

NEW MATERIAL

Italians in the Territory of New Guinea

by *Laura Mecca*

A substantial collection of photographs together with copies of 'security' documents held in the Australian Archives on the Italian community in Papua New Guinea from 1934 to the outbreak of World War II was recently donated to the Italian Historical Society by the daughter of Girolamo Pangrazio.

Pangrazio arrived in Australia in 1926 from Campoverere, a town in the province of Vicenza, in the Veneto region. He was 21 years old. Soon after his arrival in Melbourne he went to work with his uncle Jack Cera, (who had sponsored him) on the construction of the O'Shannassy Dam, in Marysville, Victoria. When the project was completed, he found employment in a quarry in New South Wales, where he met Bruno Rossi, a fellow migrant from the same



Filomena Pangrazio, with hat, with her husband (far left) and members of the Italian and Australian communities at Edie Creek with a group of New Guinean women. This photo was taken soon after Filomena's arrival in 1937.

Italian region. The Great Depression was biting hard and work was very scarce. After leaving the quarry, Girolamo and Bruno worked for a short stint on a tobacco farm in Queensland. They later tried their luck share-farming on an orange grove near Mt. Tamborine, but this proved to be a negative experience which cost them most of their savings.

In 1934 Bruno convinced Girolamo to travel with him to Edie Creek, where work in the gold mines was abundant. They were welcomed by a small Italian community made up of fellow migrants, some with their wives and children. The majority of Italians in the Territory of New Guinea were employed by New Guinea Goldfields Ltd as miners at Edie Creek and at Upper Watut and Golden Ridges in the Wau district.

Girolamo married Filomena Bonato by proxy. She arrived from Italy at Edie Creek in 1937. To give birth to their only child,



Girolamo and Filomena Pangrazio with baby Flores at Edie Creek in 1939.

Filomena had to travel to Melbourne where she stayed for some time with relatives in Carlton. Flores was born in 1939.

Italy's entry into the war on 10th June 1940, had a dramatic impact on the Italian population of Papua New Guinea. In his letter to Major WJR Scott, Victorian Barracks in Paddington NSW dated 27 July 1940, Lieut. S.A. Lonergan from the Territory of New Guinea, Central Administration Department, Rabaul writes:

I have to refer to your memoranda...to inform you that all male Italian nationals, Italians who have become naturalized British subjects and persons born in Australia of Italian (or naturalized) parents, who were resident in this Territory on the 11th June, 1940, have been detained under the authority of the National Security Act and despatched to Australia in the s.s. Orungal which sailed from Rabaul on the 25th July, 1940 (and Salamaua on the 27th July, 1940).¹

On arrival in Sydney, the Italian detainees were taken to Long Bay Goal and from there went to a holding centre at Liverpool and soon after to an internment camp at Orange and, later, at Hay, NSW. They were then transferred to the main camp at

Loveday in South Australia where they remained until their release. The internment camps were divided into separate smaller camps, according to the ethnicity of the internees, such as the Italian camp, the German camp or Japanese camp. There was no interaction between the camps.

The wives and children of the Italian internees were left in Papua New Guinea to fend for themselves, without much support from the Australian authorities. It was very difficult for the Italian women to find a berth on the ship which departed only once a month from the nearest port of Salamau for Australia. Preference was given to the Australians. A number of them were still stranded in Papua New Guinea two months after their men were arrested and interned. Among them was Girolamo Pangrazio's wife Filomena with their young daughter Flores. On 12 August 1940, one of the miners interned at Orange, Girolamo Paoloni² wrote an internal note to the Commandant of the Italian Internment Camp, Prince Alfonso Del Drago, asking for his help to resolve the problem of the stranded wives and children. Paoloni wrote:

Sir, I hereby wish to inform you that a number of Italian women and children



Members of the gold mining Italian community in New Guinea queue up to register their names as aliens at the Edie Creek Police Station in September 1939. Nine months later all the men were arrested and deported to Australia for internment.

are still waiting to be removed from the Territory of New Guinea.

I would be much obliged if you could inform the Consular Authority representing the Italian Consul General of the fact that it is most urgent that the Italian women and children should be sent to Australia.

Some of the ladies cannot converse in English, one is an expectant mother, one has a newly-born babe and the other children are of tender age.

