

FACT SHEET

ITALIAN MIGRATION 1945-1970

'Where we lived ... the war had destroyed everything—our house and our farm. So we had to start again.' Lucia, who left the south of Italy for Australia in 1963. From *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia* (IHS—COASIT, 1996).

Introduction

The suffering caused by the Second World War and the widening economic gulf between the north and south provided an impetus for many Italians to seek a better life elsewhere. The Italian government of the 1950s and 1960s, struggling to feed, house and find employment for its citizens, actively promoted migration to Argentina, Canada and Australia.

At the same time, Australia was embarking on an industrialisation and population program which would open the door to mass migration. Initially, British or 'white' migrants were favoured, but when quotas could not be filled, the Australian government turned to southern Europeans.

Patterns of migration

Between July 1947 and 1950 over 33,000 Italians migrated to Australia. The following decade saw the arrival of over 170,000 mostly southern Italians, including displaced people from the region ceded to the former Yugoslavia. The majority of migrants settled in the inner suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney. Around 80% were sponsored by relatives or *paesani* (people from the same region), some of whom had arrived in Australia before the Second World War. Work was already waiting for them and they were quickly absorbed into local Italian communities.

Between 1951 and 1968, around 42,000 Italians arrived under the assisted passage agreement between Australia and Italy. Those selected came on the condition that they took whatever work and accommodation was offered for a period of two years. Many were recruited in Italy for projects like the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. Others were sent to the steelworks in Newcastle and Wollongong, or employed in the engineering and textile factories that were springing up in major cities.

Initially, the assisted passage scheme targeted young men. However, by the 1960s, social commentators were expressing concern that, starved of female companionship, these men would become a public menace. It was also felt that assimilation would be more successful if migrants were settled in family units. In an attempt to address these concerns and to meet a shortage of domestic labour, the scheme was opened to women and family members.

For those who arrived under the scheme, conditions were not always what they had been led to expect. Migrant hostels, like Bonegilla on the NSW Victoria border, were often isolated from town centres, locals were hostile, food and customs unfamiliar. Furthermore, the beginning of the assisted passage scheme coincided with a downturn in the Australian economy. In 1952, faced with unemployment and forbidden to seek jobs independently, Italians at Bonegilla and other migrant hostels around the country rioted, demanding they be given work or repatriated to Italy. The Australian government responded by suspending the assisted passage scheme till December 1954.

Until the 1960s, there were no national, ethno-specific welfare services for arriving migrants. Support was provided on a local level by volunteers from within the Italian community, often with the help of political organisations or the Catholic Church.

The settlement process

The massive influx of Italian migrants in the 1950s contributed to the expansion of what came to be known as “Little Italys” in the major cities. By the 1960s, whole precincts were devoted to Italian businesses, shops, entertainments, coffee bars and restaurants. Italian social clubs sprang up across the country. Italian-Australian soccer teams, such as Perth’s Tricolore, Sydney’s Marconi and Melbourne squad Juventus, attracted a growing fan base. This period saw the consolidation of what is now recognised as a unique Italian-Australian culture and which found its expression in food, language, cultural practices and festivals.

From 1947 to 1954, the Italian-born population in Australia more than trebled, to 119,897. By 1961, it had reach 228,296, peaking at around 288,300 in 1971. Migration from Italy to Australia sharply decreased in the late 1960s with the recovery of the Italian economy and is now negligible. Today, the Australian-born generation of Italian parentage outnumbers the Italian-born.

Italian migration 1945-1970 in the Italian Historical Society collection

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to migration during this period in the following collections:

- Borsari Collection
- COASIT Records and Archives
- Document Collection
- Fashion Collection
- Food Collection
- Library
- Mangiamele Collection
- Newspaper Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection
- Santospirito Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Contribution of Women
- Italian migration 1850-1900
- Italian migration 1900-1945
- Map: Australia
- Map: Italy
- Proxy Brides
- Statistics on Italians in Australia
- The Arts
- Trades and Professions

Further reading

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

Publications

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- O'Connor, D 2004, *Memories and identities: proceedings of the Second Conference on the impact of Italians in South Australia*, conference papers, Australian Humanities Press, Unley, South Australia.
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