

# danilo jovanovitch and the italian experience in yarram, victoria

by  
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RAFFAELE LAMPUGNANI WAS BORN IN VERONA, ITALY, AND MIGRATED TO AUSTRALIA IN 1960. AFTER COMPLETING A BA AND MA DEGREE AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY, HE TAUGHT ITALIAN LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE AT FLINDERS AND LA TROBE UNIVERSITIES. HE IS CURRENTLY TEACHING AT MONASH UNIVERSITY. HIS RESEARCH INTERESTS INCLUDE DANTE, CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN LITERATURE AND FILMS AND THE ITALIAN MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIA.

The Italian POW experience in Australia has in the past generally been analysed in positive terms by socio-historians who have considered their deployment as labourers on farms throughout Australia as a first step in the breaking down of ethnocentric attitudes and towards greater acceptance of non-British immigrants and of large-scale post war immigration policies. Claudio and Caroline Alcorso, for example, contrast the internment of citizen of Italian background (Enemy Aliens) with the POW experience and suggest that the latter proved to be positive as it had the 'unintended consequence of fostering attitudes of friendship and trust towards the Italians... setting the scene for large postwar intakes from Italy'.<sup>1</sup> A similar positive view is expressed in the documentary *Reluctant Enemies*<sup>2</sup> where broad acceptance, goodwill and developing friendship prevail. Alcorso makes the point that tolerance and respect was mutual, citing the egalitarian nature of Australian society, and the fairness of treatment of prisoners in Australia compared to other countries at war.<sup>3</sup>

More recent publications, however, have sought to redress the optimistic accounts that tend to portray events in fairly pleasant terms, both fictional<sup>4</sup> and historical. A recent study by critic Desmond O'Connor of the personal accounts of Luigi Bortolotti highlights 'the mental and physical stress and sense of hopelessness' many POWs felt in enforced confinement, re-evaluating 'what has been too easily labeled the "fair treatment" of Italian POWs in Australia'.<sup>5</sup> A most recent re-publication of Gianfranco Cresciani's *The Italians in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) seeks to give a balanced account of the issue, noting on the one hand that POW conditions were good 'in stark contrast to ... [that of] enemy aliens' (108) whilst on the other hand noting that 'the psychological, mental and physical stress of long years

of confinement, isolation and meaningless life left an enduring mark on their character' (111).

In spite of the now prolific literature and personal testimonies<sup>6</sup> there are aspects of the Italian POW history that require further research, at least in the State of Victoria. It is significant, for instance, that the National Archives of Australia has published Fact Sheets on 'World War II Internee, Internee, Alien and POW Records' for Canberra, Adelaide, Sydney and Perth, but none are available online for Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> In particular, whilst the main concentration camps are well documented for Victoria (Murchison, Rushworth, Myrtleford and Tatura are the best known in country Victoria), less documentation is available on 'POW Army Control Centres' that were the administrative centres for the deployment of Italian farming soldiers throughout rural Australia<sup>8</sup>.

According to Desmond O'Connor, by 1945 there were 80 such control centres operating in six States and over 10,000 Italian POWs were employed on farms for the token wages of 15 pence a day (O'Connor: 2003). Peter Dunn explains that POW Control Centres were 'an Army establishment staffed by up to 12 personnel in country regions to administer "The employment of POWs without guards scheme" ... whereby Italian POWs were hired out to farmers at a rate of one Pound per week to help run the farms due to the chronic labour shortages due to the Australian workforce enlisting into the armed services'. He goes on to explain their geographical distribution, '... about 30 miles apart and established on the boundaries of the PMG Postal districts in order to assist in administration ...'.<sup>9</sup>

As more and more relevant archival material becomes available to researchers (National Archives of Australia list boxes of archival material opened up for viewing in June 2003) a clearer picture will emerge. In the meantime, it is also important to document oral accounts of this unique experience that can evidence both the character and attitude of Italian prisoners and that of the host nation.

The following interview is one of few accounts from the perspective of an Australian Army officer charged with the administration of stores and the deployment on farms of Italian prisoners at the Yarram Army POW Control Centre, in Gippsland, Victoria.



TOP LEFT An Italian POW (centre) in Yarram.

RIGHT Danilo Jovanovitch with his uncle Percy (Spasoje)

BOTTOM LEFT Danilo in front of the Court House in Yarram.

