

A Tanunda Childhood during World War II: Sunshine beneath Shadows

Frances Wells

My paper refers to some features of life in Tanunda, as experienced by a small child during World War 2, from 1939 to 1945. It balances early personal memories with information from historians and private correspondence, and from records in the public domain.

In the late 1930s most children living in Tanunda were the descendants of German immigrants who had settled in the Barossa valley during the 19th century. Their families quietly preserved the culture of the areas in Germany from which their forebears had come. A few of those families remained in regular contact with relatives still living in that country.

Just prior to the beginning of World War 2, Tanunda was a place of safety, tranquillity and order. The town's physical characteristics reinforced this impression in my young mind. People have often noted the orderliness in the layout of Tanunda and close-by Bethany - order in the streets and in the surrounding farms. The original layout happens to correspond with one of the most important words in the German language: 'Ordnung', meaning 'Order'. Ever since the first German settlement of the area, a strong sense of Ordnung had persisted, even if a century later the German language was not widely spoken.

Strong religious traditions also created a sense of order. The majority of Tanunda residents regularly attended the four Tanunda Lutheran churches on Sundays and holy days, and for special occasions such as Harvest Thanksgiving and Confirmation services. Rituals for baptisms, weddings and funerals always followed a set order. The dates of community activities were predictable, with Liedertafel concerts, brass band competitions, shooting contests and the Tanunda Show all taking place in designated months. So in

the late 1930s Tanunda people perpetuated the stable physical and social structures that their forebears had sought to establish.

In those days Tanunda was virtually a closed society, relatively isolated by the poor condition of the roads beyond the Barossa Valley, and by the sparseness of rail services to Adelaide. Only a few prosperous citizens had the means and inclination to visit the state capital. I recall overhearing some elderly Tanunda residents claiming that they had never been to Adelaide, and that they would regard such a trip as a great adventure!

For small children, the orderliness provided a great sense of security. However, when war against Germany was declared in September 1939, that event created in many adults an unsettling mixture of fear, grief, suspicion, and occasional defiance. Fear was immediately generated by the Australian Federal Government's passing of The National Security Bill (1939), an Act containing regulations similar to those in The War Precautions Act (1914) of World War One. The latter had led to investigations of many German families living in Tanunda and other South Australian towns. There had been hurtful consequences, painful internments and some very serious miscarriages of justice.ⁱ

Memories of those happenings were still fresh in the minds of older Tanunda inhabitants. Adults could recall police entering their parents' houses, searching for subversive literature, for guns and ammunition. My mother and an aunt, both of part German descent, told me about their mother's distress in 1915, when a policeman had shouldered his way into their house, looking for fire-arms. Their mother had hated the chaos that he had caused by turning out drawers and cupboards, while she clutched a screaming baby and her young daughters hid in her skirts.

Once again, some 25 years later, the Security officers were active, following up rumours of possible Nazi sympathisers in the Tanunda area. Often quite innocuous words and actions were reported by local informers, most of whom were anonymous.

For some ill-intentioned people, this was a good opportunity to create trouble for individuals whom they envied or disliked.

Fortunately my family was not threatened in this way because my German descendant father was a very well-liked and respected man. Moreover, his youngest brother had promptly enlisted as a volunteer in the Royal Australian Navy. My mother was ambivalent about her part-German descent. For example, although she loved German yeast cakes, she could never bring herself to bake them. I adored the colour of blue corn-flowers, but she refused to plant them because she said they were “the Kaiser’s flower”, and that they were also favoured by Hitler. On the other hand, my aunt had travelled to Europe in the mid 1930s to investigate early childhood education; there she had been impressed by the signs of growing German prosperity.

