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internment

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# **Italian Australians during the Second World War: some perceptions of internment**

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# **Italian Australians during the Second World War: some perceptions of internment**

## **ABSTRACT**

The entry of Italy into the second world war brought considerable disruption to the over thirty thousand strong Italian Australian community whose presence was seen by the Australian authorities as a serious potential threat to national security. About 4,700 mainly male Italian Australians were incarcerated in internment camps while women and children were left to fend for themselves in a highly hostile environment.

Although a significant social-historical phenomenon, very few and at best highly partial studies (such as Bosworth and Ugolini 1992, Cresciani 1993, Martinuzzi O'Brien 1993, 2002, in press) have been produced on the subject. Many Italian Australians, however, have tended to reflect, often from a victimological viewpoint, on the internment experience in their memoirs and reminiscences.

This paper proposes to provide an additional dimension to the topic by examining oral and written accounts produced by some Italian Australian protagonists of the internment experience with a view to considering how their albeit subjective perceptions provide a particular viewpoint of one way in which Australia reacted to the events of war.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before the outbreak of war Fascism was viewed in a not unsympathetic light by some sections of the Australian political establishment. The Australian government welcomed Mussolini's September 1939 declaration that Italy was to maintain a position of non-belligerence and as late as May 1940 prime minister Robert Menzies expressed the hope that Italy's position would be accompanied by support and understanding for Australia.<sup>1</sup>

This attitude rapidly changed when Italy declared war on 10 June 1940 leaving many Italian Australians confused and bewildered. Peter Dalseno (1994:180), for example, found that Australian friends became very quickly circumspect and kept their distance. At an official level Italians (along with Germans, nationals of other Axis-linked countries, some Australians who were members of the Communist Party and, after Pearl Harbour, Japanese) were classified as "enemy aliens" and were subject to a number of restrictions. Under the provisions of the National Security Act of 1939-1940 the Federal Government could intern any person whose loyalty was suspect. Much of the detail of this process was delegated to the military authorities and to state police forces.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Il messaggio al popolo italiano del Primo Ministro australiano,' *Il Giornale italiano*, 1 May 1940, p.1.

All Italian Australian males were investigated and categorised by the security service and detention was deemed necessary for those considered to be in the highest risk categories (Cresciani, 1979:172). This meant conscription in the “Civil Aliens Corps,” a national labour force, or, following a precedent established during the First World War for German Australians, imprisonment in one of the purpose-built internment camps that to many internees seemed starker places than they may have been in reality. Claudio Alcorso describes Hay internment camp in western New South Wales as surrounded with a double row of barbed wire and sentry towers and located in a perfectly flat almost treeless plain in an eerie, immense and hostile landscape notorious for its dust storms (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:20-21). Overall 7711 “enemy aliens” of all nationalities were interned (Fitzgerald 1981:5) and of these 4727 were Italians (nearly all male) constituting over 10% of the Italian Australian community which had become the largest non-angloceltic migrant group in Australia (Cresciani, 1993:67).

The internment of Italian Australians during the Second World War is to a large extent *una storia segreta*. It had a substantial impact on the Italian Australian community and constituted a major disruption to the lives both of the internees and of those who remained on the outside sometimes with long-term effects such as depression and in some cases mental breakdown. In many cases internment was not justified since the persons concerned had no intention of constituting a threat to the Australian war effort. The internees themselves were unable to talk or write about their experiences until many years after the event and then only in a somewhat fragmentary manner.

A number of studies have been produced on aspects of the internment of Italian Australians — Bosworth and Ugolini (1992), Cresciani (1993), Dignan (1992), Elkner (2002), Martinuzzi O’Brien (1992, 1993, 2002, in press), Menghetti (1983). Internment is featured in some of the more general historical and sociological studies related to Italian migration such as Cresciani (1979, 1985), Gentili (1983), Pascoe (1987), Zampaglione (1987), O’Connor (1996) who includes an excellent and extensive chapter on the internment of Italians in South Australia in his study on Italian settlers in South Australia from 1839 to the second world war and Longton (1997) who very briefly mentions internment in her study of Italians in Wiluna in the thirties. Saunders’s (1993) study of internment in Queensland and Saunders and Daniels’ (2000) comparative study of internment in Australia and North America also contain material on Italian Australians. However no book has been written exclusively about the Italian Australian internment experience. Bevege (1993) concentrates on the internment experience of Germans and has relatively less to say about Italians, a 48-minute video documentary on the Tatura internment camp (which housed mainly German internees and POWs) was

produced around 1996<sup>2</sup> while Seitz and Foster (1989) and Foster and Seitz (1989) report on an extensive study in progress of the internment of Germans. By contrast, studies dealing with Italian prisoners of war in Australia present a somewhat more consistent and coherent corpus. This topic constitutes the subject of three volumes, the latest being Grimmett (2001), and one documentary.<sup>3</sup>

