

'The King's Most Loyal Enemy Musicians'

Experiences of internment on the Isle of Man during World War II.

by Maurice Powell

This modest article, the first in an occasional series about eminent musicians, composers and conductors who were interned on the Isle of Man during World War II, recounts the experiences of three young men from Germany and Austria: Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel and Peter Schidlof, who, in 1948, formed one of the most famous string quartets of the post-war era, the Amadeus Quartet.

From refugee to enemy alien.

Up to May 1940 refugees from Nazi Germany - most of them Jewish - and Germans and Austrians already resident in Britain - 'The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens' - were not automatically suspected of being spies, and fewer than six hundred had been interned in Britain. Attitudes towards refugees, and those already resident in Britain, hardened following the invasion of Norway in April and the Netherlands in May, and the fall of Dunkirk in late May and early June. Colonel Henry Burton, the Conservative member for Sudbury, Suffolk, asked the House of Commons if it would not be 'far better to intern all the lot and then pick out the good ones'. Hysteria quickly overcame logic, and sentiments such as 'Collar the lot!' were soon heard in Tynwald.

As early as October 1939* there were warnings in the local newspapers about 'aliens in our midst', and it was estimated that between forty and sixty Germans or Austrians were resident in the Island; but by the end of January 1940, it was estimated that one hundred 'aliens' were at liberty in the Island although under police surveillance. An Aliens Tribunal appointed by the Lieutenant Governor and tasked with examining 'the *bona fides* of enemy aliens residing in the Island and not yet interned', stipulated that all must show just cause why they should not be interned.** One week later the *Ramsey Courier* under the heading 'Immediate internment of Aliens Demanded', reiterated the Governor's view that 'there is only one good Hun - a dead Hun!' for in his opinion many refugees were suspected of being Nazis: 'There is not an enemy alien in the Isle of Man who can possibly be above suspicion'. ***

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 06.10.1939; *Green Final*, 27.01 1940. ** *Isle of Man Times*, 07.06.1940. *** *Isle of Man Times*, 15.06.1940.

After being arrested and detained, internees were placed in one of three categories* and sent to one of the transit or temporary camps such as Kempton Park (Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey, 'a tent city' on the famous racecourse); Huyton, Merseyside ('a miserable place', noted for poor conditions); Press Heath (an old WWI training camp near Whitchurch, Shropshire, used mainly for screening German and Austrian refugees), and the infamous Warth Mills, Bury, Lancashire, from June 1940 'the internment camp that time forgot'. A disused, dark, near derelict, rat and lice infested, brutish place 'like something out of Dickens', the floors were slippery with oily cotton waste, machine sludge and general filth. The internees slept on wet *palliasses* in inadequate sanitary conditions (some 2,000 internees shared eighteen water

taps, one bath, sixty outside buckets but no toilets), and poor-quality food. The Red Cross declared the complex of buildings 'unfit for human habitation'.

* Category A: interned immediately suspected of Nazi sympathies; B: exempt from internment, but subject to restrictions decreed by a Special Order; C: a friendly alien, genuine refugee from Nazi Germany, free from internment and restrictions. After May 1940 with the threat of a German invasion high, some refugees and others already resident in Britain were interned regardless of category. Thousands of internees were progressively released after August 1940.

'In prison' is where they liked to say they met'.*

Huge crowds turned out to witness the arrival of the first male enemy aliens to be interned in detention camps in Douglas in 1940. Once disembarked, they - probably including our three young musicians - were marched along the promenade under guard towards their destination, and it was seen by all that the majority were 'youths in their early twenties and nearly all of them were Jews'. Did they notice, and even admire, the imposing Palace Ballroom and Coliseum, and further along the promenade the Derby Castle Ballroom and Opera House as they trudged up the slight rise towards Port Jack and yet again as they arrived at the Onchan Camp situated in some sixty houses on Royal Avenue West?*** After Warth Mills, the Douglas camps must have seemed like holiday camps!

