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Dalea Bean

World War II on Two Sides of the Atlantic: the Aub family 1939-47

The 'many' who make up the Jamaican people include a small but significant number of Germans. Their presence was noted from the 18th century, when groups of people from North Germany came to work the land during the 1830s, and a major wave arrived in the 20th century, escaping from Nazi Germany. They were mainly Jews fleeing Hitler's anti-Semitic measures, but also included others who left as a matter of conscience. While some came directly, others had gone to other parts of the British Empire and were transported to Jamaica after the outbreak of WWII, to be placed in the Gibraltar Camp at Mona or at Up Park Camp in Cross Roads. One of these was my father, Rudolph Aub.

As a Jew living in the Bavarian city of Augsburg, he had been arrested shortly after the *Kristallnacht* (the pogrom of 9 November 1938) and taken to the concentration camp at Dachau. He might well have perished there or at another of the death camps, like so many others, including several of his relatives, had it not been for an invitation sent by my mother's brother, asking for help in the business he was then running in Sierra Leone. At that stage, the undertaking to emigrate immediately was still considered grounds for release from concentration camp, and in February 1939 my father set sail from Hamburg for Freetown. For the next six months he lived and worked in Makeni, the headquarters of my uncle's business, as an unskilled labourer. After the beginning of the war on 3 September, he and my uncle were arrested as 'enemy aliens'. He lodged a protest (he was hardly likely

to do anything that would further the Nazi cause), and was released after a few months. He lived as a free man until the following June, and was even able to work in his own profession as a doctor for a while, but in the summer of 1940, after the fall of France and fearing that the Germans might occupy the French territories surrounding Sierra Leone, the British re-arrested him. Whereas my uncle had been transported to the UK and from there to Canada, my father was put on a ship to Jamaica, where he landed on 3 December 1940 and was taken to Up Park Camp.

His fellow inmates included citizens of the Axis countries, as well as Jamaican detainees – among them Alexander Bustamante, who continued to greet my father with a cheery 'Hi, doc' whenever he saw him in later years. Although Jewish internees officially had the same status as everyone else, some of those in authority seem to have recognised that anyone persecuted under fascism was unlikely to harbour inimical intentions, and my father and others like him were treated generously. Their skills were used in a meaningful way: a German Jewish dentist was regularly taken into town, under police guard, to work for the government dental service, while one of the jobs allocated to my father was to help to organise guard duty at the camp.

As Jamaica was very short of doctors at this time, he was released by the Governor at the end of March 1943 and became part of the team working at the Kingston Public Hospital. Jamaica was to be his home for most of the rest of his life. Once he was free to live in the community, he was readily accepted, despite the fact that Jamaica was technically at war with Germany.[3]

Meanwhile, his family – my mother, my two brothers and I – was in war-time Germany. Since my mother was not Jewish, there was not the same urgency for her to leave, and the declaration of war put paid to plans for us all to emigrate to the USA. The next eight years were to prove very difficult ones for her. Marrying a Jew was considered an unpatriotic act, and she had to tread very carefully. It was no easy task to bring up three young children in these circumstances. My elder brother, having been called to join the Hitler Youth, as all boys of his age were obliged to do, was sent home because there was no place for Jews in the body set up to train model Germans. More upsetting was being told, on what was to have been his eagerly awaited first day at secondary school, that high school was a privilege only for full 'Aryans'. As the eldest, he was well aware of the situation and how much nastier it might turn. If the war had gone on beyond the summer of 1945, he would have reached the age when half-Jewish youths were sent to the camps.

My mother had to strike a delicate balance between not telling untruths to my younger brother and me and making sure that we did not say things which might endanger us and the whole family. (I still shudder at the thought of an incident which took place in the summer of 1944: our class teacher asked us if we knew what momentous event had recently taken

[3] For further details of my father's experiences, see Rudolf Aub,'Handlanger in Sierra Leone – Amtsarzt in Jamaika', in Wolfgang Benz, (ed.) *Das Exil der kleinen* Leute, Munich: Beck, 1991. Translated as 'From my Life', 1988, typescript. A copy of this has been deposited in the Jamaican National Library.

place and I was about to put up my hand and volunteer 'The [Normandy] invasion', a piece of news gleaned from adults who were no doubt indulging in clandestine listening to Allied radio. Fortunately, the teacher answered her own question: the correct reply was 'retaliation', the first V-1 (V for Vergeltungswaffe, German for 'retaliation weapon') flying bombs having been fired. I do not like to think what might have happened if I had got in my answer first.) I was not aware of how much of the school curriculum was Nazi propaganda, with its stories of nice Mr Hitler who loved little children and was doing great things for the country. The only unpleasant personal experience I remember was being jeered by a gang of boys shouting 'I smell a horrible Jew smell', but since we girls were used to being waylaid on the way to and from school, this could simply be added to the list of horrible boys' taunts.

We had occasional letters from my father, thanks to the system set up for internees by the World Postal Union and the Red Cross. They were censored at both ends – I well remember the forbidding-looking black strips that sometimes blocked out parts of the text – but correspondence was relatively unproblematic as long as he was in camp. Once he was released, he was no longer entitled to this service, and moreover could no longer write freely about what he was doing: had the German authorities known that he was now the employee of an enemy country, the consequences for us might have been unpleasant. The first problem was solved by a kind camp official, who allowed him to continue to post his letters with the internee mail; the second by being very economical with the truth. We did not learn until well after the end of the war that my father had been released two years before the end of hostilities.

Early in the war, we had moved from the city of Augsburg to a small village in the German Alps, and from there to Lindau, a medium-sized town by Lake Constance, where we were not affected by the Allied bombings which destroyed cities such as Augsburg. For most of the war, though we did not live royally (Jewish assets were confiscated by the Nazis), a rigorous system of rationing ensured that we had enough to eat. It was in the two years after the war that we learned what perpetual hunger was like – the kind of hunger that made us dream about food and literally lick our plates clean, even if all that had been on them was porridge. In a year when the total annual sugar ration was 1 lb per person, the arrival of the first parcels from my father, containing tins of condensed milk and chocolate, seemed like a miracle.

The immediate postwar period was also particularly hard for my mother. Although we were glad that the Nazi threat was over, that my father was safe and that he was taking steps for us to join him in Jamaica, getting the necessary permits in occupied Germany - divided into four separate zones, three of which had offices involved in the granting of these permits – demanded months of struggle and travel on the rudimentary transport system. It was only in October 1947 that we left Germany. We arrived in Jamaica on 12 November 1947 – a very wonderful day. But that is another story.

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