

A different kind of oppression

VISUAL ARTS The work of two 'alien' artists gives a moving insight into life in a British internment camp

AFTER THE outbreak of the Second World War, refugees who had escaped Nazi persecution by fleeing to this country found themselves facing a new kind of oppression. Considered a security risk by the British government, about 27,000 people were rounded up and sent to makeshift internment camps across the country.

Among those held at a camp in Huyton, near Liverpool, were two artists, Hugo Dachinger, an Austrian Jew, and Walter Nessler, a German dissenter. During their long months of incarceration, the two men scabbled together whatever materials they could find, including newsprint and wallpaper, to document what they saw around them. The surviving sketches and watercolours – which go on public display for the first time on Thursday at The Walker gallery, in Liverpool – provide a rare insight into the harshness of camp life.

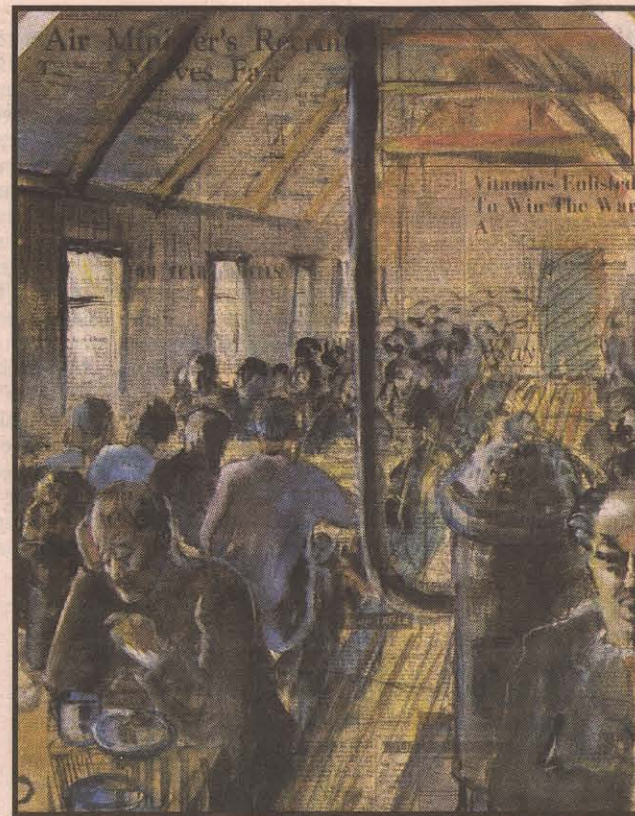
“The images capture the stifling monotony, uncertainty and quiet desperation,” says the curator, Jessica Feather. “As fierce opponents of the Hitler regime, some of whom had been imprisoned in concentration camps in Germany, the refugees were shocked to find themselves interned. Yet the British public was led to believe that they were Nazis, and when they arrived at Liverpool’s Lime Street station, they were shouted at and spat upon.”

The Huyton camp was set up on a housing estate. Through the double barbed-wire fence, internees were able to observe life going on in the estate. At first, they were crammed into houses but, as their numbers rose to almost 5,000, they spilt over into tents and huts. “Conditions were appalling,” Feather says. “The tents became waterlogged, and the men slept on straw mattresses. As a result, many suffered from chronic

influenza and pneumonia.”

Dachinger, who was born in 1908, had been a commercial artist in Vienna, but his personal work was influenced by Expressionism. His colourful drawings of the camp depict men washing their socks outside, or sitting slumped at a table. “He had a keen sense of humour,” Feather says. “He persuaded guards to give him newspapers, and often incorporated headlines into his work. One drawing is of men huddled round tables at mealtime, with the headline ‘Vitamins Enlisted to Win the War’ above them.”

Dachinger was transferred to a camp on the Isle of Man. Like most internees, he was released in 1941 and returned to work as a commercial artist. Nessler, who was born in Dresden in 1912, painted what Nazis called “degenerate art”. His bleak, monochrome sketches of the camp show figures struggling across the mud between tents



Hugo Dachinger's 'Dinner/Vitamins Enlisted to Win the War'

and huts. After his release, Nessler served in the British army. Later, he painted and taught in Paris, where he knew Picasso and Matisse.

The two artists remained friends, eventually settling in Hampstead. The art they produced at Huyton lay forgotten in attics until they died,

Dachinger in 1995 and Nessler in 2001. It will be shown alongside drawings of a German POW camp by Thomas Burke, a captured Liverpool artist and merchant seaman.

JANE HUGHES
*'Art Behind Barbed Wire',
The Walker, Liverpool (0151-478 4199) Thursday to 3 May*

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