

Powlett Express

/ Wonthaggi and Victorian Coal Mines Advertiser.

The following headlines in the Powlett Express reveal World War II history not forgotten by Italians in Wonthaggi:

14 June 1940, MUSSOLINI CAUSES ROWDY UNION MEETING;
5 July 1940, ITALIANS GIVE £19 TO AMBULANCE FUND;
again on 5 July 1940, BENDIGO ITALIANS NOT GIVEN WORK AT MINE;
12 July 1940, ALIENS AS COUNCIL EMPLOYEES; QUESTIONS ASKED.

Because I have (slowly) been interviewing the older Italians in Wonthaggi and getting them to scour their memories by asking many, many questions, I have now and again come across comments about how difficult it was to be Italian in Australia during the war. There was in fact very little trouble here in Wonthaggi, partly because of the strong union attitudes of cooperation, protection and tolerance and the work ethic of mateship in the mines. Nevertheless, from the moment Mussolini threw his hand in with Hitler, the Italians everywhere in Australia had to stand guard against suspicion of their motives, especially (and ironically) if they were hardline anti-fascists, even though they were the ones most opposed to Mussolini and Hitler. The following article published 14 June 1940 is an indication:

Italy's declaration of war on Tuesday caused one of the stormiest meetings ever held by the Wonthaggi Miners' Union.

Objecting to working with Italians, miners refused to enter Nos. 18 and 20 Shafts of Tuesday afternoon. And at Kilcunda the same thing occurred at a privately owned coal mine where eleven Britishers refused to work with twenty-five Italians.

The men met at night in a union meeting in the Union Hall and although recommended by their leaders to return to work and allow the federal government to take any action necessary, the men objected strongly against the idea. They pointed out that the two pits in question were classified as dangerous and were worked under safety regulations and one man could cause the death of 250 others.

Only after extended discussion did the men agree by a majority vote, to return to work the next day and leave any action to the federal government.

Under the sub-heading, "Action Taken by Mayor" it was reported that the mayor of Wonthaggi sent a telegram to the premier of Victoria asking him to withdraw all Italians from the coal mine until the position was clarified. He also asked that in the meantime the premier take steps to safeguard "all the vital points in the town."

One of the steps the authorities took was to ask Italians to "take all sporting guns, arms and ammunition to the nearest police station immediately." It is reported later that the Italians did this with alacrity.

Three weeks after Mussolini declared war and the Wonthaggi Italians found their loyalty to their new country under a cloud of doubt, the *Powlett Express* reported that:

The Italian residents of Wonthaggi, who asked permission soon after Italy declared war, to contribute to the local AIF Ambulance Fund, arrived at the mayor's (Cr Fincher) place of business this week and presented him with £19. The money, they said, had been collected from their own community and was an expression of their loyalty to Australia.

The cost of an ambulance was £500 pounds in those days. The Italian donation that week was the largest given by anyone.

But this did no stop the suspicion of Italians that had penetrated the town. A sub-heading in the same article was: "Bendigo Italians Not Given Work at Mine." The article that followed said that in reply to a deputation of returned soldiers during that week ending on the 5th of July, Mr. T. Johnson assistant general manager of the State Coal Mine, "denied that several Italians from other parts of Victoria had been engaged by the mine recently... The only Italian who had been taken on was one who had formerly worked in the mine and had left his employment to take a trip to Italy." The returned soldiers from the Wonthaggi Branch of the RSSILA had confronted Mr. Johnson when they heard rumours that the "Italians with whom Australians refused to work at Bendigo were coming to Wonthaggi and being engaged by the State Coal Mine while Australians were refused employment."

Only one week later, in the July 12 edition of the *Powlett Express*, the headline on page one was "Aliens as Council Employees!" The article, in its entirety was:

At a meeting of the Bass Shire Council on Monday, Cr L.M. Wilson asked if the Council had any unauthorised aliens among its employees. He said he had been requested by several ratepayers to ask the question.

The Secretary, Mr W.H. Bray, replied that there was one – an Italian engaged on contract.

Several of the older women I have spoken with remember those times in Wonthaggi. They remember that some people were actually taken away by the government and put in detention camps on the other side of Melbourne or up at Puckapunyal and that their parents went regularly to visit them laden with food and letters and news of family to help keep their spirits up.

It was hard times during the war, but once it was over, the Italians were the migrants of choice entering Australia to fulfil the new policies of economic development for this country in the 1950s. Italians then poured into Wonthaggi and through their industriousness and hard work added much to the dynamics of this town.