

German-speakers in Australia

Werner Blaich

My name is Werner Karl Blaich. I was born in 1931 in Haifa, Palestine, and my parents were members of the Temple Society. The Temple Society came about in the turbulent time 1848-1859 when there was unrest and upheaval across Europe. CHRISTOPH HOFFMANN, an ordained Lutheran pastor and his followers were dissatisfied with church politics and rigid doctrine and the arrogance present in the Lutheran church at that time. Like Martin Luther 350 years before, they wanted change and a return back to what was in the Bible. The dispute escalated and when their leader was forbidden to preach in Lutheran churches, the followers of Christoph Hoffmann decided to form their own groups without ordained clergy, preaching direct from the Bible in homes or halls. To this day the Templers hold their services in simple halls. It was then decided to set the world an example in Christian living by forming self-sufficient settlements in the land where Jesus lived and died.

Palestine (today's Israel, the West Bank and Gaza) was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Negotiations were difficult, but finally in 1870 and 1872 the members arrived. The start was incredibly hard in this underdeveloped country. In the settlement of Sarona, near Jaffa, a fertile but swampy area, malaria claimed the lives of all children under 2 years, as well as all the children born in the first two years in Palestine. Determined drainage programs were undertaken by the settlers, thousands of gumtrees were planted and slowly the area became relatively free from the deadly malaria. This however was achieved at great cost, over 30% of all men of working age in that settlement died in the first few years.

Eventually there were about six settlements as well as the major strong points of Jerusalem and the harbour town of Haifa.

I grew up in a small agricultural settlement about 18km from Haifa, fully self-contained with its own school and water supply. It was a two-teacher school, our class was the biggest with 7 pupils. Life was very safe and uncomplicated, until the Second World War broke out. A perimeter-fence was erected around the settlement within days, with a manned main gate, watchtowers and searchlights.

All Templers were passionate Germans. Days before the outbreak of war all men of military age boarded a ship and sailed for Germany. On outbreak of war the British authorities rounded up most of the men that were left (my father amongst them) and

interned them in a special men's camp at Akko (Acre) near the beach. Some months later, all Templers were evacuated from their homes in Haifa and jammed into the other colonies. Our house had three additional families jammed in together, 24 people in all. As the British authorities had commandeered our beautiful school building with teachers quarters attached, a house, its bachelor having gone to join the military, was converted to a schoolhouse.

For us children, school became more exciting, as there were many more children in the classes. Then mid-1941 about two thirds of the Templers were given short notice to pack up 40kg per person as we were being taken away from our homes, with no explanation where we would end up. My father came back from the men's camp a few days before departure.

We went by bus to Haifa and from there by train to Egypt. I remember my first train trip through the darkness of the desert, with all the stars in the black sky.

In Egypt we boarded the 'Queen Elizabeth', the biggest ship in the world. As we approached the side of the ship with a ferry, this enormous colossus grew bigger and bigger. Curving away to the front and the back, with rows of portholes going up many stories high. This beautiful ship had been converted to a troop carrier with double bunks filling the cabins. Again the men were separated from the families and we sometimes met in the huge dining halls.

The food on board was very inadequate. No fresh vegetables, no fruit, no milk, milk powder or condensed milk, no eggs. My 9-month-old sister had to live on sweetened black tea and biscuits. She barely survived the trip. At TRINCOMALI in Ceylon (now called SRI LANKA) some fresh stores were taken aboard. We had been guarded by Jewish Auxiliary Police under British officers. The atmosphere was quite unfriendly. Also on board were a few hundred prisoners of war, mainly German, some Italian. They formed a couple of musical trios, piano accordion, violin and vocal. Now even when the food was poor, we had the most beautiful, uplifting German music, I still remember it today.

When we stopped at Fremantle in Australia, things really looked up - friendly Australian guards. They handed out chocolates and delicious Australian apples to the children. They did not stand for any unfair treatment and soon showed the original guards who was now boss. The better food came just in time for my little sister and other young children.

The trip through Bass Straight was extremely rough, with lots of seasickness. We sailed to Sydney and saw the Sydney Harbour Bridge from close quarters. We then went by ferry and landed on Australian soil.

Next we travelled by train to Albury, much of the trip through mountains, the first mountains I had seen. The train rushing through deep cuttings made a particular sound that I can still recall today.

