

'Our horizon is the barbed wire': Artistic Life in the British Internment Camps

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Ernst Eisenmayer, *Untitled* (Internment Camp, Isle of Man), 1940, watercolour, graphite and pen and ink on paper and board, 30.3 x 22.8 cm (12 x 9 in), Ben Uri Collection, London.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, some 74,000 former German and Austrian citizens resident in Britain were registered 'enemy aliens' and categorised by tribunals as 'A', 'B' or 'C', according to their perceived security risk. However, following the 'phoney' war, a real fear of invasion after the fall of France, concern for fifth-column activity and the resulting media agitation led to the sudden implementation of the government's mass-internment policy during early summer 1940.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of newly elected Prime Minister Winston Churchill's directive to 'Collar the Lot!', wholesale and haphazard arrests took place nationwide – the result of poor administration – cutting across the aforementioned categories, gender, families, generations, professions and political alignment (both pro- and anti-Nazi – the latter, however, in the majority as most of the internees were Jewish refugees) and often regardless of an individual's state of health. Transit camps were swiftly established, some wholly unsuitable, from where many internees were transferred to more permanent locations in Britain and distant parts of the Commonwealth, including Australia and Canada.

Many artists, designers and architects were inevitably caught up in this process and a significant number were shipped to the Isle of Man. The island – remote and far from areas of military importance – housed at its peak, in August 1940, approximately 14,000 internees (almost 20 per cent of the ‘alien’ population), mostly men, but also women and children in ten camps, for the most part requisitioned seaside boarding houses around Douglas: Hutchinson, Onchan, Palace, Metropole, Central Promenade, Sefton and Granville as well as Peveril Camp, Peel, and Mooragh Camp, Ramsey. Around 4000 women were interned in Rushen camp, located at Port Erin and Port St Mary.

This chapter explores the rich artistic life that emerged (alongside often remarkable activities in music and writing) in the camps between summer 1940 and late 1941 (after which most internees were released), highlighting the visual artists’ resilience and resourcefulness and the diverse work produced by professionals and amateurs alike – for all were encouraged to participate. In the continental Enlightenment spirit of *Kultur* (culture/civilisation) and *Bildung* (self-cultivation/education), no distinction was made between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art; rather, success lay in ‘creating something as new as it is original’.<sup>2</sup> As Shulamith Behr has noted, ‘this endorsement of the untrained artist as being just as proficient as the professional . . . harks back to a central tenet of Expressionism’.<sup>3</sup>

The cohort of interned artists first claimed prominence on 28 August 1940 with the publication of a protest letter in the *New Statesman and Nation*, with 17 signatories from Hutchinson Camp (known as the ‘artists’ camp’ due to its high number of established practitioners) including renowned Dadaist Kurt Schwitters (1897–1948); his photographer son Ernst (1918–96); sculptors Ernst Müller Blensdorf (1896–1976), Siegfried Charoux (1896–1967), Georg Ehrlich (1897–1966) and Paul Hamann (1891–1973); and painters/graphic artists Hermann Fechenbach (1897–1986), Eric Kahn (1904–79), Fred Uhlman (1901–85), Hellmuth Weissenborn (1898–1982) and Fritz Solomonski (later Frederick Solomon) (1899–1980). Collectively, they declared that ‘Art cannot live behind barbed wire. . . the sense of grievous injustice done to us, the restlessness caused by living together with thousands of other men . . . prevent all work and creativity’. Nonetheless, as this chapter demonstrates, creativity did flourish. As Weissenborn reflected, it was a ‘miracle of the human will . . . changing a miserable prison camp into a kind of university’.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, for noted Expressionist (and Orthodox Jew) Ludwig Meidner, who refused to sign – even asking to remain – internment offered a more palatable alternative to life as a poverty-stricken and unfashionable German artist outside the wire.