Only a very few older Tanunda people genuinely admired Hitler. One woman was observed bowing down each morning before his portrait hanging on her wall. According to historian Dr Ian Harmstorf, these expressions of adoration were likely due to her advanced age and state of spinsterhood.ⁱⁱ Some grand parents who had visited relatives in Germany not long before the war began were naturally affectionate towards the old country, and they returned to Australia convinced that the Fuhrer was doing much good. Dr Frank Altmann, who has extensive knowledge of Tanunda history, has confirmed the existence of such attitudes.ⁱⁱⁱ

I knew that within Tanunda there were very loyal Australians who nevertheless thought that Germany had been rescued by the National Socialists from post World War I poverty and from the chaos following the Great Economic Depression. Such people were not alone because, prior to World War 2, the Australian press, the then Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, and other prominent Australians had praised the order restored by the German Fascist regime.^{iv}

Now, in 2007, the records of World War 2 National Security investigations are no longer secret, and most of those files can be explored in our Australian

National Archives. These confirm that Tanunda was indeed the base of a small official Nazi party, the members of which were under surveillance.^v The leader, Dr Johannes Becker, together with some others, was duly interned.

Some information about Dr Becker's activities has been presented by authors Gary Gumpfl and Richard Kleinig in a recently released book. This publication, although outwardly well-intentioned, seems more designed to engage readers through selective anecdotes and sometimes inaccurate material, rather than to present facts in a conventional historical manner.

How did the World War Two security measures register in the mind of a small Tanunda child? I noticed adult heads nodding and heard whispered names of prominent citizens. My mother warned me not to approach the houses of certain people thought to be supporters of Hitler. I feared to walk past a local Printing Office, for wasn't that a building where Nazi sympathisers might meet?

However, I and my young friends were largely protected from serious political concerns. We would have been more frightened when seeing the great bushfires that consumed the Barossa hills during the severe drought in 1939. The normal orderliness of life was re-assuring during the early months of the war. Our days were filled with childhood routines and recreations. We could safely roam the Tanunda streets and play in our gardens.

Beyond Australia, new conflicts developed throughout 1941 and 1942. These were conflicts that I and other young children could at first barely comprehend. Within several months, Imperial Japan joined Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy in aiming to conquer much of the world. On December 7th, 1941, Japanese planes destroyed part of the American Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbour. Almost immediately after this event, America, and then Australia, declared war on Japan.

Our families learned of these developments through press reports and radio news bulletins. We soon realised that the enemy now included an Oriental

country situated directly north of Australia. This fact was emphasised when our new Prime Minister, John Curtin, urgently ordered many Australian troops to return from fighting the Germans in the Middle East theatre of war.

Many Tanunda grown-ups experienced a sense of relief because the national focus had shifted from events in Germany to those in the Pacific region. Our country was being threatened by a power near home, and we could be invaded by Japanese forces. With very little warning, Tanunda underwent a radical change of atmosphere.

Early in 1942 soldiers in military uniforms suddenly descended on the town. Some of the men were billeted in private homes while others lived under canvas in the Tanunda Park. This 'invasion' by members of both the Australian and American armed forces coincided with the establishment of a military holding camp at Sandy Creek.

Soldiers were billeted elsewhere in South Australia, but their presence in Tanunda was considered especially useful for various reasons. Men and arms could conveniently be transported by rail to Port Adelaide to embark for service overseas. Local farms produced food that was essential to the war effort, and the presence of troops would make it safer. David Watts, a Military History researcher, has noted that, geographically, the undulations of the Barossa Valley were considered ideal for military training exercises. Also a further purpose was to 'keep an eye on Tanunda' because it was a centre of 'suspiciously Germanic' culture. To this end, the first troops – members of the 18th Light Horse, a machine gun regiment – drove through Tanunda in a great display of strength, making sure that they were noticed.^{vi}

With the army in residence Tanunda threw itself energetically into supporting the war. Functions were arranged to raise funds for the Red Cross and to entertain the soldiers billeted in the town. Grown-ups organised balls, concerts and raffles; children pestered others to guess the length of string in a jar, for a penny a time.