The women are left there unprotected to the extent that a few days after our internment, a native entered a house and the bedroom occupied by an Italian lady with intention of rape.

Whilst at Salamaua (the seaport), we made an application to Burns, Philp & Co. requesting their shipping department to issue berths for the women and children on the M.V. MacDhui that left the Territory on or about the 15th July 1940.

Burns, Philp & Co. answered that there was no room on board the MacDhui for Italian women. We are aware that the boat was not full at its arrival at Salamaua and that the Company gave preference to men rather than to Italian women and children.

Hereunder the names of the Italian women left in the Territory of New Guinea:

Mrs L. Cunico, one child, expectant mother

Mrs A. Pangrazio, one newly-born child

Mrs G. Pangrazio, one child

Mrs A. Spagnolo, one child

Mrs G. Pellizzaro

Mrs G. Rigoni, two children

Mrs M. Morbelli, two children

Mrs G. Zavattaro

Mrs G. Paoloni

Mrs G. Rovere, one child

Mrs E. Bortolotti, two children. At Port Moresby, Papua.

The Consular representative could get in touch with Burns Philp & Co. and find out if they are willing to transport the abovementioned passengers to Australia from New Guinea with the next M.V. MacDhui leaving Salamaua on or about the 19th of this month.

P.S. The abovementioned persons are in the position of paying their fare from New Guinea to Australia.³

At the outbreak of the war, the Japanese Consulate-General in Australia took over the task of looking after the interests of the Italian nationals in Australia, as the Italian Consulates were all shut down. Del Drago sought the intervention of the Consul General for Japan, Mr M. Akimaya, to help the Italian women find a passage for Australia.⁴ Filomena Pangrazio and her baby daughter Flores arrived in Cairns on 31 August 1940 on the *MacDhui* which left Salamaua 12 days before.

As to the interned men, some of them were successful in their appeal against the internment and were released after approximately 12 months of capture, most of them under severe restrictions such as the following imposed on Emilio De Martini who was released on 3rd May 1941:⁵

- a) *He shall not enter or return to or attempt to enter or return to the Territory Papua New Guinea.*
- b) *He shall reside in a locality approved for his residence by the G.O.C., of the Command in which he intends to reside.*
- c) *He shall not change his place of residence without the permission of the G.O.C., of the Command in which he is residing.*
- d) *He shall report fortnightly to the nearest Police Station.*

Girolamo Pangrazio, together with E. Bortolotti, L. Cunico, L. Paolini, G. Rigoni, G. Rovere, I. Rossi, E. Serafini, A. Spagnolo and S. M. Stefani also applied to an Alien Tribunal for leave to object to internment. Their application was refused and they remained interned.⁶ Girolamo Pangrazio was released from Loveday in December 1943. During his internment years, he offered to work in the kitchen and became a skilled cook. After the war, he pursued a career as chef in many well known Melbourne restaurants and pubs.

Other documents from the Australian Archives in the collection list all the names of the Italian internees in the Territory of New Guinea, as well as containing 'classified' information on their release and relocation in various camps.

The photographs illustrate 'special moments' in the lives of an isolated but close



A "sing sing" at Edie Creek.

knit community in an environment which was at the antipodes of the Italian villages from which they came. What is quite striking, is the elegance of the clothes of the men, women and children. Dress-making was very much part of the upbringing of the Italian women at that time. The women on the mines made all the clothes for their family. Fabrics and sewing needs were ordered from Brisbane and Sydney.

Many of the images also depict New Guinean nationals interacting with members of the Italian community or during a 'sing sing', celebrations to which the Italians were always invited.

Endnotes:

- ¹ AA NSW, CRS C320, item 132, New Guinea Internees.
- ² Also listed as Paolini in other AA records.
- ³ AA Vic, MP508/1, Dept. of the Army - General Correspondence 1939 to 1942, File No. 255/702/465, Paoloni to Prince Del Drago, 12 Aug. 1940.
- ⁴ Ibid, Del Drago to Akimaya, 20 Aug. 1940.
- ⁵ AA, ACT, Series A373/1, item 9533, Internees from New Guinea, File No. 255/742/216.
- ⁶ Ibid, File No. 255/702/1109.



Bruno Rossi (centre) with Girolamo Pangrazio (right) and his brother Andrea at Edie Creek, c1937.