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Kurt Wiese and the Kangaroo: A Fortunate Internment Story

German-born American Kurt Wiese (1887–1974) gained a remarkable reputation as an author of children's books and even more so as the illustrator of almost four hundred books for children and young people, among them American editions of such international favorites as Felix Salten's *Bambi* and *Bambi's Children*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Carlo Collodi's *Adventures of Pinocchio*, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and Aesop's *Fables*. Just as remarkable as his professional career is the story of Wiese's adventurous life in his younger years. When he finally settled in the United States in the late twenties, he brought with him impressions and observations from five continents, having travelled all over the globe partly of his own choice and partly caught up in the turmoils of history. These impressions are inscribed in much of Wiese's work which introduced young Americans to some of the characteristics of the peoples and places he had seen. Australia features in two self-written and illustrated books by Wiese, *Karoo, the Kangaroo* (1929) and a koala story *Buddy the Bear* (1936), as well as in his illustrations for a number of books by other authors, such as *Blackfellow Bundi, a Native Australian Boy* (1939) by Leila and W. K. Harris, *Australia Calling* (1946) by Margaret L. Macpherson, and *Australia in Story and Pictures* (1946), part of a series on foreign countries he illustrated, written by Marguerite Henry and published by Albert Whitman. Wiese's Australian connection provides quite an interesting historical tidbit, for ironically the gentle and endearing images of Australia conveyed in Wiese's writings and illustrations stem from an experience calling up the Australian convict tradition, that is from Wiese's years of forced internment as a German civilian prisoner during World War I.

Born and educated in the small Northern German town of Minden in Westfalia, Wiese "grew up under a remarkable collection of paintings of

the Düsseldorf school", as he writes in an autobiographical sketch (Kunitz and Haycraft 298), and he goes on: "A puppet show and books about foreign countries were two other factors of influence, although I never dared hope that one day I should see the countries I read about, with my own eyes." Despite artistic ambitions from an early age on, Wiese was to learn the export trade with China in Hamburg. His apprenticeship completed, his company sent him to China, where "after an unforgettable trip through Russia, through the snow-covered vastness of Siberia, along the edge of the Gobi desert, and last through fertile Manchuria", he spent six years of travelling and selling merchandise, studying the Chinese language and broadening his knowledge of the country and its people (Kunitz and Haycraft 298). When war broke out in 1914, Wiese went to the German colony of Tsingtao which was soon taken by Japanese troops. Captured by the Japanese, Wiese was handed over to the British authorities, and five years of internment began. After one year in Hong Kong, Wiese, together with other German nationals seized in the Pacific region, was shipped off to Australia for further and safer internment. At least in retrospect, Wiese seems to have viewed these rather unfortunate circumstances in the best possible light as they provided him with an opportunity to further explore some of the foreign regions he had read about: "Unforgettable again was the trip on board a small steamer through the islands of the South Seas and along the Great Barrier of Australia, till after three weeks our ship passed through the rock gates of Sydney harbour" (Kunitz and Haycraft 298). According to information provided by Australian Archives, Wiese's Australian internment began on 3 February 1916. He was kept at the Trial Bay Detention Barracks and deported back to Germany via Africa on the ship *Kursk* on 29 May 1919.



