

FAREWELL SPEECH

**THE HONOURABLE JUSTICE STEVEN STRAUSS**

*AT THE SAVAGE CLUB - MELBOURNE*

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I thought I might give you a short sketch of my early life. Many people have asked me about it, but I have not told much of it, not even to my family.

I was born on 3rd September 1921 in Lauterbach in the State of Hesse in Germany. That is a small town which then had about 5000 inhabitants. They were mainly Lutherans, there were a small number of Catholics and there were 36 Jewish families of which we were one. My given name upon birth was SIEGFRIED, but I changed that in 1945 when I was in the Australian Army and was about to become naturalised, because I did not like the connotation of the name. You all know that Siegfried was a Germanic hero.

My father was born near Lauterbach in 1875, and my mother also not far away in 1887. I had one sister who was born in 1924. I believe that in his earlier days my father had been a trader in livestock. He served four years in the German Army and became a sergeant major. As I remember him, he was not a trader then, but he was the arbitrator of the livestock association for the district. He seemed to be very busy and I remember that we had a young man who worked in the office in our house.

My father died of heart disease shortly before his 55th birthday in 1930. I was not quite nine at that time. Politically, my father had been active as a Social Democrat. I started State School in Lauterbach in 1927. In 1931 I went to the local gymnasium, which is the High School.

In January 1933 Hitler came to power. I remember that on the next morning men in brown uniforms came along and took away political opponents. I saw them take away one of our neighbours who was a communist. My mother then said something to the effect that she was glad that my father was not alive.

After that things got very uncomfortable for me at school. I had frequent fights and arguments with other children. My mother decided to send me to Berlin to my uncle Siegfried Meyer, who was a silk merchant and also an inventor. His claim to fame, such as it is, was that he invented the Simpak suitcase, which is, I think the forerunner of the suit bag, we carry on planes. His invention was that he designed a suitcase in which suits and trousers could be hung and carried on hangers. Uncle Siegfried did not really know what to do with me. He and his wife had no children. After a few weeks at a Jewish school in Berlin, I was sent to a Jewish boarding school at a village called Caputh. That is near Potsdam and not far from Berlin. Caputh was on the bank of the Havel River which consists of a series of lakes in that area. Several of the rich and famous residents of Berlin had their summer residences in Caputh. Albert Einstein had his summer house on an allotment which was next but one to the school. The name of the school translated into English was "Country Boarding School Caputh".

When Hitler came to power, Einstein was abroad. As I have been told, Einstein was warned by friends not to return to Germany. The school needed additional accommodation for children who like me, were better off away from their homes, and so the school rented Einstein's house for additional accommodation. I was in this house many times. Einstein's visitor's book was there, his correspondence was there and all his other belongings which he normally kept in the house. It was as if he had just left overnight. I don't remember all the famous names in the visitor's book but one of them was Mahatma Gandhi.

The school rented Einstein's house until 9th November 1938. On 9th November 1938 there was what has become known as the Crystal Night. That was the night when Jewish

synagogues were burnt including the one where I had become Barmitzvah, and when tens of thousands of Jewish men were taken to concentration camps. Einstein's house was then confiscated and the school had to vacate it. I was then no longer a pupil there, but was at a school in Berlin. I had kept in touch with the teachers in Caputh. One of these teachers contacted me and asked me to take Einstein's visitors' book and his private correspondence to the French Cultural Attaché in Berlin. I did this. The episode looked a bit like a cloak and dagger operation. The documents had been put into a large envelope which had written on it in the English language: "A stone of wisdom". The translation of the English words "a stone" into German is "Ein Stein".

I had 3 happy years at Caputh. We were sheltered and had little contact with the general population.