* See *The Amadeus Quartet, The Men and the Music*, Daniel Snowman, Robson Books, London 1981.

** Onchan Camp was opened on 11th June 1940, the third Douglas internment camp to be commissioned initially for 350 persons rising to 1300. It closed to Germans and Austrians in July 1941, re-opened in September that year for Italians, and remained operational until November 1944. See Yvonne M. Cresswell (editor), *Living with the Wire*, Manx National Heritage, 1994, revised 2010.

The seventeen-year-old violinist Norbert Brainin came from a family of furriers originally from Byelorussia living in Vienna who were given permission to emigrate to England after the *Anschluss* through contact with Lord Winton.* He arrived in England on Christmas Eve 1938 and took violin lessons in London with Carl Flesch and later Max Rostal. Brainin** was interned at an old WWI training camp at Prest Heath in Shropshire in 1940 but was transferred to Warth Mills where he met Siegmund Nissel.

Siegmund 'Sigi' Nissel was born in Munich. He arrived in England during the winter of 1938-9 as part of the *Kindertransport* scheme. Like Brainin, he also took violin lessons from Max Rostal. He recalled that among his co-inmates at the Onchan Camp was a *cordon bleu* chef who ensured that 'dinner was always excellent'. Whilst in the camp he gave recitals on Christmas and Boxing Day 1940, and to raise money for bombed children in London.***

* Nicholas Winton helped organise the transportation of thousands of mainly Jewish children from Czechoslovakia in 1938-39

** Brainin was described as 'a young violinist', aged 17' in the *Onchan Pioneer* issue 21, 19.01.1941.

*** See *Onchan Pioneer*, issue 23, 05.05.1941.

Hans (later Peter) Schidlof was born in Göllersdorf near Vienna, a small village in the wine-growing country towards the Czech border. He and his sister arrived in England in December 1938, and he was awarded a music scholarship to Blundell's School at Tiverton in Devon. In

September or October, 1939 he was arrested and taken to Ladbroke Grove Police Station in West London,* transferred to Prees Heath, where he met Brainin, and then to Warth Mills where he met the pianist Ferdinand Rauter (he was subsequently interned at the Mooragh Camp, Ramsey, for six months, and later encouraged our three musicians to form the Amadeus Quartet), and finally to Onchan where he met Nissel.

* See Snowman *ibid*.

Our three musicians later recalled listening to the progress of the war on the camp radio, and attending lectures, 'which were of a very high standard, at the Popular University, housed at number 45 and 46 Royal Avenue West, where, according to Schidlof, they came into contact with the '*dramatis personae* of Britain's post-war intellectual and cultural elite', and where they took music theory lessons. Their musical activities were occasionally mentioned in the camp newspaper, *The Onchan Pioneer*, and they gained valuable experience of performing in public during their time there.* A charcoal drawing of a violinist by the artist Klaus Meyer at that time is probably Schidlof. ** In a letter from the Onchan Camp in January 1941, Schidlof wrote: 'Sunday's concert was a success. Bach went very well. I am now going through the César Franck Sonata with Prof. Salomon'.

* See *The Onchan Pioneer*, issue 8, 29.09.1940 for details of a Grand Concert in the Derby Castle on Tuesday 8th October.

* See Cresswell, *ibid*, p. 80

They were released in 1941 – possibly as early as January - under the category of 'persons of eminent distinction who have made outstanding contributions to Art' following representations on their behalf by the Musicians Refugee Committee whose members included the concert pianists Myra Hess, Ferdinand Rauter and Harriet Cohen, Max Rostal, and Vaughan Williams. It had taken the authorities a year to decide that three teenage Jewish musicians did not pose a threat to national security.

The English 'cellist Martin Lovett - an occasional player with the Halle Orchestra and principal 'cellist with the Sadler's Wells Orchestra - joined the others to form a string quartet in 1946, and the début of the Amadeus Quartet took place at the Wigmore Hall on 19th January 1948, in a programme of quartets by Mozart, Verdi and Beethoven. The rest, as they say, is history.

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