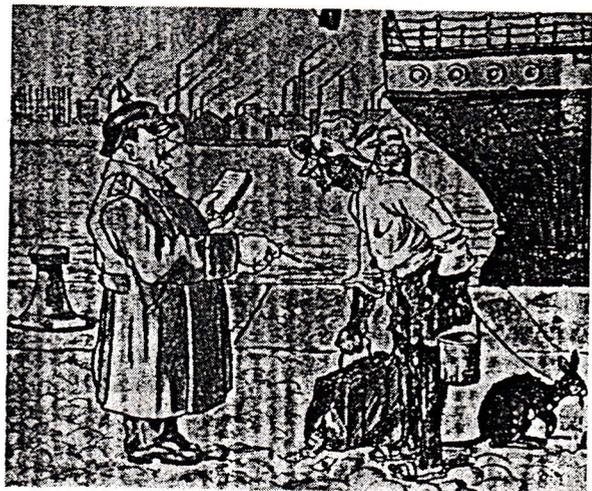
Kurt Wiese, Internee No. 5075

Much has been written in recent years about the internment of Germans in Australia during World War I, about the tensions between 'British' Australians and those who had the misfortune of having a German background, about real and imagined threats, and about the war effort at home which frequently resulted in injustice and in resentment and harassment of those deemed as enemy aliens. The most extensive study of Australian policy and practice of internment during World War I, *Enemy Aliens* (1989) by Sydney historian Gerhard Fischer, comprises the results of thorough research on life and conditions in German internment or concentration camps, as some of them were called. The chapter 'Beethoven's Fifth in Trial Bay: Culture and Everyday Life in an Australian Internment Camp' (246-266) examines conditions at Trial Bay, a beautifully situated jail on the coast of New South Wales midway between Sydney and Moreton Bay. Built in the late nineteenth century under a rehabilitation scheme which was later abandoned, the prison was reopened in 1915 to house enemy subjects. Trial Bay obviously became an 'elite' camp detaining mostly German civilian internees and prisoners of war of superior social standing (Fischer 248), including scholars, musicians, doctors and businessmen, and the internees were permitted "the enjoyment of conditions of semi-freedom not found in similar camps" (*The Story of Trial Bay Gaol* 13). To reduce the tensions and frustrations of camp

reality the internees in Trial Bay soon organised an active social and cultural life which included continuing education courses, theatre and concert performances, and the publication of a camp newspaper (*Welt am Montag*, i.e. World on Monday). Following rumors of an impending German raid to release the prisoners at Trial Bay, the camp was closed before the end of the war and the internees were transferred to a specially built 'Eastern Compound' at the German Concentration Camp Holdsworthy near Sydney. The Trial Bay internees remained separate from other sections of Holdsworthy camp of worse repute, and obviously retained their privileged status. Fischer's study briefly mentions Wiese, "the camp caricaturist" (xii, 205), and includes reproductions of several camp theatre programs with illustrations and cartoons by Wiese. They reveal that Wiese was already a skilled draughtsman at that time, and also testify to a good sense of humor. One delightful cartoon, for instance, presents a vision of the internee's homecoming to Hamburg: a voluminous German policeman confronts the returning internee whose ragged Australian outfit and gear, drawn in loving detail (complete with a little 'roo on a leash and a kookaburra on the shoulder), are in stark contrast to the spiked helmet authority awaiting him reproachfully.

Trial Bay and the circumstances and consequences of internment are, at the centre of interest in the Australian novel *Always Afternoon* (1981) by Gwen Kelly. *Always Afternoon* was made into a TV mini-series shown by SBS in Australia and in a dubbed version under the title *Gefangen in Paradies* by ARD in Germany in October 1988. Mainly a

Return to civilisation: the Hamburg policeman does not approve of the internee's Australian outfit.



romance by genre, the novel tells the fictitious story of the love between a local girl and a German internee, a gifted violinist deported from Hong Kong. However, the novel also provides a detailed and evidently quite accurate account of life and problems in and around the internment camp, and as the author indicates in her dedication and acknowledgements, this part of the novel is based on careful historical research. And indeed, even Wiese gets a fleeting mention in the novel when the frustrated protagonist Franz Müller, who like the majority of German internees rejects the Australian environment (cf. Fischer 263), at one stage contemplates, "Probably I should do something useful. Study the flora and fauna on the cliffs like Mr Weise [sic],¹ or write a monograph on the country, especially the so-interesting sheep, like Mr Haas" (Kelly 69). This calls up a German naturalist tradition represented for instance by Ferdinand von Müller. or, in a literary context, Baron von Krause in H. H. Richardson's *Ultima Thule*, and Wiese is seen as making the best of the situation by familiarising himself with what his surroundings have to offer.