About 2:00 a.m. in Albury we had to leave the carriages and board a Victorian train. It was dark and bitterly cold. We then headed for our destination, Internment Camp No.3 between Tatura and Rushworth. It was mid-August, cold and windy.

The accommodation in corrugated huts was quite primitive. The single men had to live in tents. The huts were long structures divided lengthways, then divided with masonite sheets so there were six rooms on either side. Each room had a door, a window and a single electric globe hanging from the rafters. The roofs were corrugated asbestos cement sheets, the two bunks per room were wooden rectangles nailed to the walls, with one leg holding up the unsupported corner. They had chain wire nailed across and a big hessian bag was supplied with each bunk. As soon as we arrived we were issued with bales of straw to stuff the hessian bags and make mattresses. There were also some army blankets and a pillow each. We soon cut doors into the masonite, so we could get some cross-flow when the stifling heat of summer began.

As there was basic harmony among the Templers, it was not hard for our appointed camp leaders to appoint teams to do the cooking and keeping the toilet blocks and the showers clean.

The food was very basic, but plentiful and which our expert cooking teams transformed into excellent meals. Fresh vegetables were in short supply, so spare plots inside the camp area were soon planted up with lettuce, silver beet and beans. Later on an extensive area outside the camp was brought under cultivation. The gardens were irrigated with the waste water from the camp. We were supplied with two draughthorses, a plough and two-wheel dray. Teams of men from the camp grew a great variety of vegetables and melons. We were paid the King's shilling - a shilling a day, for work done outside the camp.

The camp was diamond shaped, divided across the corners to form four compounds A, B, C and D. Each compound had 12 sleeping huts, 2 mess huts, a kitchen and a storage hut, as well as toilet, shower and laundry blocks.

School and kindergartens were soon established. The mess halls were quickly transformed into school after breakfast and after lunch each day. The teachers were augmented with educated lay people, willing to take on the task of teaching. Our schools were very good and many of the older pupils successfully completed their matriculation. English was compulsory and we had one lesson every day.

We were formed into youth groups and six days a week at 6:00 a.m. there was compulsory jogging and gymnastics.

As good Germans, we observed all the German holidays exactly as in Germany.

There were many skilled tradespeople among us and soon all kinds of woodwork and metalwork was undertaken. I was lucky enough to get friendly with a blacksmith. From broken truck and car springs we made anything from hoes, cold chisels, wood chisels and tinsnips. We also made smoothing planes from pieces of red gum. I learned how to forge and soften steel, then file to shape and harden in oil or water. I loved swinging the sledge-hammer to help forge the hot steel.

The camp was transformed over the years, with pergolas covered with creepers and with flowerbeds, as well as quick-growing trees.

There was a brass band as well as some other forms of music to help celebrate special occasions. There were some very ambitious and elaborate theatre performances, even "The Merchant of Venice", performed in German.

After the war we were free to either stay in camp for the time being, to find a job and lodgings in Australia or to be repatriated to Germany. My father had only been to Germany once, as a soldier in the First World War, so he decided to stay in Australia, after it became clear that we could not return to Palestine (now Israel).

In early 1947 we were employed on a dairy farm near Rochester in Victoria. In 1950 our family moved to Melbourne. I stayed on the farm til 1952.

On the farm we lived quite frugally, we grew our own vegetables, bread and meat such as we could afford was sent to us from Rochester in the empty milk cans.

My 12-year-old brother and the two younger sisters went to school in Rochester. He had a very tough time there to start with, being German and unable to speak much English. He had to fight his way through his class, then the class above him, and two days before the school bully (who was two years older) left school, he got flattened so badly by my brother that his father, who was the milk-truck driver, complained to my

father about it. All the school students referred to my brother as 'Basher Blaich' from then on. In his second year my brother topped the class in English, to the great delight of his form teacher, who had kept a bit of an eye on him.

Once in Melbourne, I worked at several jobs - as a cook to start with. I did not last, as I am slightly colour-blind and could not tell when the steaks were done. I then worked some time in a canning factory, as a fencing contractor, a timber cutter near Traralgon, as a delivery driver for a pie factory and as a part-owner of a milk bar.

In 1955-1956 I bought and operated a tip truck on contract, in 1956 during the Olympic Games in Melbourne I worked as a taxi driver, but could not get used to all the sitting around waiting for fares.