Direct testimonies of the internment experience are found in some memoirs, personal accounts and biographies produced by Italian Australians which contain partial and subjective accounts of internment as part of the wider story of life in Australia.<sup>4</sup> The idea for this paper came initially from the references to internment (some relatively brief, some more substantial) found in these accounts as well as from the brief accounts of internment found in collections such as Loh (1980), Bosworth and Ugolini (1992), Cabrini Fontana (199?), Zampaglione (1987). Five accounts contained in Loh's (1980) collection of oral histories report wartime experiences although Giuseppe Zammarchi's is the only relatively extensive one, Bosworth and Ugolini (1992: 105-116) contain one direct testimony by an ex-internee and three by daughters of ex-internees in Western Australia while Cabrini Fontana (199?) focuses specifically on material relating to Harvey Internment camp and the direct testimony of three of its ex-internees.

As well as these three collections the corpus used for this paper is constituted by 7 memoirs and biographies published in volume form between 1959 and 1999 and 5 interviews. Luciano (1959) is a bilingual account of the author's experiences in Australia since his arrival in 1922 until the early 1950s when he worked in Sydney as a journalist and as a lecturer in Italian at the Conservatorium (Rando 2004:40-41). His memoirs contain a brief and somewhat sanitised account of internment. A more detailed but somewhat unpolemical account of internment is provided in Bonutto (1994), a reprint of the author's memoirs originally published in 1963. These memoirs not only relate the author's experiences as a businessman in Queensland since his arrival in Australia in 1924 but also his attempts to assimilate completely into Australian society to the point of abandoning Italian in favour of English as the home language (Rando 2004:41-43). Maria Paoloni's account of her husband's internment and her own wartime experience was published in Kahan Guidi and Weiss (1989: 69-75) as part of a collection of accounts by first generation Italian Australian women. Claudio Alcorso, who had migrated to Australia in 1938 as a refugee from Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws, initially published a highly critical account of internment in Alcorso and

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Knee, Tatura World War 2 Wartime Camps & Irrigation Museum, email communication of 10 January 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Reluctant Enemies*, a 50 minute documentary produced by Maria Chillcot, ABC-TV, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> These accounts constituted part of a wider project on Italian Australian literature (Rando 2004) but space constraints precluded the treatment of internment.

Alcorso (1992). This account was subsequently incorporated in a more “toned-down” version in Alcorso (1993) where the author relates his life story in Australia from his beginnings as a businessman in textile manufacturing to his work as a board member of various Australian cultural organizations and his subsequent retirement to his Moorilla vineyard in Tasmania (Rando 2004:58-59). The internment experience constitutes a substantial episode in the memoirs of Peter Dalseno (1994) who migrated from Venice to Australia as a baby at the end of the 1920s and grew up in the North Queensland sugar belt. After his highly unsettling wartime experiences Dalseno went on to obtain engineering qualifications eventually settling in Brisbane. Brief and somewhat cryptic is the account of wartime experiences contained in Luigi Strano’s (1999) memoirs. Strano had migrated to Australia in 1929 and as well as working in a variety of occupations (market gardener, estate agent, accredited interpreter in Italian, Sicilian and English in the NSW court system) also undertook substantial literary studies and cultural pursuits (Rando 2004:60, 131-138). A substantial part of Wilma Watkins’ (1999) transparently autobiographical novel that relates the migration of her parents from Italy to a North Queensland tobacco farm deals with the internment experience of her father and of the various vicissitudes her mother faced as a result. Reflections on internment in the immediate post-war period constitute a minor theme in Vincenzo Papandrea’s (1996) novel which deals with the migration and settlement experiences of a group of *contadini* from the Calabrian town of Careri (Rando 2004:97-99). Four of the five interviews were part of a series of interviews conducted in Sydney and Wollongong in the 1980s among Italian Australians who had migrated both before and after the war with a view to obtaining oral histories of their experiences. Only one third of the pre-war migrants interviewed were willing to talk about war-time experiences and of these only one Andrea La Macchia, a fisherman who had migrated to Australia from Lipari shortly before the war, was willing to speak extensively about his internment. Luigi Strano too (interviewed in 2002 as part of the Italian Australian literature project) displayed a far greater preference for speaking about his pre- and post- war experiences than wartime ones. This would seem to suggest (although the observation would need to be verified by examining a larger sample) that many Italian Australians still felt the burden of internment and other wartime experiences. It was only after the mid 1990s when the internment issue was debated more openly that Italian Australians could speak more freely about these matters.

