

## INTERNMENTS AND ARTHUR CALWELL: THE VIEW FROM CARLTON

by Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien

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The Second World War was a watershed in the life of the Italian-Australian community. It ushered in a period of significant change, and it also encouraged a hardening of the attitudes of the previous years. As a result, the burden of Italy's position as one of the Axis Powers was increased for members of the Italian community all over Australia. Carlton was the heartland of the Italian community in Victoria, and here the potential for communal disharmony was possibly greater than in other parts of Australia.

Throughout the 19th century only a few Italians lived in Carlton. The most famous was the musician Alberto Zelman senior, who lived in Victoria Street for some years. Initially it was the musicians of Viggiano who established the Carlton community early this century, but after World War I, new immigrants, many from the Veneto and Friuli, were attracted to the suburb because of its location near the city, the cheap housing, and its proximity to the markets, the hospital and the factories. Carlton became the place of first residence of many other immigrants including Greeks, Chinese, a large Yiddish-speaking Jewish community from Eastern Europe and others. Many of the experiences of the Italian and Jewish communities are explored in the major exhibition on Carlton now current at the Museum of Victoria. Called *Bridging Two Worlds*, it is based on Italian and Jewish life in Carlton. This exhibition goes beyond a study of the separate communities, but looks at interactions within and between them and the wider Australian society, and at their contributions to the development of the wider society.<sup>1</sup>

Italian Carlton was a small, close-knit community before the Second World War, its members living side by side with the other immigrant groups and with the older Australian

community. There was a fair degree of working class solidarity, as all struggled together through the difficult depression years when work was hard to find and living was tough. As World War II threatened, tensions increased, and with Italy's entry into the war minor incidents of hostility were shown towards some Italians.



*Pre-Second World War Carlton residents Ottavio Brida with wife Anna and children at the Melbourne zoo in 1948, with their good friends Judah Waten and wife.*

With the outbreak of war, the Government introduced the National Security Regulations, which had far-reaching implications for the whole community. While these made available to the government a battery of restrictions for the control of the whole population, these regulations, however, fell more heavily on immigrant groups. There were special restrictions for immigrants who had not naturalised by taking British citizenship, and who were classed as 'aliens' or 'enemy aliens', that is, citizens of another country. There were restrictions on travel, work, residence, the sale or transfer of land, as well as prohibitions on the possession of items such as cameras, wirelesses, carrier pigeons or petrol, together with motor cars, yachts and aeroplanes. It was an offence to speak a language other than English on the telephone, and there was no freedom of assembly.<sup>2</sup>

We might ask why were these regulations and restrictions against Italians and other 'enemy aliens' imposed? One of the principal reasons given was a fear of 'fifth column activities', meaning spying and sabotage. There was a belief that the potential conflict of loyalties between the 'Old Country' and the new could affect Australia's security and safety. To protect the population against such possible threats the authorities imposed the restrictions as a method of exercising control over the groups of aliens and enemy aliens. Finally, these restrictions were imposed in the belief that they would improve public morale and encourage greater contributions to the war effort.

One of the powers conferred by Regulation enabled the authorities to detain any person in the interests of national security. This detention was called internment, and three groups of citizens were to experience this loss of liberty. The first were enemy aliens, that is those immigrants who had not naturalised, but retained their Italian citizenship. Others who were interned were naturalised British subjects (there was no separate Australian citizenship at this time, so citizenship meant British citizenship). Naturalised citizens renounced their Italian citizenship. The third group were the Australian born of Italian background, and although citizenship was their birthright, some of these were also interned.

Throughout Australia, internment had serious consequences both for individuals and for their families. Taking the example of a citizen of Western Australia, say one who arrived before

World War I, internment meant that the police called and arrested the man, without an individual warrant. The man was taken to the local lockup for a day or so, then transferred to the jail in Kalgoorlie. After some further time, and when there were sufficient numbers gathered, a train-load of internees was taken to Perth, where they were kept in a holding camp at Rottnest Island. Later they were distributed to various parts of inland Australia, Cowra and Loveday being the most well known.

Altogether there were 4721 people of Italian background who were interned. Queensland had the largest Italian population before the War, and almost half of the internees were from Queensland (2216). Western Australia also had a large number, with 1196 being taken from that state, followed by 856 from NSW. Both South Australia and Victoria had small numbers taken. In Victoria there were fewer internments than in the other states except Tasmania, even though Victoria's Italian-born population was not much smaller than that of Queensland.<sup>3</sup>

To be released, an internee had to appeal to a committee and lodge an objection against detention. Naturalised citizens appealed to an Advisory Committee, while Italian citizens could appeal to an Aliens' Tribunal. The hearings of these committees were intended to prevent the worst injustices associated with detention by order of the authorities. These hearings were not like a court case where charges were laid. At times, evidence which was gathered secretly was withheld from the detainee, and in some cases from the committee, to protect the confidentiality of the informer. Worse, the outcome of the hearings was not guilt or innocence of the charges, but a recommendation to the Minister for release or continued detention.