In 1958 my younger brother Paul and I bought a service-station business in the Oakleigh area. Paul was a trained mechanic by then and I had saved some money to enable us to obtain the business, which then employed two mechanics and two panel beaters. We then built up a tow-truck from a one-tonne DODGE truck and obtained an R.A.C.V. Service contract to attend to roadside breakdowns. In wet weather we had several mechanics on the road to assist stranded motorists, with tools, batteries and leads, they worked out of their car boots. The panel beating and tow-truck operation just kept on growing. We finished up with seven tow-trucks, as well as a "tilt tray" truck. Two of our tow-trucks were extra heavy units, able to tow away the biggest trucks. We operated all over Victoria and interstate, to tow back trucks for our fleet customers. The heavy units also had heavy-duty winches, able to retrieve crashed trucks from lakes and gullies.

We also built heavy crushers, able to straighten bent truck chassis with the aid of chains and hydraulic rams. The business grew until we had 120 employees, the biggest crash repair shop in the Southern Hemisphere. By then we had long before outgrown the original premises, we built a repair shop in Oakleigh and kept on buying neighbouring properties, demolishing the weatherboard houses to build more workshops and storage yards. In the finish we had four workshops and three gravelled storage yards. It was a very busy place. To even out the income we purchased a development farm of nine square miles on the South Australian border, what was known as the Big Desert country. 1965 I moved onto the farm in a caravan and supervised the building of two houses and stockyards. I got married in 1959 and in 1966 my wife followed me onto the farm with three young children. We lived in a rented house in Kaniva until the main house on the farm was finished. There was the house sitting on a bare sandy rise with no backyard fence or lawn, dust blowing as soon as there was a strong breeze.

By the time we sold the farm in 1972 we had developed more than half the original area of scrub. We were running sheep and cattle and had to battle through a two-year period of drought. We made the best of it and had quite a few dependable friends among our widely scattered neighbours.

When I got back to the city in 1972 I took over the running of our crash repair establishment. Paul made some investments in mining and real estate in W.A. and Queensland, so I bought his share of the crash business.

In 1977 he came back and bought me out. He then built a big new workshop in North Clayton, with extensive storage and wrecking yards. He unfortunately died of a massive heart attack in 1982 aged 46. The business was eventually sold.

In 1977 I got into a sheet metal business with my brother-in-law. We made anything from office cabinets to long range fuel tanks in steel and aluminium for interstate trucks. Also truck mudguards.

In 1984 I stepped out of the sheet metal works and tried to retire. After about a year I got bored and started a windscreen repair business. Over the next three years I built it up, then sold it.

By that time my wife and I had joined a multi-level marketing business. She traded in skincare, cosmetics and cleaning products, while I handle specialist lubricants, fuel treatments and car care products. I mainly sold to earth-moving contractors and truck fleets. Since then we got many rewards, as well as four overseas trips, for reaching the required sales targets.

Now I am 70 years old, have a lovely wife and four grown-up children. The start was hard but Australia has been good to us and we made the most of our opportunities.

P.S. The Temple Society today is divided between Australia and Germany. More than half of our number is here in Australia. The start was very hard. Many Templers (my father among them) had to start to establish themselves, when most people retire. To help our parents buy their first house in Moorabbin, all we children contributed from our wages.

The Templers here in Australia, just like once in Palestine (now Israel), made remarkable progress. Among our lot there are now university professors, lecturers, teachers and scientists. There are architects, heart specialists, doctors, lawyers, nurses, a police-inspector, army officers and tradesmen of all manner. Also a violin

maker, musicians, engineering-shop owners, garage owners as well as farmers etc. etc. We can proudly say we made a difference, we were part of Australia's progress.

Today the Temple Society Australia has got its head office, a meeting hall, tennis courts and a 9-pin bowling alley in Tucker Rd, East Bentleigh.

In Bayswater there is a community hall with youth centre as well as extensive old age facilities, also tennis courts and a bowling alley.

There also is our establishment in Sydney, as well as active groups in S.A. and in Wangaratta, Vic.

P.P.S. At a special museum in TATURA, Vic, there is a very interesting display of tools and artefacts made in the internment camp.

Werner Blaich

Editorial note: Werner attended school in the internment camp, where lessons were conducted in German, until his mid-teens. Since that time he has had very little practice with writing in German, and therefore preferred to write the above text in English.

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