

FACT SHEET

INTERMENT: POWS 1940-1947

'He always talked of us as though we were another part of his family: certainly he was a very special and much loved member of ours.' Marion Scarlett remembering POW Guido Rolani, who was billeted on the family farm in Gippsland, Victoria. From the *Italian Historical Society Journal*, July-December 2003, vol. 11 no. 2.

Italian POWs

Italy entered the war on the side of the Axis in July 1940. The following year, Australia accepted 50,000 POWs most of whom had been captured by Australian troops in North Africa. Around 18,000 were Italian.

The internment camps, located in each state, provided separate quarters for POWs and civilian internees. POWs were paid a small wage to grow food and work on infrastructure projects. Life in most camps mirrored the outside world: there were workshops, a theatre, church, a community hall and a shop. To stave off boredom and despair, the men organised social events and made illegal wine and grappa, which was often shared with their captors. POWs at Murchison built tennis courts and ran competitions. Others devoted time to digging tunnels and organising escapes.

By 1943, there was an acute shortage of manpower in rural Australia. Against the objections of the Australian Workers Union and the Labor Party, POWs were assigned to farms across the country. There were no guards and the farmer soldiers reported directly to their employers—the family with whom they lived and worked. In many cases, the men became part of these families, exchanging recipes, participating in community events, babysitting and minding the farm when the owners were away. Around one-fifth of these men returned to Australia as migrants after the war, many of them sponsored by the families they had become a part of.

When the war ended, POWs were recalled to barracks. A number of men, who had fallen in love with local girls or who wanted to stay in Australia, went on the run. Those who remained in barracks were given leave to spend weekends with members of the Italian-Australian community and the farming families they had befriended. Many would have to wait until 1947 before being repatriated.

Internment: POWs 1940-1947 in the Italian Historical Society Collection

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to the internment of Italian POWs in the following collections:

- Document Collection
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Internment: Civilians
- Italian Migration: 1945-1970
- Map: Australia

- Map: Italy
- Statistics on Italians in Australia

Further reading

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

Publications

Bosworth, R & Ugolini, R (eds) 1992, *War, internment and mass migration: the Italo-Australian experience, 1940-1990*, Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, Rome, Italy.

Bunbury, B 1995, *Rabbits and spaghetti: captives and comrades: Australians, Italians and the War, 1939-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Castles, S et al. (eds) 1992, *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales.

———1992, *Italo-australiani: la popolazione di origine italiana in Australia*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Turin, Italy.

Church, J 2005, *Per l'Australia: the story of Italian migration*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

Cresciani, G 2003, *The Italians in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

———1980, *Fascism, anti-fascism and Italians in Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

Fitzgerald, A 1981, *The Italian farming soldiers: prisoners of war in Australia 1941-1947*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, Victoria.

Gentilli, J 1983, *Italian roots in Australian soil: Italian migration to Western Australia 1829-1946*, Italian-Australian Welfare Centre, Marangaroo, Western Australia.

Jupp, J (ed.) 2001, *The Australian people: an encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria.

Martinuzzi O'Brien, I 1989, *Australia's Italians 1788-1988*, Italian Historical Society, COASIT and the State Library of Victoria, Carlton, Victoria.

Walsh, K 2001, *The changing face of Australia: a century of immigration, 1901-2000*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, New South Wales.

Periodicals

Italian Historical Society Journal 1993-, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

Internet sites

Australian War Memorial 2006, *Australian War Memorial homepage*, AWM, Canberra, <http://www.awm.gov.au>

National Archives of Australia 2005, *Fact sheet subject index*, NAA, Canberra,
http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/fact_sheets/default.html

——— 2005, *RecordSearch*, NAA, Canberra,
http://www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/recordsearch.html

National Library of Australia 2006, *National Library of Australia online*, NLA,
Canberra, <http://www.nla.gov.au>

PictureAustralia 2006, *Looking for images of Australiana? PictureAustralia® is the place to start!*, NLA, Canberra, <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>

State Library of Victoria 2004, *Pictures catalogue*, SLV, Melbourne,
<http://sinpic.slv.vic.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

Audio-visual

New heroes, new myths 1993, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT,
Carlton, Victoria.

Reluctant enemies 2000, video recording, Australian Broadcasting Corporation,
Sydney.

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