It is rather difficult at first to imagine the informant, Danilo Jovanovitch, as a former overseer of prisoners: a cultured and affable man, surrounded by a good number of valuable violins, spartiti, works of art and bookshelves, he has the presence of an accomplished musician or writer. Danilo now lives in an elegant Victorian home in inland NSW and indeed does entertain his guests singing evergreen Italian arias and reciting from memory long and short poems which reveal a life-long concern for fairness, justice and ethical conduct. His life-view is perhaps enclosed in the description he offers of himself: 'I am a white Russian and a Red Australian'<sup>10</sup> knowing well that the positive connotation of his self-description will be understood.

Danilo remembers with fondness his years in Yarram and his Italian POW friends, and has recently returned to Yarram to relive those years through his memories.<sup>11</sup> From the following interview, there emerges a picture of camaraderie, solidarity and mutual respect, not only between prisoners and farmers, but also

among Army officers and townspeople. The supporting role of the International Red Cross<sup>12</sup>, and of the Catholic Church in the town are evident. It is a warm and at the same time informative account that shows that understanding, cooperation and tolerance can emerge even in war times where there is goodwill. With trust emerging between former enemies, the evil of wars can be perceived in correct perspective: as an evil that can cause untold suffering for all humankind.

The town of Yarram, where the Army Control Centre was located, sits on the floodplains on the Southern side of the Strezlecki Ranges, near the Tarra National Park, with its centuries old tree ferns and towering Mountain Ash trees in a rainforest setting. The peaceful primordial pristine surroundings could not offer a more striking contrast to the perceived horrors of war and the constant reminder of the wartime conditions at the Army barracks. Off duty, Danilo Jovanovitch sat by the crystal-clear waters of the Tarra River to ponder on the human capacity (with all our faults within) to inflict senseless cruelty on other humans in wars. "Tarra River" is a poem Danilo wrote at the time out of the experience with prisoners of war. It is a poem about life, about the

perception of the ravages and cruelty of war, the enduring beauty of nature 'untouched by shame or sin' and the silent omnipresence of God.

## INTERVIEW WITH DANILO JOVANOVITCH

Danilo Javanovitch was born in Cairns, north Queensland, in 1919, the eldest of five children born to George Javanovitch, who migrated to Australia from Montenegro in 1910. During the Second World War, Danilo served in the Australian Army for four years. He has been writing poetry since 1934, when he was 15 years old, winning many poetry and literary competitions.

**Danilo, when were you stationed at the POW Control Centre in Yarram, Victoria?  
In 1944**

**How old were you then?**

I was about 25. In Victoria, at the Prisoner of War Camp, the Captain had us all lined up and he looked at the names and he came to me and said: 'Now, when I want you to interpret ...' I said: 'I'm not the interpreter'. He said: 'you are the only one with a foreign name!'. There was a Jewish chap who had been in Italy for a few years ... I just forget his name now too! But at any rate, we go down to Yarram ... He was a really good bloke, this Captain Brown, he had been in World War I and he received the DFC, he was a pilot ...

**What is the DFC?**

The *Distinguished Flying Cross*, from England, from the British. At any rate he said to me: 'Make sure that they (the Italian Prisoners of War) get their Red Cross stuff when it comes', because there were biscuits and all that, and you couldn't get it outside among the civilian population, and I said to him: 'Why? What is it?' at the other bloke. He said: 'Well this is why I got you now as a storeman: we'll see how you go!'. 'Well', I said, my father always told me when you are shaving look at the mirror at yourself; everything must be above board. (I used to call him Skipper!). So when we got there, I had all the clothing, I had to see if they had the clothing and the Red Cross stuff ... There used to be over a hundred in different areas and we used to go out in the car, the Captain and me, and eventually we never used to take the interpreter, because after six months, well ... the Italians and I, and him too, well, we could make ourselves understood. They taught me a few words too ... So, at any rate, we'd go around and see if there were clothes and when I went

there, there wasn't enough clothing! You had to have clothes to put in to receive clothes back! So, I said to the Captain: "Look, the thing I'm going to ask you... We've got shirts here, but I need so many shirts ... What about if I tear them in half, or rip them apart and count the pieces ..." and we did that and we got them back whole, the same as the uniforms. The uniforms were dyed red.

Oh and there was another thing: in the camp where they used to send a truck load of Italians out to work on the farms, a guard would go with them with a loaded rifle. So they would go all on the truck. And he used to... his rifle would be loaded, he would hand it to them, and they would pull him up in the back of the truck and then hand it back to him (laughs), and off they go! But they never allowed the Germans or the Japanese out to work on the farms there...