A week later, the *Jewish Chronicle* published ‘Forty Artists Interned’, further identifying Meidner (1884–1966), Johnny [sic] Heartfield (1891–1968) and Martin Bloch (1883–1954) alongside others whose names remain unfamiliar today, such as husband and wife sculptors, Hermann and Erna Nonnenmacher (1892–1988 and 1889–1980).<sup>5</sup> More than 50 years later, Klaus E. Hinrichsen, art historian and recorder of artistic life in Hutchinson in *Visual Art Behind the Wire* (‘the first port of call for researchers in the field’),<sup>6</sup> recalled more than 20 men and three women artists interned in Britain and the Commonwealth (the latter including designer Georg Teltscher, later George Adams (1904–83)), his account reinforced by half a century of rich friendships within the (mostly north-London) émigré community – adding, among others, Hugo Dachinger (1908–95), Walter Nessler (1912–2001), Jack Bilbo (1907–67), Klaus Meyer (1918–2002) and Samson Schames (1898–1967). As secretary to Hutchinson’s so-called Cultural Department, Hinrichsen

promoted and critiqued artistic activity, further documenting and ensuring its legacy in his post-war writings, oral testimonies and personal art collection.

Although space does not permit detailed discussion here, artistic output across the British and Commonwealth camps was remarkably consistent – suggesting that, despite differences in circumstances, the psychological imperatives for making images were largely universal: as assertions of individual identity and creativity; as antidotes to anxiety, depression or boredom; or as forms of communication and commemoration. More interesting still is the fact that these imperatives were clearly shared by internees in entirely different contexts: the Japanese-American internment camps, German and Japanese POW camps – and even the Nazi concentration camps. Most ‘professionals’ in the British internment camps shared similar aspirations: adequate materials and space (both physical and mental) in which to work; opportunities to teach, exhibit, publicise and even sell artwork; and to ensure its survival beyond the wire in some form. In other words, interned artists, to varying degrees, created similar mechanisms to those of the ‘real’ art world. There is a further irony in the fact that many artists who were banned in Nazi Germany as ‘degenerate’ – left-wing, modernist and/or Jewish – and then imprisoned in the very country in which they sought refuge, were able to create artwork so freely and prodigiously in internment.

From the moment of arrival at transit camps – where conditions were often harsh, particularly at the repurposed Kempton Park racecourse, Prees Heath in Shropshire and the notoriously insalubrious Warth Mills near Manchester<sup>7</sup> – creativity flourished, the presence of distinguished European academics from a range of disciplines resulting in a dynamic cultural milieu within which art eventually secured its own important position. Indeed, both Bilbo and Heinz Kiewe suggest in their autobiographies that they first discussed the concept of a ‘Popular University’ at Kempton, while sculptor Paul Hamann wrote from Warth Mills requesting plasticine for modelling, already lamenting that ‘Our horizon is the barbed wire’.<sup>8</sup> Men with different backgrounds, professions and skills were thrown together, dissolving the usual hierarchies, whilst women (including Erna Nonnenmacher, Margarete Klopffleisch, Pamina Liebert-Mahrenholz and Ruth Borchard)<sup>9</sup> faced incarceration in Holloway prison prior to their transfer to Manx camps, where their creative opportunities were limited to more lowly and domestic crafts.

Huyton, outside Liverpool – ‘. . . a housing-estate . . . used for the accommodation of aliens’,<sup>10</sup> was one of the first camps to give rise to a coherent body of artworks.<sup>11</sup> Dachinger, Nessler, Schames and Alfred Lomnitz all created evocative, richly coloured, topographical scenes and portraits, often on newspaper (Dachinger apparently favouring *The Times* for its quality). Choreographer Kurt Jooss and art dealer Erich Cassirer, among others, sat for Nessler, while Dachinger’s recently identified portrait of Wilhelm Hollitscher, engineer for the Danube Steamboat Company, is layered with toothpaste wash. (Dachinger’s works were highlights of the interned artists’ exhibition held at Huyton in late August 1940, entitled *Art Behind Barbed Wire*, and for which he designed the poster. Following his release in the new year, London’s Redfern Gallery displayed 40 internment works in April 1941 – Dachinger’s first British exhibition in freedom.)

