

PLOD ESSAY: **Enemy Aliens**

*In light of the special screening of the film **Memories that Make US at the Workmen's Club this week, we are re-publishing the following essay written in about 2010 to highlight the complexity of the Italian experience in Australia and to demonstrate their resilience and commitment to this county. We must ask ourselves, what would Wonthaggi be without our Italians?***

In an early 1941 edition of *The Powlett Express* an article headlined, "Serious Infiltration of Aliens; Investigation of Aliens Means and Affairs Urged," was alarming in that it flagged unusually negative attitudes lurking in a then unsettled population.

At a district meeting of the South Gippsland A.N.A. speakers said they were "Perturbed at the growing infiltration of aliens – Italians, Germans and foreign Jews – in this country", claiming that the problem was one of 'great magnitude'.

They claimed the main concern was that foreigners in the Gippsland area were, "making the most of the opportunity to buy up land forced to be sold by the owners enlisting in the war or through shortage of labour... it was most disturbing to find aliens getting soldiers' land, but their greatest grip was in the trades." The aliens these Gippslanders were talking about were, above all, Italians because, in 1941, Australia was at war with Italy.

Just as in the '14/18 War', as one local calls WWI, the population in Australia became frightened of "foreigners who came from the countries with which we found ourselves at war." In 1914, it was the presence of Germans that terrified everyone, but since that time the steady influx of Italians to this country made them the most prominent group of



'enemy aliens' during World War II.

Throughout the 1930's, the Italian philosophy of Fascism, as defined by Mussolini, was widely debated in Australia, not just because of the Italian presence, but because prominent Australian leaders toyed with the idea of a Fascist movement being used to overwhelm a possible Bolshevik revolution happening here. Events like the strikes in Wonthaggi, Newcastle and the sugar cane fields in Queensland struck fear in the hearts of conservatives like Bob Santamaria and his mentor, Melbourne's Archbishop, Daniel Mannix, who backed Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain. Anti-fascists like those in the famous Matteotti Club in Melbourne were condemned as Bolsheviks and harassed by the establishment. The club's leader, Francesco Carmagnola, was arrested and stood accused in a famous 1930s trial.

However, when, on 10 June 1940, Mussolini 'broke all reservations and declared war on France and Great Britain', those leaders supporting Fascism became completely silent. In only nine months, the world at war had witnessed Germany overrun Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Holland and watched with horror the newly begun *blitzkrieg* against France. Fascism was suddenly and absolutely the enemy.



Perhaps to cover its former tolerance of Fascism, the government swung into action. One day after Mussolini's declaration of war, police and security officers began knocking on the doors of Italian houses throughout the country with the purpose of interning 'enemy aliens'.

"People were visited by plainclothes policemen, who confiscated all papers, books, photographs and personal documents that they could find, and were taken by car, taxi,

bus or tram to local police stations and ultimately to Pentridge jail where they were given the same treatment and food as other inmates... Meanwhile, the wives, frightened that the letters or newspapers overlooked by the searching police officers could be used, if found, to incriminate their husbands, took pains to destroy everything that was written in Italian. By August 1940 1,901 Italians had been arrested and put in internment camps.”

By September 1942, a maximum of 3,651 Italians – one in five Italians living in Australia at the time – had been interned as compared to 1,029 Germans. The Victorian Italians were in camps in Broadmeadows, Puckapunyal, Tatura and Murchison. Inmates, many of whom were Australian citizens, languished in tents or Nissan huts behind fences topped by rolls of barbed wire.

Italians in Wonthaggi were not immune to the heightened feelings of fear and outrage that swept the country. Suddenly workmates in the mines became ‘enemy aliens’. On 14 June 1940 *The Powlett Express* reported:

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 on 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.

Irma Coldabella Storti remembers that time: “When we got into the war, it was really terrible. Even the miners, you know, they went to work and in the morning the war was declared, they were just chased away, told not to come back to work. Some were locked up. Just taken off to be locked up! Some of the fellows from here were taken to Broadmeadows, I think, to be locked up.

The particular ones they took were supposedly on the side of Mussolini. They used to talk about Mussolini and sometimes they had their meetings here [*in the Kilcunda Gully*].

“I don’t remember my parents being for or against, but some of the men from the mines used to come and have a drink and when they had had enough wine, they would start with the arguments. We were just struggling too hard to live. My parents had no time for politics. Too busy keeping alive.

“My parents were – we all were – shocked when the people were dragged off [*to be interred*]. They hadn’t done anything wrong; they had their idea, but that’s all. Lots of the men were investigated for no rhyme or reason. My parents were upset. My father used to drive down to visit the people interned. My father-in-law was interned. Who knows why? He was just listed, accused. For no reason! It made people bitter towards the government, but we really didn’t have time to become political. They never made a protest. They couldn’t afford to. They might have been afraid they would be dragged away. We were strangers, after all, and could easily be linked



with trouble. The kids at school were awful to us. It was an attitude. They thought our parents had come here to take all the jobs. And our parents didn’t speak English.”

Eventually, almost all the ‘enemy aliens’ were given their freedom. It was realised that, just as Irma said, most the Italian migrants were non-political, hard-working and honest people who had come here to make a better life for their families. Nevertheless, both those interred and those allowed to retain their freedom were left “utterly confused by the climate of hostility which surrounded them and tried to keep a low profile, retreating into the family circle.”

- c.r.landon