Not only Italians were interned, but Jewish refugees, German nationals, Japanese, Australian communists and Seventh Day Adventists. We also had civilian internees from Britain, the most famous being the Jewish internees who came on the *Dunera*. Their story is well known, but there were also a couple of hundred Italians on the *Dunera* who had been long term residents of Britain. All of these were civilians. As well, 18,000 Italian soldiers who were captured in north Africa were brought to Australia as POWs. After spending some time in camp, they were given the option of volunteering to work on farms in the

countryside to help relieve the shortage of farm labour. For many isolated farming communities this was their first exposure to Italians, and it helped break down some of the prejudice of the war years. Many of these farmers sponsored the Prisoners of War back as immigrants after the war, under the post-war migration scheme.

As the external threat to Australia's security passed, and manpower needs became more pressing, conscription into labour units replaced internments as a way of controlling the Italian community. Many young men from Carlton's community spent long months chopping firewood while living in tents in the countryside as conscripted labour. Others in Carlton had to report to the police daily, and needed permission to travel across the city.

In 1940 Arthur Calwell was elected as the member of Parliament for Melbourne, and his electorate included the suburb of Carlton. As the local member, Calwell participated in community life. He attended Jewish cultural activities at the Kadimah, and social occasions at Monash Hall. With the Italians he shared



*Ben Braida in front of the wash room at the Forestry Camp in the Daylesford area, where he spent fifteen months chopping wood as conscripted labour.*

religious ceremonies at St. George's Church (also known as Sacred Heart) and was invited to weddings, processions, concerts, plays and dances. Mrs. Calwell for years received the debutantes at the Italian community's Debutante Balls. Representations were made to Calwell, asking for help in dealing with a myriad of problems. He saw at first hand the impact of the wartime restrictions on these two communities which bore the brunt of the aliens' regulations.

When the Labor government came to power in late 1941, Calwell became the Minister for Information. In 1943 internments, which had been the responsibility of the Ministry of the Army were placed under the control of the Attorney General, and with the improvement of the war situation, Evatt, the Attorney General, appointed Arthur Calwell to chair a committee to review the treatment of aliens. The committee, called the Aliens Classification and Advisory Committee, undertook a thorough review of the internment situation, and as a result was critical of many aspects of internments. The committee was critical of classifying Jewish refugees as enemy aliens. It recorded its displeasure at the internment and the consequent denial of the civil liberties of naturalised citizens. It also protested about the appeal process, and about the way secret evidence was gathered and used.<sup>4</sup> Calwell said that 'until very recent times, all appeals were farcical and a disgrace to our system of justice.'<sup>6</sup>

Carlton, by the war years, had become the centre of the Italian community in Victoria, and also of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community, many of whom had fled persecution in Europe. It was Calwell's intimate knowledge of the experiences of these two communities which contributed to his his understanding of and consequently his commitment to immigration.

As the end of the war approached, the government turned its attention to post-war reconstruction, and realised that Australia needed a much larger population to build a secure base to defend itself in the future. Calwell was appointed Minister of Immigration, and was tireless in his efforts after the war to convince people first, that immigration in large numbers was desirable and, secondly, that immigrants from parts of Europe other than Britain were acceptable. In overcoming the historic antipathy to immigration in many sections of Australian society, especially in labour circles, his achievement was impressive.

Calwell can well be called the father of the post-war immigration scheme and of cultural diversity in Australia. It was his wartime experiences gained through helping his Carlton constituents, and his work on the Aliens Classificatory Committee reviewing the treatment of internees, that led to his vision for the future Australian society composed of a greater diversity of people than previously. He successfully implemented this vision as Australia's first Immigration minister.

#### NOTES

1. The author researched and curated this exhibition for the Italian Historical Society in partnership with the Jewish Museum and the Museum of Victoria. Arnold Zable, Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, Helen Light and Anna Malgorzewicz, *Bridging Two Worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton*, Museum of Victoria, 1992.
2. Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939-1941*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, p. 594.
3. Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, 'The Internment of Australian Born and Naturalised British Subjects of Italian Origin', *War, Internment and Mass Migration*, edited by Richard Bosworth and Romano Ugolini, Rome, 1992, p. 92.
4. CA 753, BP242/1, Item Q6446.
5. A.A. Calwell to Secretary for the Army, 25 June, 1943, in Calwell Papers, NLA.



*During the Second World War, four hundred and fifty men lived in this camp while chopping firewood in the Black Forest at Musk Creek, near Daylesford.*