GERMAN INTERNMENT
The Case of Pastor Anton Hiller

by Dan O’Donnell

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In time of war a nation has the right to curb behaviour inimical to its security, including the power to incarcerate, expel or even execute spies and traitors. In healthy democracies an uneasy acquiescence hangs over such unfettered powers. If mere suspicion is accepted as proof of guilt in wartime, then natural justice, like truth, is at risk.

Such was the case of Anton Hiller, born in 1879 at Murtoa, Victoria, son of a Lutheran Pastor who emigrated to Australia in 1876. From 1900 the young Anton studied theology at the Lutheran Missionary Institute in Switzerland, served as a missionary in British India and in 1909 accepted a call to Tanunda, South Australia. Two years later he was called to Pleasant Hills in the New South Wales Riverina where he set up a branch of the Red Cross and a Returned Soldiers’ Fund. In 1919 he answered a call to Dugandan in the Fassifern where he was known as a devout man of God, a pillar of the Boonah community and influential member of the Lutheran Church in Queensland.

In January 1934, 75 officers and crew of the German cruiser Karlsruhe visited Boonah, the grateful commander presenting Pastor Hiller with two etchings of his vessel. The day was marked by a civic reception, a parade along High Street and warm Queensland hospitality. One photograph was endorsed “To Pastor Hiller, with cordial thanks for the unforgettable hours in Boonah.” It was to become damning evidence of Hiller’s Nazi collaboration.

In August 1938, the swash-buckling Count Felix Von Luckner was also feted by the Boonah Shire Council and local dignitaries during a three-day sojourn amongst German kinsmen. Von Luckner also left photographs of himself and his vessel “in most faithful gratitude for the loving and tender reception and the beautiful hours spent”.

When World War II erupted in September 1939, both visits became the subject of enormous speculation and ultimately proof of Hiller’s Nazi involvement. His German background and his fluency in German which he taught voluntarily at Boonah Rural School generated
speculation about his pro-Nazi sympathies. On 6 July and 10 October 1940, his home and church were searched for incriminating evidence. For two years he was watched and on 3 March 1943, he was arrested and interned at Enoggera in Brisbane. After a Supreme Court hearing on 31 March he was transferred south to Tatura Internment Camp in Victoria. On 9 March 1944 he was released.

The case against Hiller was summarized by Hon. Justice Philp in the Supreme Court on 31 March 1943:

The Security Department say that you are pro-Nazi and that you have spread Nazi propaganda ... They say that because of that you being a Pastor of the Church and an influence, may be a danger to Australia... they say that you have praised Hitler... They say that you have been a channel for propaganda in that you have had or procured or had sent to you cinematograph films which were of a pro-Nazi nature and it is suggested that you have advocated that Asia should be dominated by the Japanese...

Hiller vigorously denied the allegations, pointing out that he had always striven to conduct himself "in conformity with Holy Writ". He mentioned his work at his previous parish during the First World War, and his part in setting up a Red Cross Branch in Boonah. Not many months earlier, when Japanese invasion seemed imminent, he and his wife, a trained nurse, had offered the parsonage as an emergency hospital. He mentioned that thirty of his parishioners had volunteered for military service during the present war, countering the Crown case that he actively opposed the allied cause and had threatened to ex-communicate any members of his congregation who enlisted. He did not retreat from his ardent belief that "Asia should be for the Asians". The rapid post-war withdrawal of colonial powers proved he was simply ahead of his time.

The authorities rejected evidence supporting the Pastor, even from such respected families as the Bells of Coochin Coochin. Major B.C. Bell had been asked by the Commonwealth Investigation Bureau as early as September 1939 to inquire into Hiller’s loyalties. Bell reported that "in every instance the reports of his disloyalty are only hearsay" and the investigators minuted the Pastor’s file "Bell states: I do know however that his sermons are definitely anti-Nazi." The very day before his arrest, Hiller had been elected chairman of the Ministers’ Fraternity representing the majority of religious denominations in the Boonah district.

It counted for nothing. Only evidence damaging to Hiller from protected unidentified sources was presented. Much was made of his role in the well-publicised visit of Von Luckner in 1938, yet many leading figures in Boonah had been delighted to be photographed with the German celebrity. Only those found in Hiller’s possession, however, were to constitute proof of disloyalty and anti-British sentiment.
The pastor was accused of being a channel for propaganda. On the first raid on his home, a number of films were seized as evidence. "The films proved to be an insidious and subtle form of propaganda in favour of Germany," one Intelligence Officer reported, "probably designed with the two-fold object of arousing a feeling of nostalgia among people of German origin, and of impressing foreigners, particularly young people, with the apparent happiness of the German people, and the devotion to peaceful pursuits." The films were exclusively about picturesque parts of Germany, and showed German youths hiking and sailing. The commentary was in English. Where was the subversion and propaganda? "The most remarkable feature was the entire absence of anything in the nature of militarism, or of direct propaganda in favour of the nazi system" the Intelligence Officers reported. "No uniform of any kind was seen on any of the films. They simply show pictures of a happy, contented, industrious and prosperous Germany, depicting a people so engrossed in their tasks and simple pleasures that they could not possibly harbour any thoughts of aggression."

The extrapolation of non-sequitur conclusions from innocuous evidence recurs repeatedly. The clickety-clack of Mrs Hiller's spinning loom aroused suspicions of radio transmissions. A torchlight to locate the family possum in the backyard tree excited whispers about morse-code messages of wartime secrets. Innocent family photographs sent for developing excited a wild spy-hunt in the local pharmacy. The litany of unsubstantiated rumours and suspicions became fact in the Report on Internee Q527 (Anton Hiller): "Dossier shows previous history of subversive activity accentuated by influence he had over his flock." Even the two censored letters he was allowed to write each week to his wife Pauline condemned him as "always derogatory of official arrangements and camp conditions." A dossier on his 10 year old daughter was even sought.

When Hiller’s home was first searched for incriminating evidence, his co-operation in the search also condemned him. "Hiller and his wife ... are very cunning," the Investigators reported: "They assisted by turning out their drawers etc. and they were very respectful to us and endeavoured to make it appear that they did not have anything to hide, which only goes to show their cunning in an attempt to make it appear that their actions were those of loyal persons." This was compounded when the Pastor, no doubt alarmed at what was happening to his Church records and family papers, requested a receipt only for the treasurer Von Luckner photographs. "This alone goes to show in what directions Hiller’s sympathies lie," the Investigators records on his file, "By asking for a receipt, he unconsciously disclosed his true feelings."

The most sobering fact is that Hiller’s case, although extreme, was by no means an isolated aberration.