Life took on an American flavour. In the Tanunda Institute Hall double bill movies were screened on Wednesday evenings as well as on Saturdays. Now there seemed to be fewer British films and more American technicolour products from MGM and RKO. I enjoyed studying the movie posters pasted on shop walls, showing colourful images of stars such as Errol Flynn, Betty Grable and Deanna Durbin. Concerts in the Institute did not include performances by the Tanunda Liedertafel. Instead they featured items by guitar-strumming Barossa couples who droned Country and Western songs in fake Hill-Billy accents.

By this time I had begun to attend the Tanunda Public School, along with about 100 other pupils from grades 1 to 7. The smaller Lutheran School in Jane Place remained open, but under Education Department control, which forbade the speaking and teaching of the German language.^{vii} Our State school attendance rolls were full of German family names. However, all first names were distinctly un-German. Our parents might have been baptised as Otto, Clemens, Hildegard or Elfrieda, but we children were called Dean, Howard, Shirley and Lorraine. Students bearing Anglo-Saxon family names were never excluded from school friendship groups. Not one of our war-time school teachers had a German sur-name. (I have since realised that this was deliberate Education Department policy.)

At one stage a new small girl appeared at school. With her German Jewish parents she had fled from Europe to escape Nazi persecution, and the family was housed in Tanunda. To prevent this child from becoming a social loner, my mother, who had an extremely strong Christian sense of duty, ordered me to play with her. Eventually the family moved elsewhere and I never saw her again. I will always remember her shy, sweet smile, and the way she hung her head on one side.

Town gossip was somewhat disapproving of that refugee family. In order to plant potatoes, they dug up a lawn tennis court in the garden of their allotted house. Some well-to-do Tanunda families had beautifully manicured lawn

tennis courts. Understandably the refugees did not fit with local horticultural ethics, especially as the parents were professional people!

As in all state schools, patriotism was fostered and accepted without question. Saluting the Flag was a regular event, on our asphalted playground beneath the flag pole. The school fife and drum band (boys only) often played appropriate British tunes such as 'Work for the Night is Coming' and 'Bonnie Charlie'. The words of the Salute were recited solemnly: 'I am an Australian... I love my country, the British Empire...' The girls particularly enjoyed the line 'I salute her flag, the Union Jack', because we always vied with one another to make the deepest curtsey. Meanwhile the boys stood to attention and proudly saluted. I now believe that few of us, if any, were ever conscious of the ambiguity of the situation. There we were, pledging loyalty to a country that had recently sent pilots to drop bombs on German towns – the home-towns of some of the children's relatives and friends.

In our classrooms formal lessons continued in an orderly fashion, effectively instilling in us the three Rs. From these we gained a grounding that has benefited us ever since. Although we were not fully aware of the great tragedies of the Pacific conflict, the war there did influence our school routine. After the first bombing of Darwin by Japanese planes in February, 1942, we had the excitement of school air-raid drills.

Our once beautiful school garden was transformed into an interesting network of deep trenches. We were instructed to listen for sirens set off in the town fire station, and made to march in lines towards the trenches. We had to crouch down with our hands behind our heads. Alternatively, if a really sudden raid should ever occur, we were to remain in our classrooms, huddled beneath our desks. Our head teacher emphasised that we were to listen for three sirens: a 'red siren', a 'yellow siren' and a 'white siren'. Each sound apparently meant something different, but I could never understand how we might recognise sounds that were coloured.

At school, further excitement was generated by our efforts to raise money for the Schools Patriotic Fund, known as the SPF. We did this by collecting newspapers, rags, silver foil, old car batteries and rubber tyres, all of which were carefully weighed and valued. The totals earned us individual points, represented by enamelled metal badges, with bars attached as our totals grew. Those badges were worn proudly as a signal of our loyalty to Australia.

We also showed our loyalty by volunteering to knit articles for the Forces Comforts Fund and the Red Cross. Knitting scarves, balaclavas and socks for the troops was a pleasant pastime, although the only acceptable wools were dull khaki and dark navy. However, for the Red Cross, we were allowed to use any wools that we could scrounge. As I loved working with bright yarn, and as I could never manage the four needles required for knitting socks, my small fingers produced mainly scarves in strange shapes and weird colours.

