the Irish

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<sup>1</sup> Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

coast, it suffered a hit from a torpedo fired by a U-boat and sank within an hour. Most of the Italian internees were in the lowest part of the ship, and many were trapped by the layers of barbed wire. Over 800 lives were lost.<sup>2</sup> The very next week, many of those who had survived this trauma were sent on another transport ship from Liverpool, this time bound for Australia. This still sounds incredible to me as I write. The *Dunera* carried over 2,500 'enemy aliens', including some 500 prisoners of war and Nazi sympathisers, the other 2000 were mainly German and Italian civilians, resident in Britain or refugees from persecution. With the addition of British soldiers and crew, the ship held over 3,000 people, double its capacity. The internees were not told the ship's destination. Overcrowded conditions were made far worse by the brutal treatment meted out by the British soldiers. The internees had their possessions ransacked, then tossed overboard; they were frequently beaten, and the soldiers closed the hatches to deny them air. This was in high summer.

The *Dunera* was attacked by two U-boat torpedoes. By most accounts one passed underneath the ship, the other apparently struck the ship's hull, but failed to explode. After the war it was discovered that the *Dunera* was saved from being destroyed by a Nazi submarine. The U-boat commander sent divers to investigate the debris which had been tossed overboard. From the number of German-language items the commander concluded that the ship was carrying prisoners of war and decided not to attack.<sup>3</sup>

I had heard of the *Dunera* but had no idea how personal this story would become, until I started to read through my father's notebook and came across a poem written in German. At the bottom corner of the page in tiny

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<sup>2</sup> Sourced from <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/collar-lot-britains-policy-internment-second-world-war/>

<sup>3</sup> Peter & Leni Gillman, *Collar the Lot!* Quartet Books, 1980

writing, I make out the words, '*Dunera Juli 40*'. I knew that he had been interned in Australia, but now I knew he had been on board. Reading this back fills me with the same shock as when I discovered those sparse words in his notebook.

I find myself trying to piece together fragments of my father's life from even smaller fragments: index cards held by relief agencies, the bare information on archival databases, those notebook jottings. My father would surely have disapproved; for him, as for so many, the horrors lay in the past and were to be consigned there – the future was everything. Perhaps they haunted his dreams; if they did, he never let on.

So why do I keep searching? Well, for one thing, because I can. The age of digital information has granted access to spaces and places which were all but inaccessible when my father was alive. Ironically, perhaps, he became an information scientist in a pre-digital age. As a linguist as well, he was involved in setting up technical libraries in many countries. In so doing, my father became a cog in numerous multicultural networks, well before the word was in common parlance.

The Austria that existed a century ago, before being perverted by Nazism, was itself a child of multiculturalism. The Hapsburg Empire contained a multiplicity of ethnic groups, all of them with distinct languages, beliefs and cultural backgrounds. Vienna and many other cities were thriving, vital centres of culture, science and enquiry.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the drive for my continuing quest is to have a narrative which I can try and make some sense of, a picture of what my father went through that

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<sup>4</sup> Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (translated by Anthea Bell), Pushkin Press, 2009

was not available to me when I was young. Had he told me something of what he and his parents had been through, I honestly don't know if I would have understood. For him, perhaps, no narrative was needed; that he had survived was enough.

Britain is often portrayed as a welcoming home for refugees. For those fleeing the Nazi invasion of Europe, 'the process... was designed to keep out large numbers of European Jews – perhaps 10 times as many as it let in.'<sup>5</sup> Around 70,000 had been admitted by the outbreak of the war in September 1939, but British Jewish associations had some half a million more case files of those who had not.

Sounds familiar? It will be for refugees from Somalia, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Ukraine and many other countries, whose painful narratives have been hijacked by a hostile environment in government policy and the press.

The demonisation of refugees has been a pastime of the press for well over a century, resulting in the 1905 Aliens Act, designed to 'keep them out' – especially the Jews. It has been one small step to the demonisation of others. The systems and cultures of malevolence designed to weaponise one group of people against others rise, hydra-headed, from a slew of misinformation and disinformation amplified on social media. They taint us all. It is invidious to mention some, and by so doing omit others, but they need to be named and remembered to reveal the depth of venom implicit in them.

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<sup>5</sup> Louise London, *ibid.*

A few scattered examples from recent and current events in what is still called the 'United Kingdom': Windrush, Hillsborough, Section 28, Bloody Sunday, Grenfell Tower. All of them subjected to false narratives by politicians and in the media in which the good names, memories, human and civil rights of individuals have been tarnished, tainted and trampled on. As for refugees from civil wars and military dictatorships, from rape and from torture, from the insult of poverty and broken lives, well, they are not entitled to take 'British jobs' and 'our benefits'. Parts of the press would have us believe that these jobs and benefits are the sole reasons for which they risk their lives to reach these shores. Would my father have been allowed into a country defined by its proud 'hostile environment'? Well, I am here now.