This certainly fits the impression Kurt Wiese conveys in his later reminiscences. "Deeply impressed by the landscape and the animal world of Australia, I began to take up drawing and writing," Wiese writes in an autobiographical sketch (Kunitz and Haycraft 298), and in another statement he even gives his Australian experience the credit of having prompted his career:

Captured by the Japanese and handed over to the British, I was sent to Australia and lived for five years in the Australian bush as a prisoner of war. These years gave me the courage to throw the Chinese trade into the Australian dust and do the thing I wanted to do. Thus I began to draw.

(Qtd. in Bertram 196)

When Wiese returned to Germany in 1919, he evidently brought with him a great deal of material in sketchbooks. He began to write and illustrate children's books and designed exotic backgrounds for a film company formed by the well-known animal dealers Hagenbeck of Hamburg. When the film company had to close during the Depression, Wiese went to Brazil where he again travelled widely, and successfully continued his work as an illustrator and newspaper cartoonist. After three years he took up an attractive offer from the United States and eventually settled in New Jersey. He must have been a prolific writer and artist; for the year 1929 alone, *Contemporary Authors* lists Wiese as

illustrator for six books and author-illustrator of another two, *Karoo, the Kangaroo* and *The Chinese Ink Stick*. *Karoo*, Wiese's first book drawing on his Australian experience, was received favorably by the reviewers, in one case even enthusiastically:

While much less ambitious than the 'Jungle Book', it is perfect of its kind. Its utter simplicity carries conviction of greatness. 'Karoo' ought to be a nursery word. Best of all, it is a complete whole. Kurt Wiese's own illustrations are not less beautiful than his text. Even to the jacket the book is a distinguished modern achievement.

(Catharine Woodbridge in *Saturday Review of Literature* 6, 16 November 1929: 429; qtd. from *Book Review Digest* 1929 1026)

By 1931, as Bertram notes, "Wiese's reputation as a children's illustrator was well established in America" (199). In 1937 he received an award at the World's Fair in Paris, and his book *Fish in the Air* (1948) won the *New York Herald Tribune* Children's Spring Book Festival award. His last self-written book, *Thief in the Attic*, appeared in 1965, and he continued publishing until the early Seventies.² Wiese's death at the age of 87 was acknowledged in an obituary in the *New York Times* (29 May 1974: 44). His work is listed and discussed in numerous American handbooks and studies on children's authors and illustrators, and he even gets a short entry in the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. Apart from his ability to give his young readers a great deal of information about other parts of the world, Wiese has been particularly appreciated for his delightful animal representations, for his fine craftsmanship and his admirable diversity of style and technique ranging from Chinese brushes to lithography, for his gift of observation, his attention to detail and his humor.

In his research on American writer, journalist and historian C. Hartley Grattan, Laurie Hergenthan came upon a letter by Grattan to Vance and Nettie Palmer where the former warmly recommends Wiese's *Karoo* to his Australian friends:

First of all, there are two Australian books that I have recently come upon that I want to tell you about. The first is "Karoo the Kangaroo" by an Austrian, Kurt Wiese, who illustrated Felix Salten's "Bambi." "Karoo" is a book for children, excellently illustrated and with a charming story. Wiese spent the war years in an internment camp in the bush of Australia and kept a kangaroo as a pet. How he got there I

don't know, but that's the story. Have you see[n] it? if not, let me know and I'll send you a copy. (Letter of 5 January 1930. Palmer Papers ANL 1174/1/3445)

Whether or not the Palmers ever got a chance to see the book is not known. The fact is, however, that *Karoo* is extremely rare in Australia: only one copy could be located, in the State Library of Victoria, and is not available on interlibrary loan. Presumably some readers with American connections might find a copy of one of Wiese's Australian books in their children's books sections. If this is so, its donation to one of the library collections of Australiana, for instance at the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland, would surely be appreciated as a testimony to the quite successful outcome of Kurt Wiese's Australian internment experience.

¹ The misspelling of the name mirrors a common confusion deriving from the contrasting pronunciations in English and German of *ie* and *ei*.

² An extensive list of Wiese's work can be found in *Contemporary Authors* 11/12, a shorter version in *Something About the Author* 3 (both Detroit: Gale).

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