**Why? Why did they feel so different about the Italians?**

No! It was the attitude of the Italians! My uncle was in the Middle East and he told me there were parts in the Middle East ... where they wouldn't have had such an easy time if it hadn't been for the Italians. Most didn't want that war; most didn't want to fight in it. But you know that! That's what I also noticed. At the camp, all day long they would play "Amapola". Do you know that song? I don't know the Italian words, but it's a nice melody. It was a modern sort of an Italian song for those days. I remember one of the German officers ... he was an officer, educated in England ...

**So, there were Germans in that district?**

Oh yes, Germans, and Italians and Japanese of course, but ... I was given a revolver, and I had that in the holster. Whenever I went into the German camp or the Japanese camp I had to leave the revolver outside. But if I went where the Italians were, they didn't care: I carried it, because they weren't going to take it off me and I wasn't going to use it, so ... (laughs) and that's how it was! And then, as I say, I never saw an unhappy person in the Yarram area on all the farms, because ... the farmers were decent, and when they came to the town, they brought them with them and they had to bring them up to the Control Centre and then, well they would always ask for me. It started off ... the interpreter used to take them down, but once they heard "Jovanovitch" and "Danilo", they called me *montenegrino* because my father came from Montenegro. One of them, before I had a chance to tell him, said 'You know our queen came

from Montenegro?'. That's why they came in and wanted me to take them down to the Control Centre. Of course I could say 'Vado a mangiare...' and half a dozen other words. And I would have at least two or three with me as I took them down and we would sing "Torna a Surriento" or "Sul mare luccica", "Core ingrato" and (sings) "Veni sul mar ...", things like that... Now that Captain Brown was good. He asked me 'Do you reckon they're happy?' 'Well', I said, 'they are smiling and are happy to see us and all that, and the farmers seem happy with them, with what they were doing ...'

**Were the farmers always happy or were they worried at first?**

No, no.

**They weren't concerned that they had ... enemy aliens in their homes?**

I don't know... It just sort of... it wasn't there! You could see it! I think things might have been different with the Germans and the Japanese ... My grandmother was German, but ... I don't know. It's just that... there was no animosity... see? And even here, I understand there were POWs working on farms around here somewhere...

**I just learned about the POW experience at the camp in Cowra, not too far from here.**

Oh yes, of course. To tell you the truth, I was in that camp! And they shifted me out of that camp.

**Is that how you ended up in the Yarram Control Centre?**

I don't know how I ended up in a POW Control Centre. The Army moved me. But not long after they had the trouble there with the Japanese ... I'm glad that sort of trouble didn't happen in Yarram. No, the Italians had no animosity and the people there had no animosity: brother, brother and sister... I remember a POW there, who of course had to go back to Italy, then he came and brought his family back and he bought a dairy farm out at Yarram and raised his children there. So his children must still be there, unless they moved away ...

**So, Danilo, what sort of work were the POWs doing?**

Dairy farming and other types of farm work. They weren't all dairy farms, but other types of farming.

**Cropping?**

Cropping, yes.

**Were there ever any troubles?**

Never had any trouble!

**Were you in charge?**

Captain Brown was in charge and I was under him. There was a George Davis, he was an Englishman. He wasn't bad. He was the corporal. There was half a dozen more of us doing other things, but I was in charge of Stores.

I can't really tell you anything else about them. There was never trouble. They were happy, we were happy and the people who had them were happy ... It showed they didn't want war.

**Were you surprised after the war to see so many Europeans coming... to see that Australia had opened up?**

Not really! I thought it was a good thing ... No, I wasn't surprised. I had a brother in law that married my sister. He came from Montenegro too. And he used to go and meet the boats with the Slavs on ...

**Because they used to come from everywhere didn't they?**

They came from everywhere. I've been with him with the Slavs. Of course he had a little bit of money, being in business. He'd go on the boat and he'd have a few hundred pounds on him, and he'd meet some of the people whose relatives he knew and he would ask them if they had any money and he'd give them all a fiver. So I knew... I was sort of happy that they came from Europe, back then ... Talking about languages, Italian is one of the nicest and easiest... I like Italian, German, French and Russian, I can sing in these languages ...

**It's very unusual to meet someone with your service background who can also write poetry. How did you develop your interest in poetry?**

Well, going to school ... I liked Henry Lawson. I liked Italian poetry which I read in translation. I've got books of poems in French, I was always interested. I've got books in Russian (laughs) I can't read them. I love books! My poetry expresses what I feel, what was there in life to live for. Even now, when I see on television ... children ... what is there in life to live for?

