

THE ARCHBISHOP'S COMMITTEE FOR ITALIAN RELIEF DURING THE INTERNMENT CRISIS IN VICTORIA: JUNE-DECEMBER 1940

by Cate Elkner

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Having lost everything through my husband's detention, I am now dependent upon the sustenance I am receiving. I have no complaints to make except that my husband is being detained on some entirely wrong suspicion, whereas if freed he could earn my living and his own, instead of both of us being a burden to this country...

Had my husband been or inclined to be a Fascist or a communist, I would understand but he was nothing of the sort and should be working for his family and Australia...

Within a few weeks I shall be a mother and you would give me no greater joy than to allow my husband to be back with me and his farming work.¹

Introduction

The origins of the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief can be traced to July 1940, shortly after Italy's entry into World War Two on 10 June, which coincided with what *The Argus* described as the 'greatest round-up of aliens in the history of Australia'.² In response to the crisis of internment Archbishop Mannix invited members of Melbourne's Italian community to attend a meeting at St Patrick's Cathedral 'to decide on ways and means of assisting Italian families'.³

The Committee went on to work throughout the war years to raise funds for the material welfare of internees and their families. A total of 170 persons of Italian origin were interned in Victoria.⁴ The effects of Italy's entry into the war were felt throughout the entire Italian community. With their new status as 'enemy aliens', many people were affected by unemployment or loss of business.

In addition to fundraising for needy families, the Archbishop's Committee had another, somewhat covert, aim, which has received relatively little attention:⁵ to work to secure the release of Italian internees in Victoria. The Committee, led by

Italian businessman and community spokesperson Gualtiero Vaccari, co-ordinated a campaign of letter-writing and visits to the authorities, appealing for the release of individual internees and for the cases against them to be reviewed. Representatives of the Church and the Committee visited government and army authorities and held meetings to discuss the situation of internees and their families.

By the end of 1940, at least 61 internees had been released.⁶ The majority of these releases resulted from the Committee's work in co-ordinating the appeals of family members and the Catholic Church, rather than the official mechanisms under the National Security Regulations. This article will give a brief overview of the first six months of the Archbishop's Committee's campaign on behalf of internees, focusing on the case study of internees from Werribee.

Werribee

The first six months of the Archbishop's Committee's work for internees centred on families from the Werribee district. Of the 170 persons of Italian origin interned in Victoria, a disproportionate number (between 60 and 70) were Italian market gardeners from Werribee.

The fears and prejudices which emerged in Australian society as it 'united' in the face of war were running high in Werribee. The majority of Italians in Werribee were market gardeners who had purchased or leased land in the Werribee South Irrigation Area. In many cases, these farms had been taken over from 'soldier settlers', who had bought land from the State Government after World War One. The land failed to yield returns for many of the soldier settlers, who began to sell up in the late 1920s.

Many soldier settlers responded to the arrival of the Italians with resentment, particularly as the Italians' skills in intensive agriculture led to the establishment of successful market gardens in

Werribee South. Racist publications like *Smith's Weekly* inflamed the situation, portraying the growth of the Italian market gardening community as a hostile invasion, and part of a plan to 'crowd out' Australians from agricultural production.⁷



Salvatore Burgio sowing broad bean seeds by hand in his Werribee farm in 1940.

As Australia became involved in World War Two, many returned servicemen in Werribee became involved in local militia activities, forming a Defence Corps to be ready when the war came to Werribee. It was thought that there were several possible targets for 'subversives' in Werribee, such as the RAAF aerodromes at Point Cook and Laverton.⁸ Claims were made in the local press about the threat Italians posed to the community, stressing Werribee's proximity to major defence works and aerodromes. It was argued, for example, that aliens might sabotage the pipelines of MMBW Farm, throwing Melbourne's sewerage system into crisis.⁹

Meanwhile, younger men in the district were signing up for military service. Their send-offs

often provided an arena for public outbursts by returned soldiers and local politicians against the 'dark individuals' in the Werribee community.¹⁰

In this atmosphere of rumour-mongering and preoccupation with domestic security, the local police received numerous 'tip-offs' about the subversive activities of Italian market gardeners. (For example, police were informed that Joe Perillo had 'frequently been seen in the early hours of the morning in the vicinity of the Laverton RAAF aerodrome').¹¹

One resident, writing to his local member in support of his interned Italian neighbours, described the situation:

A good many people here have very little time for Italians and would like to see them all deported; and these people have been ever ready to condemn them and say many things to their detriment.

