



Source: Ian Traynor and Jonathan Steele, 'Europe nervous despite US denials it plans to attack Iran', *Guardian* and *New York Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 01/02/07.

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Family legend has it that my grandfather learned to speak English by reading Dickens with the aid of a Russian-English dictionary on board ship bound for Australia. My mother said that this shaped the way he spoke for the rest of his life. Apparently, within a few months of his arrival, he was fluent enough to ask the astonished grocer, upon being told that his daughter was getting married, when the impending nuptials of the happy couple would take place?

I imagine that it was this more than anything else that set him apart, permanently and forever, from the community amongst whom he came to settle. However grateful he was for the opportunity to live here, he could never enjoy the anonymity that his Australian-born neighbours took for granted. His naturalisation application announced his nationality as 'Russian Jew', and his political affiliations, and those of his children, drew him to the attention of the authorities to the extent that he was denied citizenship twice before it was finally granted in 1936. But he didn't need the bureaucracy to tell him that he didn't belong. Each time he opened his mouth, he declared it to the world. The long, leisurely nineteenth-century sentences alone would have been enough to differentiate him from the taciturn working class community in which he lived, but larded as they were with his heavy accent, in which 'v' and 'w', 'h' and 'g' were indiscriminately interchanged, he must have been a marked man.

I used to imagine my grandfather sitting on the deck of the *Balranald*, his copy of *David Copperfield* in his lap, the pages fluttering in the stiff, weatherly breeze as he inched his way through the first chapter. How often did he have recourse to that dog-eared dictionary? At what places did his understanding fail? Did he stumble at that word caul as I had done at twelve, having to resort to my parent's pocket Oxford for clarification? Was he struck by the minor coincidence of the reference to the caul as a sailor's charm against drowning, as the voices of the seamen of the *Balranald* echoed about him? Or was he too struck by Mrs Copperfield's impecuniousness, which obliged her to advertise the caul for sale for fifteen guineas? For a man who had recently had to sell his watch to buy food for his children, this, surely, must have struck a chord. Or perhaps his efforts at translation were more rudimentary than that. Was he only capable of trying to take the words one at a time, at their face value, not as yet attached to a larger, overarching story?

I have no idea why I have always been convinced that it was *David Copperfield* that acted as my grandfather's first English primer. Perhaps it was simply that it was the first Dickens novel that I read myself, carefully chosen for me by my mother, for whom it had also been the first. Her father had suggested it as a good one to start with, she told me, as we took it down from the adult shelves in the

Canberra Public Library. It was an Everyman edition, its grey dustcover carefully encased in thick plastic. Whatever the reason, it seems completely appropriate. The narrative of a boy adrift in the world, overcoming the terrors of a cruel childhood through a combination of fortitude and wonderful luck, coming at last to that safe haven of domestic happiness, mirrored my grandfather's own journey through terror, poverty and uncertainty and his hopes for a new life.

And then, of course, there's that opening line: 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else, these pages must show.' There is no doubt that my grandfather considered himself to be the hero of his. I never met him, but in the few photographs of him that I possess, he is a strong-featured man and everything about him suggests someone a little larger than life. Some years ago, I met a cousin by marriage of my mother's. He showed me a photograph of some family occasion in which my grandfather appeared, standing off to the right, slightly apart from the rest of the group gathered on the stairs of some public building in Melbourne. The cousin told me that my grandfather's voice was powerful and dominating, and that he liked to tell the story of how he came to Australia. I got the feeling that the cousin didn't like him.

Sometime before I was born, my grandfather told his story to a family member, who took it down in shorthand and then typed it up. The first eight pages have been lost, and so the story begins on page nine with the words 'The advance of the Russians against the Poles ended near Warsaw', a beginning worthy of Tolstoy. At the centre of the story is my grandfather, paying people smugglers, fording rivers, trudging through snow, buying false papers, outwitting pettifogging bureaucrats to bring him to that culminating moment on the *Balranald*, Dickens in hand and a new life before him.

But from the moment his name was typed up on the shipping register of the *Balranald*, his life began to become a narrative in translation:

Name: Wainschelbaum, Mr U.

Place of origin: Russia

Occupation: Teacher

By the time he was naturalised in 1936, his occupation was listed as 'draper' and that foreign surname (which meant 'cherry tree' in Yiddish) had become 'White', which was perfect, really: the name equivalent of a tabula rasa upon which to inscribe a new future.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.*