Hollitscher's unpublished internment diary<sup>12</sup> vividly recounts the sittings, while Schames, whose works in Frankfurt had 'been slashed and mutilated by the Nazis',<sup>13</sup> described Huyton's productive atmosphere:

*Room and board were taken care of; models were plentiful. . . . I drew and painted but also made figures out of barbed wire which I later on showed in Bond Street . . . Since . . . I had no paint, I made it myself. The soot of a stove, mixed with condensed milk, gave me black. The juice of beets mixed with pulverised chalk . . . gave me red paint. Clipped hair attached to little sticks served as brushes*<sup>14</sup>

(Again, this extreme ingenuity in the procuring of materials is a feature of art produced in other internment situations as well.) When interviewed about using precious rations for art, Schames responded, 'There wasn't so much to eat at this time but I preferred it this way. I thought to make something positive out of these negative things.'<sup>15</sup> Denis Matthew's review of Schames' 1942 exhibition at Bilbo's Modern Art Gallery noted, 'it is refreshing to see . . . where the restrictions of the internment camp have not deprived him of the language to express his emotions – where charcoal and paper stained with vegetable juices speak more eloquently than aureolin on expensive canvas'.<sup>16</sup>

Schames was released directly from Huyton, while Meidner and Bilbo were transferred to Hutchinson and Onchan respectively. Onchan, home to 1500 internees (of whom 8.6 per cent were reputedly artists, writers and authors)<sup>17</sup> and consisting mainly of two streets of elegant villas overlooking Douglas Bay, opened in early June 1940, while Hutchinson's square of 45 boarding houses opened a month later. Once the formalities governing daily life were established, both camps independently evolved similar artistic activities – each under its own impresario of distinctly contrasting character.

In Onchan, the flamboyant and virulently anti-fascist Bilbo was the driving force behind the Popular University, art exhibitions and ambitious cabaret and theatre performances. Onchan's 'school of art', which began modestly with lettering classes, eventually embraced portrait and mural painting, clay modelling, furniture and interior decorating, and perspective and fashion design.<sup>18</sup> Bilbo encouraged both 'young and old boys to learn something more'<sup>19</sup> – hence, the roles of pupil and teacher became fluid, even inverted. Klaus Meyer, who had barely completed 18 months' study at London's Central School when interned, found himself teaching advertising alongside Onchan's most notable artist, graphic designer F.H.K. Henrion (1914–90). This unconventional education helped form several young artists, including Ernst Eisenmeyer (1920–2018) in Onchan and Peter Fleischmann (later Peter Midgley RA) (1921–91) in Hutchinson, who took life drawing with Schwitters and sculpture with Ehrlich and Hamann and later described everything he learned at art school after the war as 'just a recap'.<sup>20</sup>

At Hutchinson, Uhlman recalled the *embarras de richesses* of self-organised high culture delivered by various Oxbridge professors, as part of the so-called 'Camp University',<sup>21</sup> which initially excluded art and theatre. Many internees were already known to each other through their earlier involvement with the Hampstead-based Free German League of Culture, in which Uhlman played a significant role, and internment served to cement many close

friendships. Erich Kahn's print *Lecture on the Lawn II*, gifted to Weissenborn on release, depicts one of the famous *plein air* academic talks, signed on the reverse by 22 internees. Many also gathered indoors at the so-called Artists' Café, whose members – comprising artists, poets, writers, architects, photographers and musicians, a graphologist and a lawyer, and art dealer Siegfried Oppenheimer – witnessed eccentric performances by Schwitters. Significantly, Camp Commandant Captain O.H. Daniel provided studio space and materials as far as conditions allowed, his pivotal role in facilitating creativity acknowledged in a farewell album of artworks with 'personal dedications by every one of the Hutchinson artists in recognition of the help they had received from him'.<sup>22</sup>

Weissenborn, who had brought his engraving tools into internment, was credited by Hinrichsen as the first artist to use found materials – a nail and a razor blade – to scratch mythological scenes and still lifes into blacked-out boarding-house windows. Even an amateur, Mr Neunzer (a lion tamer and animal trapper), became a skilled window engraver. Like Schwitters' stinking porridge sculptures, these ephemeral artworks did not survive; but the need to improvise is expressed in works such as Uhlman's drawing *My Bedroom – the Artist Uses his Suitcase as a Work Surface, in the Absence of a Table*. This monochrome image is from a series documenting Uhlman's daily life and frequent despair, often foregrounding a young child (inspired by his yet-unseen newborn daughter, Caroline) as a hopeful talisman.<sup>23</sup> While internment art rarely referenced contemporary religion or politics, a number of these images are distinctly nightmarish and surreal, reminiscent of Goya or Austrian artist Alfred Kubin; some of them savagely attacked the Spanish Catholic Church, seen by Uhlman as supportive of fascism and corrupted by power. They certainly stand in stark contradiction to the more detached, stoical and even amusing accounts that Uhlman (like many of his fellow internees) gave of his experience in later years.

