

Frank Close's obituary of Richard Dalitz FRS (Guardian Education, 24 January 2006) noted that the name Dalitz had been 'a byword in high-energy physics for half a century' but did not go into the origin of the name, a question that baffled its bearer himself for the first half of his life. Among his classmates at primary school, who gave him the nickname 'Fritzie' (as he once told me), it passed for German, but Dick was sceptical. He suspected that the Dalitzes, although they came from Germany, were not Germans but belonged to some other ethnic group. It was only after he came to Oxford in 1963 that he found proof that they were descended from the pre-German inhabitants of what later became Brandenburg, known as the Wends (or Sorbs), who survive to this day in a few villages between Cottbus and Berlin. Having discovered that his great-grandparents had emigrated from this region to Australia in 1858, he eventually identified the exact village as Werben and, despite the Iron Curtain, he arrived there one day in the 1970s to check the parish records. It was a stirring moment when, examining the church books together, he and the village historian discovered that they were related. He went further into the history of the Wendish emigration to Australia and discovered, among many other interesting things, that the sailing-ship 'Pribislaw', which had carried a large group of Wendish emigrants to Melbourne in 1850, had run aground in the Shetlands in 1870. Armed with this information another Australian Wend, Robert Wuchatsch, discovered in 2002 that some of the ship's timbers had survived and were still in Lerwick. Eventually they were purchased by the Australian Wendish Heritage Society and taken to a museum in Australia. Despite limited linguistic skills Dick's curiosity led him to cast new light on other aspects of Wendish history, including the biography of the poet Mato Kosyk. He also did original research on the life of the polyglot poet Georg Sauerwein, a German champion of the Wends. But his greatest gift to the land of his father's fathers was the distinction he brought to the Wendish name Dalitz.

2.2.06

Dear Professor Heweliga-Smith,

Above is an amended version of what I sent to the 'Guardian' and copied to Prof. Close. What I wrote about Dick finding the remains of the 'Pribislaw' was wrong, but I have now corrected it. Fortunately, the 'Guardian' used only a fraction of what I had written and left the mistakes out.

If you need any more detail, such as Dick's publications on Sorbian/Wendish affairs, do let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Gerald Stone

P.S. No need to return any of this, as I have copies. I'd like a copy of your obituary, when it appears. GJS.

Autobiographical notes made by Richard Dalitz  
for Gerald Stone c. ~~1985~~<sup>1985-</sup>1990

My Childhood & Life in Australia

(population 2000)

Dimboola, my birthplace, is a small town on the river Wimmera, which flows north from the Grampian mountains of western Victoria until it disappears in the sands of the semi-desert to the north. My grandfather Heinrich lived on the 'Settlement', a cluster of smallholdings, several km out from the town of Dimboola, near the river. He had some cows, one or two horses, a few sheep, quite a few hens, as well as land devoted to growing vegetables, with many fruit trees. In Wjerbno, I think he would have been termed a "Kössath".

Heinrich had been born in 1861 at Klemzig, near Adelaide (South Australia), soon after his parents Mathes Dalitz and Maria Habner, arrived in Australia. By 1875, the family had settled at Robertstown, about 100 km north from Adelaide, in a district where there were many German settlers. A few years after Heinrich had married Anna Elizabeth Wuttke there, during which time my father Friedrich Wilhelm was born, Heinrich and his family left Robertstown to settle in the Wimmera district <sup>of Victoria</sup>, which involved a journey of some 350 km, mostly across semi-desert country. Heinrich's main income was as a stonemason, primarily building chimneys, since houses were then generally made of wood, with a galvanised iron roof, wood being inexpensive and readily available. He had a large family (10 boys and 3 girls), more than a small-holding could support, so that the boys had minimal education, having to go out to work as soon as possible. My father Friedrich Wilhelm was the oldest boy; he took up work as a blacksmith in Dimboola town. My mother was a school teacher at Dimboola and was of Scottish descent.