*Why the struggle to survive?*

*Every day the same old routine,  
just to keep oneself alive,  
Ruled by fear and superstition  
and traditions we are fed  
and we blindly fight each other,  
and each other's blood we shed.*

We all have our traditions and I have my own personal traditions. I'm an Australian: my music is Italian music, Neapolitan. And nobody is going to change me. I take

something from all countries. Poetry is musical and it has compacted meaning.

Danilo, while we are still on the topic of poetry, how did you get to write the poem about Tarra River in the region where you supervised Italian POWs?

Well, I was down there; the time I saw it it was more open near the town than it is today. I've seen it out too when I went with the car with the officer and I liked it. The countryside is peaceful. When I go to the bush like that, and I look up amongst the trees and I get goose pimples and I say a few things I want to say to the Almighty. And of course, please, why must people fight one another? Why?

You spoke about the Red Cross. Was the Red Cross involved with Italian POWs?

No, the Red Cross didn't do it, but we got supplies from the Red Cross.

I read in Cowra, at the Information Centre, that the YMCA was involved directly with POWs, was there anything like that in Yarram?

No, the only thing, there was a Catholic church; a priest, I forget his name now. The Italians used to go there. Some of them, they were brought in by the people who had them. I'm sure there are still people who remember or descendants who can piece together this aspect of Italian-Australian history in Yarram.

I may well follow up your suggestion, but for now thank you Danilo.

### RIVER TARRA

*Ah! Languidly in happiness she winds her way along,  
Through hills of green and forests, where trees grow  
tall and strong;*

*A ray of beauty, rare and sweet, appealing to the eye,  
The river Tarra glides along and smiles up at the sky.  
Rare and charming are her banks arrayed in colors  
glowing,*

*Rhythmically, with pulsing heart, she keeps her  
steady flowing.*

*River Tarra, happy stream, caressing moss and  
flowers,*

*I've often strolled along your banks to while away the  
hours.*

*Oh, merry stream in joyfulness; on to your goal you  
wind,*

*With careless sloth, in happy mood you reach your  
journey's end.*

*Your rippling murmur, strong and clear, floats o'er  
the scented air,*

*And Father Time will never change your grace so  
clean and rare.*

*You have your grace so pure and clean,  
untouched by shame or sin,*

*But we are only surface clean, with all our faults  
within;*

*You are the spirit of the bush, a throbbing pulsing  
beam,*

*A silver singing ray of life, Oh! happy happy stream.*

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Italians in Australia During World War II' in Stephen Castles et al. *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society* (St. Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1992) 33-4.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Chilcott, *Reluctant Enemies* (ABC-TV, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See p. 31 (op. cit.). Alcorso's comparison with the POW experience in Japan is based on A. Fitzgeralds study *The Italian Farming Soldiers: 1941-1947* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981) 116.

<sup>4</sup> The image of farming soldiers on Australian farms was often fairly stereotypical in Australian fiction especially short stories, but amusing anecdotes, such as the exploits of Edgardo Simone nicknamed *Volpe* for his ingenious escape attempts, abound even in historical accounts. See Robert Pascoe *Buongiorno Australia: Our Italian Heritage* (Richmond Vic. Greenhouse Publications, 1987) 143-6.

<sup>5</sup> Desmond O'Connor 'From Tobruk to Clare: the Experience of the Italian Prisoner of War Luigi Bortolotti 1941-1946' *Fulgor* vol 1 issue 3, December 2003 <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor> accessed 24 July 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Marian Scarlett 'Rolani Guido: a Prisoner of War in Gippsland' *Italian Historical Society Journal* vol 11 No 2 July/December 2003, p. 30.

See <http://www.naa.gov.au/fsheets/>

<sup>8</sup> A comprehensive historical study of the region that is the focus of the interview with Danilo Jovanovitch, the former Shire of Alberton, now Wellington Shire in Gippsland, does mention the presence of Italian POWs in one sentence adding that "the Land Army girls provided valuable assistance". No other information is given. See John Adams *From these Beginnings: History of the Shire of Alberton (Victoria)* (Yarram: Alberton Shire Council, 1990) 210.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://home.st.net.au/~dunn/pow/powcontrolcenter.htm>, site accessed on 26 July 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication 5 October 2003.

<sup>11</sup> *Yarram Standard News* Wednesday, March 26 2003, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> For the role played by the International Red Cross and its delegate George W. Morel, see Cresciani (op. cit.) page 108. A few digitised copies of correspondence from the Swiss Consul General inquiring about Italian POWs are available online at the National Archives of Australia site (cited).