



Finding something good

Willy Field, a German Jewish refugee, survived Dachau and came to Britain in 1939. He didn't set foot on German soil again until 1945 – driving a Cromwell tank for his regiment, the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars.

Interview by **MELANIE McFADYEAN**

Willy Field exudes warmth and good cheer; he is one of those rare people you feel you have known all your life even as you shake his hand on your first encounter – in my case on his doorstep in North London at the house he has shared with his wife Judy since 1954.

Thanks to historian Helen Fry's excellent biography *From Dachau to D Day*, I knew his story. In her book, Fry remarks on his lack of bitterness. But I was sceptical. How could someone who has been victim and witness of Nazi brutality not harbour bitterness somewhere in his soul?

Willy was living happily with his family in Bonn aged twelve

when the horror began. It was 1933 and the Nazis had just taken power. He remembers waking to the sound of hundreds of SA men marching and singing the Horst Wessel song. A year later he saw the Nazis burning books and Jewish shops set on fire; he saw the body of his best friend, shot dead for making a remark about the Hitler Youth. He was thrown out of school for being Jewish. And then on Kristallnacht in November 1938 the Gestapo came for him. A hundred Jews were killed and some 25,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Willy was taken to Dachau, where he experienced the prelude to the full-scale slaughter that was to come. On arrival the prisoners were forced to strip, were hosed down, and had their heads shaved. He saw people walk into the electrified

barbed wire fence, choosing suicide rather than the cruelty and insanity of the camp's regime. When someone failed to appear for roll call, all were made to stand in freezing cold for 48 hours and fifty people died. Willy tried to prop up a fellow inmate but he collapsed and was taken away, never to be seen again.

His parents managed to get him a visa and a work permit for the UK, with which they bargained for his release. But freedom came with caveats: 'I was told if you talk about what happened you will be taken back to the concentration camp and never be let out. When I came home in 1939 to my parents and my family, I didn't tell them what happened in the concentration camp.' He spent four weeks with his family before leaving for the UK in May 1939. He would never see his father, mother or brother again.

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He arrived in the UK with no English, one small suitcase and ten shillings and found work in the East End fitting sewing machines for making army uniforms.

In June 1940 he was arrested again – this time by British police. He was one of 2,000 German and Austrian Jewish internees herded onto the troopship *Dunera*. They weren't told where they were going and were kept 23 hours a day for nine weeks in foul and overcrowded conditions. 'Some people called it the floating concentration camp. I wouldn't go as far as that. We were below deck, no ventilation, no proper beds. There were a few hammocks that older people slept in – we slept on wooden tables. We had nothing. I read a book of someone who was on the *Dunera* as well. He described it as much worse than I did. He was right. But I cannot do that. It is not my nature – I always found something good in something bad.'

And that is the key to this quietly remarkable man. 'I've never forgotten what happened and I never will forget, but for me you have to go ahead.' His wife Judy smiles; she is used to his optimism, and capacity to forgive. 'He's just like that,' she says.

'Judy is right, I am just like that. People say to me: why are you like this? You should be a nasty person. But it's my nature. I can't change. I was always a happy boy. Up to 1933 I was very happy, I had a wonderful childhood. I was brought up within the Jewish religion, but we were a liberal family. I believe in Jewishness, I believe in God, but I do not practise. What I do and always have since I was a little boy, is say something before I go to sleep – "Give us a good day tomorrow and thank you very much for the day" – and I've been doing that ever since I remember. Even during the war.'

Judy and Willy met in London after the war. She was also a refugee from Germany and her father died in Auschwitz. 'The first time we met I liked her very much, she was lovely looking, beautiful long hair. She didn't really like me because I talked about the football league.' But Judy relented. 'She was easy going and we got along fantastically.' They have been getting on fantastically for 61 years and have two sons, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Willy, still a passionate football fan and a lifelong Arsenal supporter, goes to the matches with one of his sons and two grandsons. 'Arsène



Opposite: Willy Field, August 2008

Above: Willy Field serving in the British forces during the war

Wenger sent me a very nice letter congratulating me on being such a long-standing member and hoping that I carried on. I shall carry on as long as I can walk down. I walk everywhere.'

After the gruelling *Dunera* journey, Willy was dumped in an internment camp in Australia where, behind the barbed wire, football was a major distraction. A year later the British, finally embarrassed by the scandalous treatment of the internees, offered them the chance to return to the UK and join the Pioneer Corps. Four thousand men enlisted, many of whom went into active combat. As Helen Fry says: 'The risks were high: Germans caught behind enemy lines were tortured and executed as traitors. The general public don't realise their contribution. The nation should be grateful to these silent heroes.'

Had Willy told them where to stick their offer, nobody could have blamed him – why should he put his life on the line for the British after all he had endured at their hands? He says he was giving something back to the country which had saved his life; he was protecting democracy and doing his bit to resist Hitler.

Following two years training in the Pioneer Corps, Willy joined the Royal Armoured Corps as a tank driver, changing his name from Hirschfeld to Field in case he was captured by the Germans. Posted to the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars, he drove a Cromwell tank and took part in the Normandy landings, arriving in France three days after D-day. He was involved in heavy combat and was wounded in Holland when his tank took a direct hit. The only survivor, he still feels the pain of losing his comrades. After he recovered he returned to frontline fighting, reaching Germany in 1945.

In the midst of war he hoped his family had survived. 'You always hope.' And how did he feel towards the Germans he encountered? 'I never had any hate.'