Our teachers encouraged us to become the pen-friends of English school children who were enduring air-raids and severe food rationing. They sent us letters consisting of tiny lines, cross written on very thin single sheets of paper. We pitied those children for not being able to add drawings and decorations to their news, as we would normally do. We felt very fortunate not to have to economise to this extent.

Although our State School was strictly secular, weekly Religious Instruction lessons were conducted by visiting members of the four Lutheran congregations. Church of England, Roman Catholic and Methodist religious teachers also visited to teach their faiths. To me, a non-Lutheran, it seemed not at all strange that the Tanunda Lutherans were divided; I simply accepted this as a fact of life. I became used to hearing, 'Oh, we belong to Pastor Held...', or 'We go by Pastor Hebart...'

I never witnessed any tension between children in the different Lutheran factions. I envied those from the Tabor church because that building had (and still has) a spire topped by a cross resting on a golden ball. Someone had once persuaded me that the ball was full of gold sovereigns – unimaginable

wealth in a time when a silver sixpence would be treasured by a child. I also admired the Tabor children because they attended Saturday School – a superior version of my Anglican Sunday School.

My own family, in which each parent belonged to different religious denomination, gave me the advantage of ‘having a foot in both camps’ so to speak. My mother regularly took me to St Aidan’s, the humble little Church of England in McDonnell Street, where the congregation included a number of former Lutherans who had ‘gone over to the other side’. However, because I had been baptised in my father’s Lutheran church, St Paul’s, we always attended that Christmas Eve service. There I was thrilled to receive a large bag of lollies from under the church Christmas tree. And on the next morning I collected more lollies from St Aidan’s. Double benefit!

Our war-time school experiences taught us that hard work was not only desirable but also satisfying. Tanunda men and women worked tirelessly to keep the town running. After war had been declared on Japan, the government introduced a limited form of conscription. However, most men remained in Tanunda because they were involved in jobs which were classified as “reserved occupations”, vital to the war effort.

As the war continued, Tanunda farmers and their families toiled to produce fruit and vegetables in huge quantities. Much of the Barossa Valley floor was devoted to vegetables, especially carrots. Compared with the landscape today, there were far fewer vineyards. Wheat and barley were cultivated to provide bread flour and to feed poultry and farm animals. Around the town stretched neat fields containing apricot and peach trees. Their fruits were canned, dried or turned into jam to feed the armed forces.

Men worked at physical jobs, in professional roles, and essential businesses. My father ran a motor garage, selling rationed fuel and maintaining pre-war models of cars, trucks and tractors. At that time many people still used horse-drawn vehicles and farm implements. My father’s premises were once a blacksmith’s shop, and a part of this remained beside the motor business. As

a small child I loved its smoky black interior, where red hot iron bands were applied to wagon wheels, and towering draught horses were fitted with new shoes.

After work most men would relax at one of the local pubs until 6 o'clock closing sent them home to their families. The traditional German male groups such as the Rifle Shooting Club, the Tanunda Town Band and the Kegel Club were no longer operating. Some men performed special duties related to defence. After dark they acted as air-raid wardens, prowling the blacked-out streets of Tanunda, making sure that no lights were showing. I recall my father going out in his dark coat and tin hat, torch in one hand and gas mask in the other. To a child, it seemed an exciting time.

Wives were kept very busy raising children, growing vegetables, keeping hens, doing washing and house cleaning, and cooking family meals. Without modern equipment these tasks required effort and imagination during the war-time food rationing. After clothes rationing began in 1942, the mending and making-over of garments also took time. Every fortnight I saw mothers pushing their babies in wicker prams to the Tanunda railway station. There, in a 'Baby Health Train' carriage, a visiting Nurse would weigh and check each child, and give strict instructions on baby care.^{viii}

Women also worked hard for the Red Cross, for the CWA^{ix} and their Church Guilds. They provided flowers and food for balls, 21st birthday parties and weddings. Local newspapers always described what the brides and bridesmaids wore – usually referred to as the "frocking". The *Australian Women's Weekly* was also widely read in its reduced war-time format.^x

Women were very important in the life of the town during World War 2. Their many talents continued to be exercised after the war ended, for example, in preparing lavish agricultural displays at the Tanunda show. Above all many Tanunda women were involved in organising the Barossa Vintage Festival that was first instituted in 1947.