It is worth saying a little about the later history of this family. Of the girls, one died young by accident, while the other two married, one to a Schulze, the other to a Tepper, both being from German families. Of the other 9 boys, two became local farmers, having married into <sup>German</sup> families (Möller and Hirthe) owning farmland locally, two became grocer's assistants locally, one died in France in 1917, one became a country post-office employee, one became a carpenter in a country town, another became a country tailor (and mayor of his town, for several

decades) and the last boy was born mentally subnormal. All of the other wives (my aunts) had English surnames.

I lived only two years in Dimboola. By passing examinations, with my mother's encouragement, my father became a Government clerk in Melbourne. My paternal grandmother died long before I was born, and I have only one recollection of ever seeing my grandfather. We visited Dimboola a few times but past disagreements between my father and his father meant that my father would not go out of his way to visit my grandfather on the Settlement. Just once, my grandfather (then aged about 75) was persuaded to come into town to see us for about an hour at an uncle's house there. He was still alive when I left Australia but it didn't occur to me to visit him before our departure. This illustrates how little he was mentioned in our family. It was a shock for me to learn later (about 1970) that he had still been alive in 1946. I had believed him to be deceased.

At primary school in Melbourne, I was clearly different from other boys, in having such a name as Dalitz, whereas they were called Smith, Ross, Warland, Marriot, McMullen and names like that; I was given the nickname 'Fritzie' in primary school. I was interested to know where my family name came from but I did not succeed in learning anything then. Probably my father knew little about it, and certainly he had no interest in the matter. My parents discouraged my interest in things Germanic; they had very little and lived frugally - it was much more important to look forward and to establish oneself in Australian society. There was no time to waste in looking backward.

### My Education

My education was all in Melbourne, firstly at the local State Schools, then at Scotch College (by scholarship) for the last 4 years of secondary education. This secondary school was a Presbyterian foundation. I was not aware of any Germanic names there (although there were a few, such as Ampt, which I did not recognize as such) and I don't recall now any Sorbian names at all in my time (although I know there were some later on, such as Matuschka). In 1942, I became a physics and mathematics student at Melbourne University, supported partly by small

scholarships and prizes which I had won in my school-days and living at home.

In 1946, I was awarded a small travelling scholarship that University had and was sent overseas to Trinity College (Cambridge) to do postgraduate research in theoretical physics, at age 21. Before leaving Melbourne, I married Valda Suiter, of the same age, so that we were able to travel to England together. I took my Ph.D. degree in 1950, after work at Cambridge, Bristol and Birmingham Universities.

#### Discovery of my family background

The question of my family background was still at the back of my mind. My father died before I could visit Melbourne again, <sup>after my departure,</sup> 15 years ~~later~~, and my mother knew nothing about my father's origins, except that his people came from "near Leipzig". It was only after she died that I suddenly realised that, if I was ever to find out about our family origins, I had better do so urgently, while I still had a few uncles and aunts alive who might know more. Unfortunately, they were all in Australia, far away from Oxford. For some reason which I cannot trace (it may have been a remark by my uncle Oswald to the effect that he knew that the German our family spoke at Dimboola was different <sup>from</sup> that of other Germans because it included many words which they did not know), I had the idea that we were not really German but came from some group within Germany. The first step forward came when I sat next to Macartney (a Fellow in Hungarian History at All Souls) and asked him whether there might have been some non-German group "near Leipzig". 'Oh yes', he said, 'those were the Wends, but they have all gone now'. Some time later I asked John Simmons whether this was really true and his response was to copy for me some pages out of the Sorbi<sup>sche</sup> Sprachatlas (vol. I) which showed the districts where Sorbian was still spoken today. He told me also that Dr. Stone at Nottingham University was the outstanding expert on the Sorbs in Britain. By a lucky chance, I happened <sup>soon</sup> to receive an invitation to visit the Physics Department at Nottingham, which made it convenient for me to see Dr. Stone in person. That was my first contact with anybody who knew the Sorbs at first hand, and he kindly loaned me the book "Do cuzeje zemje" by Frido Mětšk, about the emigration of Sorbs