

Herr Brack, temporary German master – and Nazi spy?

On the 3 September 1940, a year to the day after Britain had declared war on Germany, Captain A.R. Heighway, the officer-in-charge of the Australian Prisoner of War Information Bureau, signed a detention order for one Georg Walter Heinz Brack, *'being an enemy alien on board His Majesty's Transport "Dunera," who has been sent from the United Kingdom to Australia for internment.'*

Born in Berlin in 1915, Brack had come to Sherborne School as a young graduate in 1936 to help out temporarily in the Modern Languages Department where he taught intermittently until 1939. Brack had been recommended to Headmaster A.R. Wallace by one of the School Governors, Professor John Murray, then Principal of University College Exeter. Brack was apparently a delightful young man and a good teacher but, as relations deteriorated between Britain and Germany, the Headmaster became uncomfortable about Brack's reasons for being here and even had him tailed by Scotland Yard whilst away from Sherborne on holiday.

Evidently, the Headmaster was not the only person in Sherborne to have his doubts about Brack. Victor Swatridge, the Aliens Officer at Police Divisional Headquarters in Sherborne, recalled in later years, how *'I had to register a man of magnificent physique, a young blonde Prussian named Heinz Brack. Brack was a most charming man and regarded as a delightful person by his associates at the school. He quite often paid visits, under any pretext, to the divisional office, which aroused my suspicions, and when I refused the information he required, became arrogant and demanding... I intensified my enquiries and found that Brack was away from his lodgings every weekend, travelling extensively in the south-western counties. I was confident that he was busily engaged in subversion and had a great influence and control of German nationals in this area, possibly part of an espionage network.'*

On the evening of 27 September 1939, Brack turned up at School House while the Headmaster and his family were having dinner. On being asked why he hadn't returned to Germany to fight for his country, Brack replied that he found it impossible to fight against his former friends and so had remained in Britain. The Headmaster gave him a bed for the night and then handed him over to the Military Police the next morning. It later transpired that Brack had been a Nazi agent responsible for collecting information about Germans living in Dorset.

After his arrest, Brack was sent to an internment camp and on 1 July 1940 was put, with over 1,200 other German and Italian internees, on the SS *Arandora Star* at Liverpool, bound for internment camps in Canada. However, the next day the ship was sighted by U-47 commanded by Günther Prien (one of Germany's top U-boat aces and responsible in October 1939 for the audacious sinking of HMS *Royal Oak* at the Scapa Flow Naval Base) and torpedoed with the loss of over 800 lives. Brack survived, but lost all his possessions. However, this was not the end of his ordeal for just nine days later he was put with 2,542 internees on HMT *Dunera* at Liverpool, this time destined for internment camps in Australia. The voyage of HMT *Dunera* to Australia was later described by Winston Churchill as "a deplorable and regrettable mistake." The ship was hugely overcrowded and the conditions were appalling with men kept below deck for all but 30 minutes a day and fresh water supplied only two or three times a week. When HMT *Dunera* arrived 57 days later in Melbourne, the Australian medical army officer was shocked by the conditions he found on the ship and his subsequent report led to the court martial of the officer-in-charge.

Having arrived in Australia, Brack was placed in Tatura Internment Camp (no.1) in Victoria. Camp no.1 was built in 1940 and was Australia's first purpose-built internment camp. It housed single males, mostly German and Italian internees, and over the next five years the internees developed tennis courts, workshops, a newspaper, and flower and vegetable gardens. Photographs of the Tatura Internment Camp held in the Australian War Memorial Archive show a happy and healthy-looking Brack with fellow internees.

Following the surrender of Germany in May 1945, Brack was transferred back to Britain on the QSMV *Dominion Monarch*, arriving in Liverpool on 2 August 1945 in considerably more style than he had left five years earlier. But Brack's story does not end there. He returned that year to his home in Magdeburg and was immediately arrested by the Russians on undisclosed charges and kept in confinement for ten years. On his release he moved to Bonn where he took up teaching again, but died there in 1966, aged just fifty-one.

Rachel Hassall

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Heinz Brack (front row, left-hand side) with a group of German internees at Tatura Internment Camp, 13 February 1943. (AWM 030187/04)