We are all here owing to the marvellous fact of our survival. War, enslavement, rape, pogrom, pandemic, populism, crude and ultimately violent political opportunism have all failed to turn us into history's footnotes. The ever-growing climate emergency may still achieve this.

Whether or not a Jewish person is religious, Ashkenazi or Sephardi or Mizrahi, keeps or breaks the dietary restrictions, and so on, would have been irrelevant to the Nazis. Their very existence would have had them rounded up and killed. There was only one destination for them, as there was for trade unionists, communists, non-heterosexual, and dis/abled people. Tragically the Armenians, the Kurds, the Roma, Sinti, Tutsi, Rohingya and countless other groups know this only too well.

The British geneticist and author Adam Rutherford writes that antisemitism 'is one of the only forms of racial bigotry that punches upwards to perceived

power'.<sup>6</sup> This may not be unique to antisemitism but it is clear as day – and as mud – that if it is in any way unique among racisms, it is because some people make it an obsession. That obsession, allied with political opportunism, threatens to turn a blind and divisive eye to other forms of racism, potentially leading to wider conflicts. And such divisions are a gift to populists, cynics, opportunists and haters. The perilous road to the multicultural is littered with shards of glass.

Perhaps it is only in suffering that Jewish people can say 'we', without becoming mired in the claims and counterclaims of those who declare being Jewish fit for only one favoured group. Or, to use a word loaded with meaning and nuance, 'chosen'. For many, the recounting of Jewish history in a kosher nutshell is one part survival, one part bleak, dead-eyed humour. *'They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat.'*

Survival. A supremely difficult act, which to those whose lives have not been touched by it may appear no more challenging than breathing. But then came Covid-19. Breathing itself became and remains a very real challenge for millions. The coronavirus is democratic in that it respects no one, so we continue to suffer – not only from the pandemic and the still incalculable consequences, but also from pernicious gaslighting of the victims, especially the elderly and those with underlying health challenges.

Many people of all faiths argue that the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis is unique among horrors. Understandably so. But one cannot, and importantly must not, compare horrors. Where would you start anyway? For all those who have suffered, their suffering is unique. What brings common cause is the determination of those who have endured or have

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Rutherford, *How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2021

witnessed such suffering to stamp it out, to try to ensure that it is not inflicted on others. The combination of understanding the nature of the threat to our humanity, allied with the determination to act upon that knowledge, often at tremendous risk, has the power to unite rather than separate us.

How multiculturalism – very much a Western concept – exists and thrives in a post-colonial society is a matter for reflection as well as debate. Our great gift, also seen by many as a threat, is by no means secure.

Critics come from many corners, including the Jewish establishment. “The real danger in a multicultural society is that every ethnic group and religious group becomes a pressure group, putting our people’s interest instead of the national interest.”<sup>7</sup> Re-imagining the ‘national interest’ beyond something to do with cricket – untainted by racism of course – or ‘*taking back control*’ of an indeterminate, indeed illusory ‘way of life’, is imperative for all of us seeking to survive in an increasingly authoritarian world.

Whether multiculturalism is a social experiment in cultural diversity, or simply the way we live now, it has to be created and recreated in our own lives. It does not even have to be an idea; it can be exemplified in our actions and in the courage to be open to others and to ourselves. ‘Multiculturalism as a policy or an ideology is something I have never understood. We don’t walk around our neighbourhood thinking how’s this experiment going? This is not how people live. It’s just a fact, a fact of life.’<sup>8</sup> There is no single, simple story to what happens next.

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<sup>7</sup> Outgoing Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interview August 2013  
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lord-sacks-multiculturalism-has-had-its-day-its-time-to-move-on-sp2mhcfjkts>

<sup>8</sup> Zadie Smith, Today Interview May 2010

Is Jewish multiculturalism an oxymoron? Resisting hostility and scepticism, our multiculturalism expresses itself in so many ways – from the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra to the recipes of Claudia Roden and Yotam Ottolenghi, from the East End of London to the furthest parts of the globe, encompassing all places and diversities in between. Our multiculturalism is not only integral to our shared humanity, it is inspired also by our unique and our joint suffering, and the overarching will to overcome and survive.

My father would have been against the search for a narrative thread. He did not choose to flee Austria. He had no choice. Nor did he choose to be shipped off to Australia, to a dry and dusty town called Hay, on the edge of the middle of nowhere. Luck, rather than design, allowed him to survive. Which is apt, as his parents named him Felix.

### **Simon Liebesny**

‘The human and civil rights we have complacently taken for granted are being eviscerated before our eyes. We need to learn from the sufferings of our parents and the generations before them to understand that there are no gains without struggle. And we must tell their stories, because when they and we are gone, people will have little immunity against the twin viruses of conspiracy and hate.’

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A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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