But it would be a mistake to see Willy's good nature as making him any kind of push-over. Far from it: 'When I went through the German villages everything looked terrible, but I was never sorry about that. I was thinking "You deserved it. It was your own fault." I've never felt sorry for the Germans, never mind whether they were good Germans or bad Germans. When I went to Berlin for the first time it was completely

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destroyed. The Germans were picking up bricks to build houses. They told me silly stories – “Oh how bad we’ve got it here. The Russians did this to us” – but I told them I didn’t feel sorry for them. Why should I? “You brought it all on yourself. You did it. You couldn’t say Heil Hitler or get rid of the Jews quick enough in 1933. You deserve everything you got.”

It was a wonderful moment for Willy when he drove his tank past Churchill at the victory parade in Berlin. But soon after, he heard what had become of his family through the Red Cross. ‘My father died in a camp in Cologne on his way to a concentration camp, but my mother was able to bury him in a Jewish cemetery in Cologne. That was a miracle. I only found that out twenty years ago. My mother, my brother, my uncle and my aunts were taken to the concentration camp in Minsk and died in 1941 or 42.’ Only he and his twin sister Thea survived – she too had made it to the UK before the war.

For a long time Willy didn’t talk to his sons about the past: “They knew where I came from and what I did, but I never talked about the horrors of the concentration camp. It was difficult – you didn’t want to talk about it.’ But in 1997 he started visiting a group of primary-school children in Bonn and told them his story. He went on visiting them every year and in 2001 he returned to Dachau for the first time, accompanied by the children he had got to know. Once again he stood on that parade ground, he saw the ledger with his name registering his arrival, he found the hut he had been confined to. It was overwhelming.

Willy still has a trace of his German accent but feels British and thinks and dreams in English, although he counts in German. England, he says, gave him his freedom. It gave him a life he has enjoyed, a marriage, two sons, a respectable career and much else.

I realised I was trying to elicit ‘meaning of life’ revelations from Willy. But it’s not his style. His words are simple, direct and understated. Despite his experiences, his bravery, and his resilient spirit, he is modest, forgiving and straightforward. That is his wisdom.

• Helen Fry *From Dachau to D-Day: The Refugee who Fought for Britain* (History Press, £20)

• Willy Field’s story can also be accessed through the AJR audio-visual Holocaust Testimony Archive: see www.refugeevoices.co.uk



Profitable Wonders

by James Le Fanu

Being the right size

‘EVERYWHERE nature works true to scale and everything has its proper size,’ wrote the great biologist D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson. ‘Man and trees, birds and fishes have their appropriate dimensions and their narrow range of magnitude.’ A hare could scarcely be the size of a hippopotamus and remain a hare, nor a whale the size of a herring and remain a whale. And we too could not be much bigger than we are without becoming vulnerable to the host of misfortunes encountered by the nine-and-a-half-foot tall ‘Alton Giant’ Robert Wadlow, born in Alton, Illinois in 1918, and ‘moulded on a vast scale, colossal in bulk, gargantuan in all proportions.’

As a young boy he could easily pick his father up and carry him around, but by his early teens his prodigious strength had begun to wane, his bones and muscles outstripping their capacity to function effectively. He became progressively crippled by arthritis of his weight-bearing joints, the hips and knees, and needed sticks to support his frame as the muscles of his lower limbs provided insufficient leverage for him to stand upright. He died aged 22 having had a miserable life, ‘deeply resentful of the fate that had fashioned him on so preposterous a scale.’

This necessity to be the right size for what you are illustrates in a particularly dramatic way that central feature of all forms of life – the ‘unity of form’, the interdependence or correlation of one part with another on which the functioning of the organism as a whole depends.

Thus the most striking feature of an elephant is (obviously) how big it is. But on reflection, each of its many distinctive features are a corollary of its size – that astonishing flexible trunk, the long tusks, flapping ears, pillar-like legs and soft deep treading feet, its high intelligence and complex social behaviour.

So why the trunk – Kipling’s *Just So Stories* aside? The mechanics of supporting its massive dome-shaped head require the elephant to have a very short neck reinforced by powerful stabilising

muscles attaching it to the body. There is little range of movement here, indeed the elephant is the only four-legged animal that cannot lower its head to the ground to eat and drink. A serious disadvantage indeed. Hence it needs an appendage to feed itself, that remarkable prolongation of upper lip and nose, the highly flexible trunk. But that is not all it does, for within the animal world the attributes of this extraordinary structure are only echoed by those of the primate hand: picking and grabbing, lifting and pulling, smelling and exploring, sucking in and spraying out water and mud, caressing and playing with its fellows.

He deeply resented the fate that had fashioned him on so preposterous a scale...

This acute sensitivity of the trunk to touch and smell is paralleled by that further unique characteristic – those massive flapping ears, capable of detecting the low-frequency sounds generated within their capacious bodies with which elephants communicate with each other over distances of several kilometres. This novel means of communication accounts for how a herd of elephants not in sight of each other can still move in a coordinated way.

These highly developed senses presuppose considerable intelligence, which in turn is inseparable from that further corollary of being big – the practical difficulties of reproduction. This requires not just a protracted gestation of 22 months but a prolonged youth and adolescence during which the young must be tended and instructed. This in turn requires that most attractive feature of these wonderful creatures – the intense sociality and mutual sympathy characteristic of elephantine family life. There is much more of course, but as with the elephant, so too all forms of life whose diverse parts are, as D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson put it, ‘inseparably associated and moulded with each other.’