By Easter 1936, I had finished the schooling available at Caputh, which stopped 2 years short of matriculation standard. The question then was, what to do next. My uncle in Berlin could not take me to live with him because he had sublet part of his flat for economic reasons. I went to live at a Zionist Youth Hostel in Berlin in the hope that I might be able to emigrate to Palestine. The difficulty which Jewish people had in those days was not that you could not get out of Germany, it was that we had difficulty getting into other countries. One of the few hopes I had was that I might get to Palestine. After some months at the hostel I went to a retraining school and did a course in cabinet making. That is where I met David Denby's father who was a pupil there also. Then I heard that a new Jewish High School was to be opened by the Jewish Community of Berlin at the beginning of the school year commencing at Easter 1937, and that that school would go to matriculation. At that stage, a Jewish child could not get into ordinary

schools and there were no jobs to be had. I went to that school and passed my matriculation at Easter 1939.

In about March 1937, at the age of 15 1/2 years I rented a room in a flat occupied by a Jewish family which was near the school and lived there until I migrated to England in July 1939. By that time an uncle in America had provided an Affidavit of Support for me so that I might be able to migrate to the United States. But there was a long waiting list. There was a quota for German citizens which also applied to Jewish people and I would have had to wait for years. A former teacher of mine had migrated to England. He was able to persuade an organisation concerned with helping Jewish children in Germany to arrange for my stay in England pending my migration to the United States. They had to deposit 50 pounds sterling and arrange matters so that I would not be a financial burden on the English public. I went on a children's transport to England on 3rd July 1939. I last visited my mother and sister in June 1939. They too had moved from Lauterbach in about 1934 to a town called Fulda. That was the last time I saw either of them

After my internment in 1940 I received several letters from my mother and sister through mail which could be sent to internees. The last of these letters was dated 30th March 1942. As I have since ascertained, shortly after March 1942 my mother and sister were deported to a concentration camp in or near Riga. A survivor whom I knew told me that my sister was taken out of the camp in a truck one day and did not return. I do not know how my mother died. My sister was 18 when she was murdered.

I landed in England on 4th July 1939. I was able to take with me a suit case of clothing and 10 German marks which was the equivalent of 17 shillings and six pence. That was all I had. The landing permit went something like this: "Leave to land granted this 4th day

of July 1939 at Harwich on condition that the holder of this permit does not enter into any employment paid or unpaid while in the United Kingdom".

I was sent to a prep school at Bayswater in London as a pupil, but, of course, there was nothing I could be taught at a prep school. I had done 4 years of English at High School. So I was made an assistant master - without pay. On Sunday 3rd September 1939 (which was my 18th birthday) I took a group of 15 or 16 boarders for a walk in the nearby Kensington Gardens. I was standing near a barrage balloon. The R.A.F. people who were in control of that balloon had a radio and I there heard Chamberlain declare war on Germany. I was just getting the children together to take them back to school, when the first air raid sirens went off. So the children and I dashed into an air raid shelter. A few days later the school was moved to Richmond in Surrey. I did not go to Richmond but was sent to a hostel for young refugees in Stamford Hill in the north of London. Although I was not able to take a regular job, I was allowed to become a trainee and receive some small remuneration for it. The people who ran the hostel arranged for me to become a trainee in a clothing factory near Oxford Circus. There I was taught to match up linings and buttons for ladies' garments. I was paid one pound a week. This pound was handed over to the hostel which provided me with food, fares to and from work and all other necessities such as toiletries, haircuts and the like. I was allowed sixpence pocket money a week. However, I was able to save a penny on the bus fares on the way to work and a penny on the way home from work by walking between Bloomsbury Square and Oxford Circus. That gave me an extra shilling pocket money a week.

After a few months I was able to make a more favourable financial arrangement by going to live with a Mr and Mrs Reubens in the East of London. Whilst living with them, I heard about Toynbee Hall. That was a workers'; education establishment in the East of London.

One of the subjects taught there was dramatic art. As I had usually played a leading part in school plays, I fancied myself a bit as an actor and I decided to take lessons in acting. The teacher at Toynbee Hall told me that if I wanted to take a walk on part in the production of King Lear at the Old Vic Theatre, she would make the necessary arrangements for me to do so. The pay was 4 shillings a performance. I was able to keep my job in the factory and take the walk on part as well and that seemed enormous riches to me. The cast of King Lear was a splendid one. It included Gielgud as Lear. Jack Hawkins and Lewis Casson had parts in it and if I remember rightly Jessica Tandy played Cordelia.