Rumours have circulated and for which there was not the slightest vestige of foundation have probably reached the ears of the authorities; and this, I think, is the reason why many have been interned.¹²

The members of the Special Branch who came to arrest the Werribee farmers as they worked out in the fields in their gumboots,¹³ were acting on (at that time unverified) information given to the local police as well as dossiers on known members of the Werribee branch of the *Fascio*, prepared by the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB). In the confusion of the arrests, several people were 'swept up' in the operation and interned with no evidence against them.

Several of the Werribee internees were tenants of the Catholic Church, leasing plots of land at Corpus Christi College (now Werribee Park) which was then a seminary for training diocesan priests. An appeal for help was made to the Archbishop from the internment camp through the official visitor, Justice Gavan Duffy.¹⁴ By July 1940, the Church had sent a detailed report to the government on the state of internees' families, prepared by local priests. This report initiated the informal campaign of writing letters, visiting government and army officials, and advocating on behalf of the Italian community. This campaign was to prove much more effective in bringing about the swift release of many internees than the slower-turning wheels of the appeal mechanisms under the National Security Regulations.



Italian tenants of the Catholic Church Mr Puccio, Gaetana and Mrs Burgio are pictured with the priests at the gates of Corpus Christi College at Werribee, c1939.

The strategies

Minutes of a 1941 meeting provide evidence of the aim of the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief to secure the release of Italian internees. This aim was to be achieved through liaison between internees' families and the authorities, and by writing 'hundreds of letters'.¹⁵

The Vicar-General from St Patrick's Cathedral, Dr Lyons, Vaccari, and Fr Modotti all made personal visits to influential members of the bureaucracy and the army's Southern Command at Victoria Barracks, in connection with the plight of internees and their families.

The Committee's lobbying efforts focused on Major Roland S. Browne, head of the CIB. Browne was responsible for compiling the intelligence reports which sealed the fates of many internees. At the same time, he was sympathetic to the plight of internees' families. His support was crucial for arranging for the release of an internee through army channels.

Browne was quick to acknowledge that 'some errors had been made at Werribee' and supported the majority of the applications received from

family members. He sent memos to Southern Command recommending the urgent release of many internees, 'in the interests of the state as well as themselves and families'.¹⁶

While the CIB compiled intelligence and made recommendations, the internments themselves were carried out by the army. In several cases, the army interned people who had already been investigated by the CIB prior to June 1940 and had been found to pose no threat to security.

The Committee also organised for letters to be sent to the CIB on behalf of internees. Most of the letters which were written appealing for internees' release conform to a definite pattern. The similarities may reflect the fact that it is evident that many of the letters were written by Vaccari, and signed by the appellant, most often the internee's wife (many of whom knew little English).¹⁷ The letters can be found in the correspondence of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch.¹⁸

The letters often included 'testimonials' as to the internee's good character, from friends, employers and neighbours, presumably designed to demonstrate their status as accepted members of the Australian community.