For teenagers, leisure time was regulated. Girls and boys from strict Lutheran families belonged to youth groups known as the 'Y P's, which organised bible study sessions and sedate social gatherings. These were occasions when modestly-clothed girls might meet their future husbands. However, a few daring young Tanunda women sometimes dressed smartly to go on dates with soldiers. I noticed them flouncing along Murray Street, arm in arm with their uniformed boy-friends. In their floral dresses and high heels, with their long hair either swept up in 'pompadour' rolls or encased in velvet 'snoods', they seemed like glamorous film stars.

The two other major Barossa Valley towns, Nuriootpa and Angaston, were also affected by the war, but their atmospheres were different. As a child I sensed a rivalry and occasional hostility between people living in self-contained Tanunda and those living in Angaston and Nuriootpa.

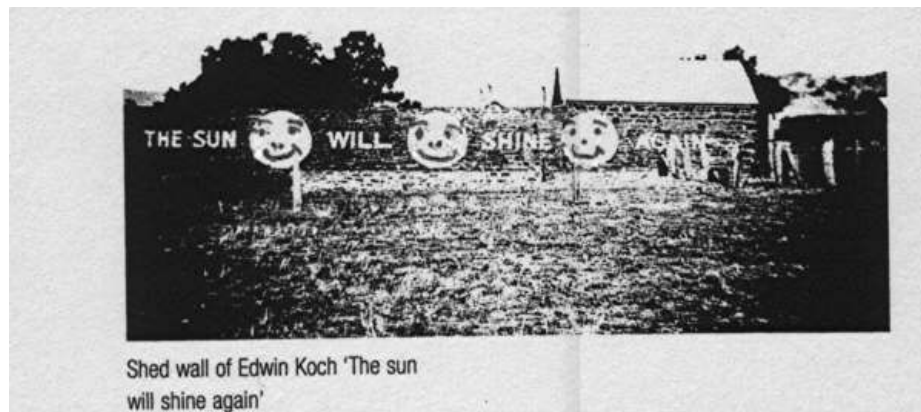
Angaston, nestled in the hills, seemed to me almost another country. It was a town distinguished by strong Scottish and English traditions deriving from the influence of the Angas family. German Lutherans had settled there, but their descendants formed a minor proportion of the population. When World War 2 began some Angaston residents regarded them as Nazi sympathisers. Their Lutheran church was burnt down by persons unknown. Throughout the war Angaston remained as fiercely anti-German as it was anti-Japanese. To give warning of approaching Japanese planes, patriotic mothers climbed a hill to do duty as 'spotters'^{xi} But their children still talked of Tanunda as a German enemy stronghold, a place where Lutheran church spires were painted silver to guide Hitler's bombers.^{xii}

By contrast, Nuriootpa was populated by many German descendants. In the late 1930s it was already the most industrial of the three towns. It was distinguished by a great community spirit, which was eventually formalised in the establishment of a community-owned hotel and major store. To some people the word 'community' meant 'communist', a term much despised by the Tanunda Lutherans. Nuriootpa therefore seemed 'tainted'. This war-time

tension between Nuriootpa and Tanunda now seems extraordinary, because shortly after the war it was transformed into friendly competitiveness.

I have attempted to describe how the traditional orderliness and energy of Tanunda were maintained through the years 1939 to 1945. For me and most local children, the town was a relatively secure and happy place in which to live during a terrible world-wide conflict.

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The image of the Koch barn is significant because those smiling sunny faces once concealed a trio of Swastikas. The story of this transformation is quite complicated and can be found in the Koch family history records in the Mortlock Library. But for now, I see the photo as an apt metaphor: the sun really did shine on my Tanunda childhood, despite the shadows of war.

References

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