I played a soldier or one of the murmuring crowd and did such other jobs as shaking tin plate to imitate the sound of thunder during the storm on the heath.

It all came to an end after a few short weeks. On 16th May 1940, 2 burly men arrived at the factory and told me that I had to accompany them, because I was to be interned. They took me home, where I collected my suitcase and a satchel I had acquired and then took me to some army barracks. This was the first time I had the experience of having a machine gun pointed at me. Next day we were taken to Kempton Park Racecourse, where barbed wire enclosures were being erected in haste. Shortly afterwards, we were taken to Bury in Lancashire, where we were kept in a disused cotton factory and then we were sent to Onchan on the Isle of Man. We had been interned there for a short time when we were told on 9th July 1940 that a ship was going to Canada next day and that they wanted a certain number of people from the camp to go on that ship. It was decided by the spokespersons for the internees that those men should go who did not have wives and children in England. I wanted to go to Canada because I thought it would get me closer to my uncle in America.

Before I say any more about the ship Dunera I want to say that Britain was one of the few places in the world which made it possible for a large number of children and youngsters to obtain shelter there on the same or a similar basis as I did. I am sure that if I had not got to England, I would not be alive today. The other thing I want to say is this: Although some things on the Dunera were quite nasty, almost everybody survived. There were only 2 accidental deaths. If we had been on a German ship, none of us would have survived.

On 10th July 1940 we were taken on to the Dunera. As we walked aboard, we had to leave our luggage on the deck. We were searched. Money, watches and other valuables were taken from us. On the 2nd day at sea I and many others saw soldiers go through our luggage. They forced cases open with bayonets and otherwise and took what they wanted and threw other things and suitcases overboard.

As this was going on there was a loud bang, seemingly against the side of the ship. People screamed "torpedo". I had been so sea sick I could hardly move. I jumped up and everybody tried to get up the stairs which led from the hold to the deck. I thought I would never make it. I sat down thinking that this was the end. But the torpedo had not struck the ship. I understand that it exploded before striking the ship, and that a second torpedo which had been fired missed the ship.

I have since been told the following story, but am not able to say whether it is true or not. The story is that a newspaper in Frankfurt published an account from the commander of the U Boat which fired the torpedoes and that he stated that as the torpedo was fired he saw objects which he thought were people jumping from the ship. After the Dunera was

out of sight, the U Boat surfaced and the U Boat crew then found floating in the water objects which had German labels on them and that for that reason the Dunera was not attacked again.

If the ship was to go to Canada as I thought it would, it had to travel west. Hence it was difficult for us to understand, why it kept travelling generally south. The ship took on water in Freetown on the coast of Africa and then berthed a few days later at Capetown. We knew then that we would not go to Canada.

On 26th August 1946, the ship berthed at Fremantle in Australia where I was given an Australian "Certificate of Registration of Internee". The ship berthed at Melbourne on 3rd September 1940, my 19th birthday. We disembarked in Sydney on 6th September 1940 and were taken under guard by train to an internment camp at Hay in New South Wales. After 56 days of sparse and poor food on the Dunera, it seemed that I had never tasted anything better than the sandwiches and fruit in the railway lunch box.

We remained in Hay until about May 1941. I played a lot of soccer and handball and did some acting. During a soccer match I got a broken fibula. I was sent to the camp hospital, which was in fact the old gaol at Hay. I was kept there for a couple weeks in a bed in a room which used to be the prison workshop. About the end of May 1941 I was sent to an internment camp at Orange in New South Wales. In about July 1941 we were sent to an internment camp at Tatura in Victoria. In Tatura the internees set up a camp school with the aid principally of Miss Margaret Holmes, the secretary of the Australian Students Christian Movement. That organisation supplied us with textbooks and made arrangements enabling us internees to sit for the Victorian School Leaving Certificate in the Internment Camp. In those days, the school leaving certificate qualified one to enter

In the opening scene Lear enters the stage and announces his impending retirement saying : "and 'tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age conferring them on younger strengths while we unburdened crawl towards death."