Deported after the first world war, Paul Dubotzki had created a remarkable record of life as an internee, writes Glenn Nicholls

With cigarette hanging from his lip, Paul Dubotzki poses with a group of young men at an internment camp at Torrens Island, South Australia, in 1915

The Enemy at Home: German Internees in World War 1 Australia
By Nadine Helmi and Gerhard Fischer | UNSW Press and Historic Houses Trust | $44.95

AFTER spending four years interned as an enemy alien during the first world war, Paul Dubotzki was deported from Australia to Germany in May 1919. “Huns to go,” proclaimed the Sun, and Dubotzki was one of those who went, never to return and seemingly leaving hardly a trace behind.

But Dubotzki left a record of his time in internment that has only now become visible. When he was deported he took with him most of his photographic collection, including hundreds of photographs from his time in internment. And now those photographs have resurfaced.

Working in the archives of the Trial Bay Gaol Museum, near the NSW coastal town of South West Rocks, researcher Nadine Helmi came across “several stunning black-and-white photographs” taken by a certain “Dubotzki.” By circuitous means, she contacted his descendants in Germany, who shared his trove of photographs. They provide a vivid portrait of life in internment and form the core of the remarkable book, The Enemy at Home, and an exhibition showing at the Museum of Sydney until 11 September.

Dubotzki grew up near Munich. In 1913, aged twenty-two, he left home, having been engaged as an official photographer on an expedition to China and Sumatra. He then made his way to Adelaide, where he lived in Rundle Street. After war broke out he was arrested as an enemy alien and interned on Torrens Island, formerly a quarantine island, in the Port River. The internees had to erect their own tents for shelter, and in a photo he composed on Torrens Island (above), Dubotzki stands cigarette in mouth in the middle of seven men and their tent. They sport caps or wide-brimmed hats and look confidently at the camera. At this early point in their internment they might have felt almost like pioneers.

Camps like Torrens were soon closed and internees moved to New South Wales. Dubotzki spent most of his time in internment at Trial Bay, named for a nineteenth-century shipwreck. The camp was on a headland with a single access road and comprised a jail and outbuildings stretching down to the beach.

At Trial Bay Dubotzki photographed a compelling self-portrait. His sparse belongings are set up in a corner of the barracks; sunlight from the window falls on him. He looks questioningly at the camera as if asking, “What is going to happen now?” Neither he nor anyone else knew how long incarceration would last or what would happen afterwards. In front of him is a desk with a white cloth, as blank as his future. It is a haunting portrait of the artist as internee.
Nearly 7000 people were interned as enemy aliens in Australia during the first world war. The vast majority were resident in the country when war broke out. There were no hearings or appeals. Unsubstantiated denunciations and German or Austrian heritage were enough to get people arrested. People long settled in Australia were interned, had their naturalisation papers cancelled and were torn away from their families. Even the members of a group that was in Australia at the invitation of the government to address the Congress for the Advancement of Science were locked up when war broke out. Among them was Dr Peter Pringsheim, the brother-in-law of Thomas Mann.

Some internees opposed the measures but to no avail. The internee Frederick William Meyer, for example – a naturalised Australian with an Australian-born wife and son – railed against being interned, a fact that was noted by officials censoring internees’ correspondence. After the war ended he was kept in internment until the camps were closed; then he was released into the community only to be informed in a single-sentence letter that his naturalisation had been revoked and he would be deported. When he appealed to the High Court in an eleventh-hour bid to stave off deportation, the defence minister, George Pearce, hurried to draw up a formal deportation order. But he needn’t have bothered. The court dismissed Meyer’s challenge, finding that the government didn’t need to give any reasons for his denaturalisation and didn’t need to issue the deportation order to him – no more was needed than a ministerial minute on the departmental file. Meyer was deported on 5 June 1920.

Anti-German animosity, fanned by the government, was so strong that life inside the internment camps was preferable for many people of German or Austrian heritage. During the war 1500 people chose to be interned voluntarily. In mainstream society they faced surveillance and unemployment; inside the camps they at least had food and camaraderie and could earn a little money by working.

In fact, internees had a surprising measure of control over activities within the camps. In the early days they organised and asserted themselves during stand-offs with camp authorities, winning considerable autonomy over their own affairs. Elected committees of internees were essentially responsible for the internal management of the camps.

The camps had a rudimentary economy of their own. Prisoners could, for instance, run businesses closed to them outside the camps. Although enemy aliens were not normally allowed to possess cameras, Dubotzki ran a photographic business. Seamen who had been taken off ships into internment continued to draw salaries from their companies and could pay for services. Internees could earn money working in labouring gangs organised from the camps.

Also among the internees at Trial Bay was a group of internees who had the remnants of former affluence – people arrested in British colonies such as the Straits Settlements, Ceylon, Fiji and Hong Kong. The colonies wanted to deport these people, who had suddenly become unwelcome because of their heritage, but needed somewhere to send them. In a curious reversion to the days of convict transportation, the Australian government agreed with alacrity to accept and intern them. Altogether 1000 people were sent to Australia for internment in this way; they brought with them whatever money they could. In 1918, in an even more curious footnote to these events, the Australian government established an enormous new camp at Molonglo in today’s Australian Capital Territory to receive 5000 internees it had agreed to take from Africa. The plan was only scuppered when the German government got wind of it and threatened retaliatory measures against British POWs in Germany.

Trial Bay had the richest cultural life among Australia’s several internment camps. Dubotzki’s photographs are an eloquent record of artistic, sporting and business activities in the camp. They capture plays, cabarets and orchestral music. From salvaged materials the internees constructed elaborate sets to stage productions, and threw themselves with gusto into theatre. They even produced posters about shows and promoted them to a truly captive audience.

Dubotzki himself took up painting at Trial Bay. One carefully composed photograph shows the photographer among a quartet of men in the camp’s art studio. In the centre sits a man next to his own portrait. Dubotzki is beside him, and his own portrait hangs top centre. Some of these paintings have survived. A self-portrait by Dubotzki, similar to the one in the photograph, was found in a hut at Trial Bay long after the war.

The Trial Bay camp was shut down suddenly in May 1918 when a wild rumour spread that the German raider
Wolf, running amok in waters around Australia, was going to land on the coast and liberate the internees. In panic the military transferred the internees inland to the large German concentration camp at Holsworthy near Liverpool. Conditions there were far less favourable than at Trial Bay. The internees spent a year there before being deported.

The last photograph Dubotzki made of Trial Bay shows the haste with which the camp was closed. A window has been left wide open. Furniture has been thrown out of the barracks in the rush to pack. The place looks like it’s been ransacked.

But the photograph does more than show the chaos of the departure. Amid the disorder one thing has been carefully arranged: a hat atop a pole. The hat itself is blurred but its shadow is perfectly focused in the brightest part of the photograph. Inexorably, it draws the eye, reminding the viewer of Dubotzki’s presence.

The shadow of the hat is a poignant touch. It is as if Dubotzki is saying to the viewer, “There is abandonment all around but I have taken the trouble to place this hat on a high stand. You cannot see me but the hat shows that I am here now taking this photograph. I was one of the people who lived here for years. I will leave my hat behind as a reminder of my presence.”

In fact Dubotzki left far more behind than that. He left a unique collection of images from the years of internment that he and thousands of others spent in Australian camps.