The letter with which I opened this article typifies the approach taken in the correspondence, which used a common persuasive strategy. First, the letters described the personal hardship experienced by families deprived of the head of the household. Another theme in the letters is the assertion that a mistake had been made, and that the internee had no interest in politics whatsoever. Finally, appeals to the national interest are common. This approach emphasised economic factors, such as the unnecessary financial costs to government of keeping internees in camps, as well as the looming disaster in Werribee if the crops in the market gardens were to fail:

The Archbishop realises that there are difficulties in this matter, but, at the same time, wishes to point out that, apart from the distress of the wives and families of these internees, very serious loss and consequent heavy expense from government sources must result, if something cannot be done to see that the properties and crops in the Werribee district are cared for.¹⁹

Judging from the letters, the Committee believed that in the context of war-time shortages, the

prospect of wasted crops would be as persuasive a factor in obtaining the release of Werribee internees as the fact that many were detained without evidence.²⁰

The Church, through its written reports and visits to the authorities, also tried to cast light on the realities of the political situation in Werribee. In a report 'The History of Italian Activities at Werribee',²¹ the circumstances of the establishment of the Werribee *Fascio* were set out. Despite 'encouragement' from 'fascist notabilities' to join the *Fascio*, which was formed in 1936, the organisation did not prosper. Fascists in Melbourne were peeved that the Italian Returned Soldiers' Association A.N.C.R.I. [*Associazione Nazionale ex-Combattenti e Reduci Italiani*] was much more popular in Werribee.

In mid-1938 the Melbourne fascists decreed that the Branch Secretary of Werribee *Fascio* was also to hold the office of President of A.N.C.R.I. This action led to a boost in membership of the Fascist Party, as many office-bearers in the association wished to maintain their status.



ANZAC Day 1938. Italian immigrants members of the Werribee branch of the Italian Returned Soldiers' Association A.N.C.R.I. laid a wreath at the local War Memorial.

Nevertheless, the Werribee *Fascio* remained, as Major Browne acknowledged, 'to all intents and purposes moribund'.²²

Browne was of the opinion that the majority of Italians in Australia had little interest in politics. Moreover, he recognised that those who were involved with the *Fascio* joined for complex reasons, and that membership could bring a range of social, cultural and economic benefits.

In February 1940, Browne wrote that fascist propaganda was having little effect in Victoria, and that the majority of Italians were:

peasant types who realise that they are better off in Australia than ever before, and who have an appreciation of the freedom accorded to them here and denied to them in their own country.²³

However insulting this stereotype of the ignorant peasant, it worked in favour of the internees' prospects for release, and similar representations of the Italian community were taken up by the Committee and the Church in letters on behalf of internees. Thus, in a memo to the army in connection with an appeal that had been received for the release of two Werribee internees, Browne wrote, 'it has been suggested that the persons concerned were more interested in cauliflowers than politics'.²⁴ Similarly, Fr Modotti, in a 1943 letter to Archbishop Mannix about internees from Northern Queensland, wrote: 'I am sure they are no more interested in politics than the cattle they have on their land'.²⁵

The results

Initially, the official channels for appeal under the National Security Regulations were only open to those internees who were naturalised British subjects. The situation changed in December 1940, when the Regulations were amended, giving Italian subjects the right to have their appeals heard by 'Aliens Tribunals', which sat in 1941.²⁶

Several naturalised internees of Italian origin lodged objections to their internment from July 1940 and were given the opportunity to have their case heard by an Advisory Committee. The first 8 successful appellants were not released until late October 1940.²⁷

In contrast, many 'enemy alien' internees who had not sought naturalisation were released within

MOLLYCODDLING ITALIAN SUSSOS Departmental Muddle At Werribee

A REMARKABLE STORY OF OFFICIAL INEPTITUDE CONCERNING SUSTENANCE ARRANGEMENTS FOR ITALIANS COMES FROM WERRIBEE. THE DISTRICT HAS A BIG COLONY OF THESE ALIENS, AND FROM ALL ACCOUNTS SOME OF THEM, ESPECIALLY UNNATURALISED FOREIGNERS, LEAD A LIFE OF EASE ON SUSTENANCE, WHILE HARD-UP AUSTRALIANS SUFFER PRIVATIONS. FEELING IN THE DISTRICT HAS BEEN MOUNTING FOR SOME TIME CONCERNING THE WAY IN WHICH THE DEFENCE DEPARTMENT, AIDED AND ABETTED BY THE STATE SUSTENANCE BRANCH, HAS MOLLYCODDLED THE FOREIGNERS.

