

INTERNEES

Internment camp school days 1940–1943

Anita Dalheim – in her own words

Nostalgia

Looking back on my school days in Port Erin and Port St Mary during the war, I am filled with nostalgia. Being so unorthodox, as were the teachers too, they taught us more than we could have learned in a 'normal' classroom. It was hard to adapt to a school routine after that first hot summer of camp life. We'd had such freedom, spending our days dashing from 'Sunset View', on Port Erin promenade down to the fascinating life of beach and rock pools below. But our classes were never dull, the teachers being drawn from all walks of life. As some could not even master the English language, many classes were held in German – a very strange thing for me, having only been to English schools. Being taught the workings of 'ze hydraulic-press' in gutteral (throaty) English was quite a laugh. Mrs Diehl, our Biology teacher, used to take us to the Biological Station and we loved staring at the giant squids and octopuses. Mrs Kneen taught us to love poetry and also encouraged us to write our own. I



Last photo before the camera was confiscated, August 1939

remember writing an ‘epic’ poem on an orange, after seeing Spaldrick Bay strewn with a cargo of oranges – it was great fun.

Diverse curriculum

As our school was in a terrace of houses, up a slope from Port Erin lower promenade, the barbed wire ran close by. Needless to say, the temptation to climb through it was too great for us! We did, and were caught and reprimanded. When our school in the Port Mary camp was opened in Cowley’s Café (full of lovely corners in which to hide from our teachers), we missed our wonderful train rides to Port Erin. But, once again, the diversity of lessons and teachers made school life interesting. Learning Pitman’s Shorthand, advanced German Literature in German, Mathematics and Science way above our heads and German Bookkeeping (when I didn’t even understand *English* bookkeeping) were all in a day’s work. At least the rough, tough games and gymnastics on the beach, and in all weathers, were a great outlet for our vast store of energy (our teacher being a German army instructor). This was in contrast to the lady-like PT (physical training) classes given by a dancer in Dandy Hill Chapel in Port Erin.

How we loved reading Shakespeare on the ‘brows’ and even put on the playlet of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the public! The internees were very grateful for *any* kind of entertainment. In spite of a teacher who loved his lavender hair oil – and I didn’t – we read and loved Bernard Shaw. Our Scripture lessons were divided between our own Lutheran Pastor, Pastor Diehl, the Anglican Vicar and the Methodist Minister, Harry Johnson. The Catholic children had their own visiting Priest, while the Jewish children had their regular lessons with the Rabbi. I remember no problems there.

Life is greater than learning

Back in Port Erin again, with fewer children and fewer staff – internees being ‘released’ periodically – our classes were very small. I became the only pupil in the ‘matriculation class’. I was mostly left alone with a thick mathematics book. I would have been sunk without the answers at the back of it! However, something must have sunk in as I went to high school in Leeds once our family was released. I never felt that I’d lost three years of formal education. Far more, I felt that I had *gained*.

Later, when I was at Darlington Training College, our motto really struck home: *'Vita magis quam literis'* – 'Life is greater than learning' – which is what I had gained in the camp.