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## Little Library, Big History

Book banning by conflagration was, in the runup to World War II, possibly European fascism's most indelible photographic portent of a human conflagration to come. Of course, it has competition. It competes with Kristallnacht of November 8-9, 1938, a purposefully unleashed violence and fireball remembered foremost by its aftermath of shattered glass. But I want to tell a story about this period of shameful Big History just in the context of books and Libraries, especially in the context of one very, very little Library. There is warmth in it that is not of pyres or blackened shards of glass.

My primary source is the book "The Island of Extraordinary Captives: A Painter, a Poet, an Heiress, and a Spy in a World War II British Internment Camp" (2022), by Simon Parkin. Yes, a British place of internment, named Hutchinson Camp, one of ten on the Isle of Man, opened July 1940, isolated in the Irish Sea. Prison to about 1200 men shortly after opening, none given due process, 80% or so Jewish, many Nazi-targeted artists, already refugees from the worst to come in Germany, the most innocent of fascism's victims mixed in with captured Nazis and suspected Nazi sympathizers. Horrifically, in some cases forced to bed in with them.

There were no doubt spies against Britain and potential spies among the Nazis, and why not bag the whole lot of German-speakers for ultimate homeland safety to Britain during wartime? That story is told in the book, including Winston Churchill's part in it. Not at all unlike the fates of Japanese-Americans and Japanese-Canadians during World War II in North America.

The Camp Commandant, Captain Hubert Daniel, tried to be encouraging of the internees self-organizing themselves into a place of modest comfort and culture, from which many came. An orphaned teen and novice artist like Peter Fleischmann could hear lectures and take training like nowhere else for him. No family outside for him to miss, just this unexpected access to a world of art and culture, though within barbed wire boundaries. He is a key protagonist, but not a typical one.

Besides the expansive, rectangular lawn between living units, buildings were set aside for common use: laundry, decontamination post, hospital, post office, workshops, coffeehouse, and a Library.

"Many sought solace in books. Within three weeks the camp library had more than 130 available to borrow, some donated, others, including Pelican editions of works by H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, were bought with the library's modest budget and marked as camp property with an official stamp. The librarians estimated that around 60 percent of internees used the library, the most popular texts including Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' and Daphne du Maurier's 'Rebecca.' Literature offered its precious gift of escapism."

Escapism in this sad instance, but for others, even in a still free but strained society as our own, public Libraries are also opportunities for inclusion: for the indigent, for those

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being judged irrationally by skin, hair or eye color, for alternate life styles, for those being bullied for being too nerdy, for those on the autism spectrum for being misunderstood -- for anyone seeking to understand the breadth of human nature. That tiny Hutchinson Library signals just how important such candles of hope were, and continue to be.

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