AUSTRALIAN sustenance workers bitterly complain that they are compelled to freeze, while Italians drive up in trucks to the sustenance fuel stack at the Shire Hall and cart off firewood for their compatriots who are on sustenance.

One Italian, who has just been put on sustenance, is reported to have recently paid £10 for the renovation of his motor truck.

It is said that he owns a house and garage, and made good money all summer picking peas and beans on the share system, which is a good cover-up against investigators prying into Italian financial affairs.

Way back in 1938, maximum number of Italians, naturalised and unnaturalised, on sustenance in the Werribee district, was six with 21 dependants, making a total of 27.

In 1939 these figures had jumped to 38 individuals with 83 dependants, totalling 121. Failure of crops on the 'Dagoes' settlements around Werribee was given as the reason for the increase.

This year, before Mussolini stabbed the Allies in the back, there were only two Werribee Italians with five dependants on sustenance. Italy's entry into the war gave the authorities a chance to demonstrate their muddle-headedness.

Six Italians who were on relief work elsewhere were dismissed, and on returning to Werribee were placed on sustenance, thus making a total of 8 naturalised Italians with three dependants who were working for sustenance.

Worse, however, is the fact that there are five unnaturalised Dagoes with six dependants receiving sustenance, for which they do nothing at all. Official explanation for this free gift of board and holiday to enemy aliens is that trouble might arise if they were put to work alongside Australians.

On top of this there are six Italian

wives of internees with seven dependants in the district. They are all certified at the time by the police as being destitute. Now the taxpayer must support them on sustenance rates without any return for the money.

When their men folk were rounded up at the outbreak of the Italian war, the Defence Department pushed the job of looking after them on to the Sustenance Department.

Result of all this mess-up is that there are now 63 aliens on the Government pay roll in the district, and more look like joining it.

Werribee residents are inclined to blame the Shire authorities. Actually nominations for sustenance hand-outs come from the Sustenance Branch or the Defence Department. The Shire Secretary merely transmits their orders. What becomes of sustenance commodities is no concern of his.

Sustenance arrangements for Italians are becoming a grave problem, not only in Werribee, but in other districts where there are large communities of these aliens. The problem will become more tangled as other Italian employers are "put in," and their employes are "put out."

So high is feeling in Werribee at the moment that the local branch of the Returned Soldiers' League has taken the matter up. The annual conference of the league, which has been sitting in Melbourne this week, has been approached and will probably seek the aid of other branches who have Italian communities in their districts, to tackle the Federal Government.

WAR FUND CONCERTS

SUNDAY night concerts at Melbourne Town Hall have been organised by the National Theatre Movement to assist the Australian Comforts and Red Cross Funds. Leading radio entertainers and other popular artists will provide a complete change of programme each week. Admission will be by donation at the doors.

days of their internment. The majority of these were from the Werribee district, and had had representations made on their behalf, organised by the Church and the Archbishop's Committee. Gualtiero Vaccari reported regularly to the Archbishop on the Committee's progress, writing in August 1940 that representations had already been made on behalf of 67 men.²⁸

The first Italian internee to be released in Victoria was Mario Coniglione of Corpus Christi College, released on 13 June 1940. Thirty internees had been released by the end of August 1940. By January 1941, Vaccari was able to report to the Archbishop that the number of Italians interned

in Victoria had been 'just about halved'. He wrote that in around six months, 61 men had been released.²⁹ An astonishing 57 of them were from the Werribee district. In October, Vaccari acknowledged that the Committee's work had focused on Werribee: 'Additional applications have been sent in for certain internees from other districts ... only the fringe of the very large ground has been touched'.³⁰

Such high numbers of releases were not seen again until 1943, when at least 49 internees were freed, and 1944, when 30 more were released. These releases resulted from steps taken by the new Labor Government, which came to power in October 1941. The Aliens Classification and Advisory Committee was established in September 1942 to re-appraise cases of 'precautionary' internment.³¹ The Committee was chaired by Arthur Calwell, whose close relationship with Dr Mannix and the Italian community is well-known. Calwell continued to work closely with the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief throughout the post-war period.

