

What Difference Does Writing Make?

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Lost Pride

By Laura Ricketts

The pine tree that dominated the front courtyard of our home still splays its branches out in my memory. My Papa had clasped its beginnings as he watched his country curve and fuse into the horizon. He used to trace my fingers over the web of tiny scars that gloved his hand. Papa said that his fist had tightened as his home vanished and only the hot flush of blood from the pine cone had shaken his nostalgic trance.

At Christmas time we draped glass beads among the lower branches and the needles brushed my cheeks as gently as Papa's stories. The Christmas tree, my father told me, had its origins in Germany and the English had Prince Albert to thank for its introduction. Ironic that he used a tree to ensure I would not "forget my roots".

His fears were unfounded though, the language of my ancestors lived on in our home and my father's harsh tongue contrasted violently with the lazy undulations of the Australian accent — how could my heart forget what my ears could not?

Yet I never felt the soft duvet of snow succumb to my boots, nor did I feel the injustice of the post-war Allied occupation as my father had.

I grew up a wholly Australian child, raised in the rugged, thirsty land of the drovers. I grew up in "Thunderbolt" country, with summers that scorched your skin as raw a red as the earth one day and turned it brown as old gum leaves the next.

Among all this stood the pinnacle of my father's patriotism, a pencil-like by-product of our assimilation. The old tree inched higher, growing with the self-same constancy as the years since Papa's immigration.

Then came the disillusionment, the hush of anticipation in the country classroom, our stern old Headmaster, an ex-ANZAC; temporarily unseated in his authority. The static crackle of Menzies' voice, shattering my childhood innocence, resonating with spectacular effect;

“Fellow Australians,

It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that in consequence of a persistence by Germany and her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.”

I suppose it did not start instantly, the initial shock silenced their fears. As the death toll grew, though, the rancid tolerance of the impressionable community declined into spiteful names and ill-masked trepidation.

Nazi, Hitler, moustaches under noses and flaying legs in playground marches, all these from the children and from the adults no better; alien, enemy spy, German scum, if not ill-whispered it was written in their stance, the nervous shuffling of feet, the vagrant wandering of eyes.

Amidst the public disgust for the “old country”, I clung all the more to my childhood memories, the stories of soft snows and faultless, ordered forests. The rough bark of the old pine's embrace was the silent witness that sustained my faith.

Papa didn't see the children's taunts, but he heard their shrill echoes of his voice, knew I was not naturally withdrawn. At a certain point he stayed behind after the other parents had led their children away, home from school, but most of all home from “that German girl”. I sat outside amidst the scrub and scrawled my fingers in the dirt, the memory of swaying sunlight is with me yet, it engrossed my attention until the darkness stayed its dance and then my father came out. No-one ever knew, or asked for that matter what passed between them, the old fighter and the new enemy.

Papa's tall, Teutonic figure did not do justice to the true military man, the old soldier that stood within the schoolroom door, and they parted in a dignified silence. Papa took my hand, but we did not talk as we made our way home. As home loomed close, Papa hoisted me up upon lofty shoulders so I

swam in a dark sea of pine needles. Only then did he speak and he whispered of his own voyage across watery seas and let me examine his hand, a trophy of his past loss.

I heard the rhythmic thump of his pacing until they merged into dreams; how far into the night they marched I do not know.

In the morning the overseer of my childhood, that prolific growth of nostalgia, had gone.

My father had cut down the old pine tree.



Laura Ricketts wrote this essay in 2006 when she was in Year 12 at St Joseph's College, Banora Point, New South Wales.