Repurposing became a way of artistic life. Schwitters incorporated found detritus into his Merz sculptures, drew on paper napkins and tablecloths, and painted on dismantled tea chests. While in Onchan, Henry de Buys Roessingh (1899–1955) fashioned part of a tea chest into a double-sided sign advertising 'Bilbo's cabaret'. Blensdorf sketched on toilet paper – bold, Expressionist figures contrasting with the fragile support, creating 'a sort of illuminated scroll'<sup>24</sup> – and 'cannibalized' a piano, accidentally 'destroyed' by concert pianist Maryan Rawicz's vigorous playing, for his carved panels depicting fertility and regeneration.<sup>25</sup> Weissenborn used a washing mangle as a printing press, cut linoleum from attic floors for linocuts and produced ersatz ink from margarine and graphite. Wallpaper was torn down for drawing: floral designs are still visible on the reverse of studies for Blensdorf's panel *The Lovers* and of Meyer's often humorous sketches of Onchan daily life – depicting latrines, communal cooking and outdoor scenes – which frequently imbue his fellow internees with a mock-heroic quality. As in other internment contexts, humour could serve as a coping strategy.

## Notes

1. This policy was extended to include Italian residents, after Britain and Italy declared war on each other on 10 June 1940.
2. Shulamith Behr, 'Klaus E Hinrichsen: The Art Historian behind "Visual Art Behind the Wire"', in Shulamith Behr and Marian Malet (eds), *Arts in Exile in Britain 1933–45 Politics and Cultural*

- Identity*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2004, p.19.
3. *ibid.*
  4. Helmuth Weissenborn, *Helmuth Weissenborn, Engraver, with an Autobiographical Introduction by the Artist*, Wittington Press, Andoversford, 1983, p.xiv.
  5. *Jewish Chronicle*, 'Art Notes', 6 September 1940, p.17.
  6. Klaus Hinrichsen, 'Visual Art Behind the Wire' in David Cesarani and Tony Kushner (eds), *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, Frank Cass, London, 1993, pp 182–209.
  7. See [www.warthmillsproject.com](http://www.warthmillsproject.com)
  8. Letter from Paul Hamann to his wife, Hilde, 9 July 1940, courtesy Artist's Estate. Thanks to Sarah MacDougall for this information.
  9. Miriam Kochan, *Britain's Internees in the Second World War*, Macmillan Press, London, 1983, p.67.
  10. Borchard, although not an artist herself, would later become known for her collection of self- portraits by British artists.
  11. See Jessica Feather, *Art Behind Barbed Wire*, exh. cat., Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 2004.
  12. The diary is held by the Wiener Library in London. Excerpts relating to internment were translated from German by Hollitscher's family during 2018 and supplied to the author with grateful thanks.
  13. *Jewish Chronicle*, 'Art Notes', 15 March 1940, p.33.
  14. Cordula Frowein, *Samson Schames 1898–1967*, exh. cat., Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main, 1989, p.120.
  15. *ibid.*, p.9.
  16. Introduction to *Samson Schames*, exh. cat., Modern Art Gallery, London, 1942.
  17. See Jutta Vinzent, 'The Political, Social and Cultural Patterns of Migration', in Jutta Vinzent and Jennifer Powell (eds), *Art and Migration: Art Works by Refugee Artists from Nazi Germany in Britain*, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, 2005, p.38.
  18. Anonymous, *Onchan Pioneer*, no.31, 30 March 1941, p.4.
  19. Jack Bilbo, *Jack Bilbo an Autobiography*, E & J Arnold, Leeds, 1948, p.218.
  20. IWM Sound Archive 3941.
  21. Fred Uhlman, *The Making of An Englishman*, Gollancz, London, 1960, p.232.
  22. Hinrichsen, 'Visual Art', p.203.
  23. After the war, Uhlman donated these drawings to museums in both Britain and Germany, publishing 24 of them under the title *Captivity: Twenty Four Drawings by Fred Uhlman*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1946, with an introduction by Raymond Mortimer, who in 1938 had written so damningly about the *Twentieth Century German Art* exhibition.
  24. *ibid.*
  25. Hinrichsen, 'Visual Art', p.193.