Conclusion

It has become almost a truism in the historical literature that in Victoria, only 'ardent fascists' were interned.³² The experience of the Italian community at Werribee challenges the common conception that Victorian authorities took a more 'enlightened' approach to internment of Italians than their counterparts in other states. The round-up of the market gardeners at Werribee more closely resembles the arrests in states such as Queensland and Western Australia, which saw almost wholesale, 'precautionary' internment of Italian men of military age.

The creation of the Archbishop's Committee to assist the Church in its work for and on behalf of internees demonstrates Archbishop Mannix's commitment to forging a strong relationship between the Catholic Church and the Italian community.³³ The Committee's work for and on behalf of the internees was in response to a dearth of government support for families experiencing hardship, as well as widespread ignorance and prejudice against members of the Italian community in Victoria.

The Committee's work over its first six months helped to effect the release of around 61 internees, the majority of them from the Werribee district, and raised funds to support internees and their families.

The campaign on behalf of internees laid the foundations for the Committee's work with post-war migrants, under the presidency of Lena Santospirito, which saw further collaboration between members of the Italian community, the Catholic Church and immigration authorities.

NOTES:

¹ Letter from Mrs Giuseppina Agnello to Major Browne, written on behalf of her husband Antonio. NAA, MT 269/8, Item 1046. Agnello was released on 4 October 1940, the day after the CIB forwarded the letter to Southern Command.

² *The Argus*, 12 June, 1940, p.2

³ Form letter from Vicar-General Dr Lyons, 12 July 1940. Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians to 1940'. The members of the Committee in July 1940 were: Dr Lyons (Vicar-General, St Patrick's Cathedral), Fr Ugo Modotti, Mr G Vaccari, Mr J Santamaria, Mr B A Santamaria, Mr S De Marco, Mr G Briglia, Mr J Fonti, Miss E Nicoletti, Mrs L Santospirito, Mrs J Imbesi, Mrs L Castellano, Mr S Tizio, Mr N Borghesi, Mr Frank Di Mattina, Miss J Virgona, Miss G Tilbury, Miss De Luca, Mr B Canestra, Mr F Basile, Mr D Boffa, Miss Picone and Mrs V Virgona.

⁴ 'Commonwealth Statement of Resident Aliens Interned in Australia 31 March 1944', in Noel Lamidey, *Aliens Control in Australia: 1939-1946*, self-published, Sydney, 1974, p.51.

⁵ This may well be due to the fact that the Committee's campaign to release internees is not well-documented in the archival records. The government was only advised that a fundraising committee for needy families had been launched (Letter from Vicar-General Lyons to Major Browne, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, 11 July 1940, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians to 1940'.) The Catholic Church did not publicise the work of the Committee until after the armistice with Italy.

⁶ The figure is most likely slightly higher than 61. The figures used in this paper have been compiled using the IHS's database of Italian internees and my own research using National Archives of Australia records. This work is ongoing and as yet, the exact numbers have not been established.

⁷ *Smith's Weekly* reported that 'land acquisition by aliens of enemy origin' was on the agenda for the Annual Conference of the Victorian Branch of the RSL in 1942, *Smith's Weekly*, 23 July 1942.

⁸ Clipping from *Smith's Weekly*, 1941, Italian Historical Society.

⁹ Maria Mantello, *Now and Then: the Sicilian farming community at Werribee Park 1929-1949*, Carlton, *Il Globo*, 1986, p.40.

¹⁰ *Werribee Shire Banner*, 19 September 1940, p.2.

¹¹ Transcript of Giovanni Perillo's hearing on 22 August 1940, NAA, MP 508/1, Item 255/742/403.

