

## FACT SHEET

### INTERMENT: CIVILIANS 1940-1947

*‘... I have never been a fascist, but they said, “Perhaps that one is a fascist—go and get him”* Filippo Corsetti recalling his arrest and internment on the Queensland canefields in 1940. From the IHS Oral History Collection.

#### Introduction

From the 1920s onward, Mussolini’s Italy devoted considerable energy to promoting fascism to its citizens in Australia, where local party branches (*fasci*) were established and pressure was applied to join. As late as 1939, Mussolini was still viewed by Australia and other English-speaking nations as a model of modern leadership. There was therefore some pride associated with being fascist and Italian. Many migrants with no real understanding of politics joined the party in a gesture of national pride. Those who had been forced to escape Mussolini’s Italy made a desperate attempt to draw attention to the looming threat of fascism.

#### Internment

By 1940, around 40 per cent of members of the Italian community in Australia were naturalised and several thousands Australian-born. When Italy entered the war on the side of the Axis in July 1940, there was strong public feeling against this group and a fear that Italian-Australians would assist enemy invaders. Members of this community, along with other Axis nationals, were declared “enemy aliens”. Some 4,700 Italians were interned and many had their assets confiscated. Many locally-born or naturalised citizens were interned or conscripted into the Civil Aliens Corp, where they were assigned to civil works projects. Those who remained at home were forbidden to leave their suburb without permission, use telephones or congregate in homes or on the streets.

The crew and passengers of Italian ships either berthed in Australian ports or found in Australian waters were also interned, along with civilians who had been living in New Guinea, the Middle East and Britain. Those arrested in Britain would come to be known as the “Dunera Boys”. By 1942, more than 12,000 German, Japanese, Hungarian and Italian civilians were held in internment camps around Australia. Among the mostly male population was a small number of women and children.

Initially, internees were held in prisons and former army camps in each state. As numbers grew, the government constructed purpose-built internment camps. Civilian internees and military POWs were kept apart and each language group housed in separate barracks. Internees were put to work for the war effort cutting wood, tending vegetables and working on building projects.

Fascists and those who had actively opposed Mussolini’s regime were often forced to share the same barracks. In 1942, tensions came to a head when the anarchist, Francesco Fantin was murdered by Italian fascists at the Loveday camp in South Australia. The resulting public outcry eventually led to the release of anti-fascists.

Life in many camps mirrored the outside world: there were workshops, a theatre, church, a community hall and a shop. Internees made illegal wine and grappa, which was often shared with their captors, organised social events and exchanged shoemaking, carpentry and other skills which would help them find work at the end of the war.

By 1943, severe food and manpower shortages ensured the release of the majority of internees, many of whom were contracted to produce food for the war effort. Others were pressed into service in the Civil Aliens Corp to work on infrastructure projects.

### **Internment: civilians 1940-1947 in the Italian Historical Society Collection**

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to the internment of civilians in the following collections:

- Document Collection
- Index of Italian Civil Internees
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Contribution of Women
- Internment: POWs
- Italian migration 1900-1945
- Map: Australia
- Map: Italy
- Statistics on Italians in Australia

### **Further reading**

The resources listed below can be accessed, by appointment, at the Italian Historical Society.

#### **Publications**

Bartrop, PR & Eisen G (eds) 1990, *The Dunera affair: a documentary resource book*, Schwartz & Wilkinson and The Jewish Museum of Australia South Yarra, Victoria.

Bevege, M 1993, *Behind barbed wire: internment in Australia during World War II*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

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Bunbury, B 1995, *Rabbits and spaghetti: captives and comrades: Australians, Italians and the War, 1939-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Cabrini Fontana, M (ed.) 199-?, *A story is told. Internment: truth, memory and reconciliation*, Harvey Shire Council, Harvey, Western Australia.

Castles, S et al. (eds) 1992, *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales.

———1992, *Italo-australiani: la popolazione di origine italiana in Australia*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Turin, Italy.

Church, J 2005, *Per l'Australia: the story of Italian migration*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

Cresciani, G 2003, *The Italians in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

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———1980, *Fascism, anti-fascism and Italians in Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

De Bolfo, T 2002, *In search of kings: what became of the passengers of the Re d'Italia*, HarperCollins, Pymble, New South Wales.

Douglass, WA 1995, *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

Fitzgerald, A 1981, *The Italian farming soldiers: prisoners of war in Australia 1941-1947*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, Victoria.

Gentilli, J 1983, *Italian roots in Australian soil: Italian migration to Western Australia 1829-1946*, Italian-Australian Welfare Centre, Villa Terenzio, Marangaroo, Western Australia.

Hammond, J 1990, *Walls of wire: Tatura, Rushworth, Murchison*, J Hammond, Tatura, Victoria.

Jupp, J (ed.) 2001, *The Australian people: an encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria.

Martinuzzi O'Brien, I 1989, *Australia's Italians 1788-1988*, Italian Historical Society—COASIT and the State Library of Victoria, Carlton, Victoria.

Patkin, B 1979, *The Dunera internees*, Cassell, Stanmore, New South Wales.

Pearl, C 1990, *The Dunera scandal*, Mandarin, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

Stephens, F 1999, *Interned and out: the work of the Italian painter Cesare Vagarini at POW Camp 3, Tatura, during World War II*, Benalla Art Gallery, Benalla, Victoria.

Walsh, K 2001, *The changing face of Australia: a century of immigration, 1901-2000*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, New South Wales.

Yule, P (ed.) 2004, *Carlton: a history*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, Victoria.

### **Periodicals**

*Italian Historical Society Journal* 1993-, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

### **Internet sites**

Jewish Museum of Australia 2006, *Home page*, Melbourne,  
<http://www.jewishmuseum.com.au/>

Martinuzzi-O'Brien, I 2002, *Italian Australia Records Project (IARP)*, Victoria University, Melbourne, <http://w2.vu.edu.au/iarp/Default.asp>

National Archives of Australia 2005, *Fact sheet subject index*, NAA, Canberra,  
[http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/fact\\_sheets/default.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/fact_sheets/default.html)

——— 2005, *RecordSearch*, NAA, Canberra,  
[http://www.naa.gov.au/the\\_collection/recordsearch.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/recordsearch.html)

National Library of Australia 2006, *National Library of Australia online*, NLA, Canberra, <http://www.nla.gov.au>

PictureAustralia 2006, *Looking for images of Australiana? PictureAustralia® is the place to start!*, NLA, Canberra, <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>

State Library of South Australia 2004, *Downstream-the River Murray in South Australia: Did you know...? Internment during World War II*, SLSA, Adelaide, South Australia, <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/murray/content/didYouKnow/internment.htm>

State Library of Victoria 2004, *Pictures catalogue*, SLV, Melbourne,  
<http://sinpic.slv.vic.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

### **Audio-visual**

*Collar the lot! Recollections of the World War II Tatura Internment Camps, Australia* 1997, video recording, Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum, the Tatura and District Historical Society, Tatura, Victoria.

*15 Amore = 15 love* 1998, video recording, MTXM Movies, Paddington, New South Wales.

*Images and reflections: the Italian Australians* 1995, video recording, Video Education Australasia, Bendigo, Victoria.

*New heroes, new myths* 1993, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

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