¹² Letter from Ted Coates to the Hon J A Beasley, for-

warded to Attorney-General W M Hughes on 27 June 1940, National Archives of Australia (NAA), MP 508/1, Item 255/740/327.

- ¹³ See Sir James Gobbo, 'Italians in Victoria and the Second World War: an address for the Italian Historical Society given at the Italian Institute of Culture, 19 May 1988', and Tape No 142, Mr J Perillo, interviewed by Maria Mantello, 28 May 1981, Italian Historical Society.
- ¹⁴ Memo to Duffy from Italian Camp Leader, no date, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians to 1940'.
- ¹⁵ *L'attività del comitato non si è limitata alla raccolta delle contribuzioni, ma si è rivolta in notevole misura alla liberazione del massimo numero possibile d'internati dello Stato del Victoria. Quest'opera ha comportato non pochi viaggi per interrogare la famiglie lontane da Melbourne, visite alle autorità e centinaia di lettere.* [The activities of the Committee were not limited to the collection of donations. Much effort was put into obtaining the release of as many internees as possible. This involved many trips to interview the families living far from Melbourne, several visits to the authorities and the writing of hundreds of letters]. Minutes of Meeting held 8 April 1941. Fr Modotti papers, Jesuit Archives, Hawthorn. File: 'Opera Religiosa'.
- ¹⁶ NAA, MT 269/8, Item 982.
- ¹⁷ For example, Vaccari wrote to the Vicar-General that he 'prepared a letter signed by Mrs Perillo' which he delivered, with others, to Major Browne. Letter from Vaccari to Lyons, 19 August 1940, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians to 1940'.
- ¹⁸ See NAA, MT 269/8 and B741/5.
- ¹⁹ Letter from Vicar-General Patrick Lyons to Major R S Browne, 11 July 1940, NAA, MP 508/1, Item 255/702/360.
- ²⁰ The 'national interest' also kept other internees in detention. The General Manager of the State Coal Mine in Wonthaggi wrote to the CIB giving his support to applications made for the release of miners Giovanni Maddalena and Domenico Vescovi. However, Major Browne had been informed that 'a section of the miners employed at Wonthaggi, intimidated immediately subsequent to the declaration of war by Italy, that they would not work with Italians'. Browne recommended that the Wonthaggi miners remain interned, due to the need for industrial peace, and therefore coal outputs, to be maintained. NAA, MT 269/8, Item 1112, 22 October 1940.
- ²¹ Report dated 12 August 1940, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians to 1940'.
- ²² MT 269/8, Item 1083.
- ²³ NAA, MT 269/8, Item 430.
- ²⁴ NAA, MT 269/8, Items 952 & 953.
- ²⁵ Letter from Fr Ugo Modotti to Archbishop Mannix, 11 September 1943, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File: 'Italians 1942-1943'.
- ²⁶ Transcripts are available at NAA, in Series MP 529/3.
- ²⁷ They were Messrs Faranda, Scacciantè, Carli, Boschetti, Perillo, Rigo, Crimi, and Menegazzo. See NAA, MP 508/1.

²⁸ Vaccari to Lyons, 19 August 1940, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File 'Italians to 1940'.

²⁹ Vaccari to Lyons, 6 January 1941, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File 'Italians 1941'.

³⁰ Vaccari to Lyons, 21 October 1940, Archdiocese of Melbourne Archives, File 'Italians to 1940'.

³¹ Noel W Lamidey, *Aliens Control in Australia 1939-1946*, self-published, Sydney, 1974, p.4.

³² For example, Cresciani writes that 'only militants' were interned in Victoria, and attributes the low number of internees in this state to Dr Mannix's support of the Italian community. *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia, 1922-1945*, ANU Press, Canberra, London & Trumbull, 1980, p.173.

³³ The Church was tackling what B A Santamaria coined 'the Italian problem' or the tendency for Italian immigrants to abandon their faith in the host country. See his article, 'The Italian Problem in Australia', in *Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol XVI, January 1939, No 1, pp291-305.

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