While it is obvious that the internment experience of Italian Australians still requires a substantial amount of research, the story that emerges from these partial and subjective sources provides interesting insights on Italian Australian’s perceptions of internment, life both inside and outside the internment camps and reactions to the internment experience.

## SELECTION FOR INTERNMENT

The criteria applied by the security services for selecting internees were for Italian Australians puzzling to say the least.<sup>5</sup> It is true that many had joined Italian Australian fascist organisations but community sources such as Strano A (2001:55) claim that, except for a small active minority, this was more from a feeling of social, community and national identity rather than a true conviction of the validity of the Italian fascist system or active support for Mussolini. Some Italian Australians claim they were interned because the *invidia* of their compatriots or grudges by some of the local inhabitants meant that they were reported to the authorities, often unjustifiably, as fascist sympathisers. The possession of fascist literature and other artefacts, expressed admiration for Mussolini and occupational category also seemed determining elements in the internment of many other individuals. In some cases Italian Australians were interned to protect them from public violence (Cresciani 1985:77).

Numbers of Italian Australians interned varied from state to state (Martinuzzi O'Brien 1992). Queensland, the state which contained about one third of Italians resident in Australia interned a comparatively greater proportion, both Italian nationals and naturalised Italians whether fascists or not (Dignan 1992). This was particularly the case after the Japanese occupation of New Guinea placed northern Queensland under threat of invasion and as the internment process gathered momentum Italian Australians in Queensland no longer greeted each other in the conventional fashion but used the expression "You're on the list!" (Dalseno, 1994:192). Western Australia, also perceived as being under threat of invasion, interned a comparatively greater proportion as well but was somewhat more lenient with naturalised Italians and those born in Australia (Bosworth 1992) than New South Wales (where Japanese submarines had penetrated into Sydney harbour) and South Australia which included naturalised citizens and Australian born as well as those who had retained Italian citizenship (Martinuzzi O'Brien 1992). The Northern Territory, despite being the area most threatened by the Japanese, and Tasmania concentrated on Italian nationals and suspected fascists. Victoria was the most lenient state because it was less under threat than some of the other states, because of the greater status enjoyed by the Italian Australian community and also because pro-Italian and pro-fascist catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix intervened on behalf of many Italians to prevent their internment. In Victoria only those considered active fascists were picked up and interned while non-naturalised Italians had to report regularly to the police (Cappello 2002, Elkner 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> Cresciani, (1979:172) reports that the security services had "sorted" Italian Australians into five categories ranging from those considered a very high security risk to those considered ordinary harmless people and that detention orders were prepared for all included in the first three categories, some in the fourth with only the ordinary harmless people category exempt.

Oswaldo Bonutto, an active member of the Italian Australian community and an enthusiastic advocate of assimilation, was a tobacco farmer and hotel proprietor in Texas (Queensland). He claims that he was arrested on 10 June 1940 because of unjustified reports by envious locals that he was a fascist activist, taken to Gaythorne internment camp (near Brisbane), released in October 1940 only to be re-interned in April 1941 on the orders of Military Intelligence even though the local police knew that the accusations were baseless (Bonutto, 1994:50,60). Subsequent to the Japanese bombing of Darwin (March 1942) he was transferred to Loveday (South Australia) where, according to his perception, the country ‘was sandy and looked like a desert’ (Bonutto, 1994:68).

Roberto De Conti who had migrated to Australia in 1927, was arrested in Mareeba (North Queensland) on 22 October 1940 although Watkins (1999) claims that his only link with Fascism seemed to be that one of his daughter’s godfathers was a fascist activist. De Conti had applied for and obtained naturalisation in 1934 but was told that under the provisions of the National Security Act this could be revoked. He was taken to Gaythorne and subsequently to Loveday. It was a far from pleasant prospect for someone who as a young man had already gone through the traumatic experience of being interned by the Austrians for the duration of the first world war. (Watkins, 1999:10, 14, 71, 72).

Peter Dalseno, who had grown up and had been educated in Australia, found to his dismay that he had to complete the Alien’s Registration Card because he had not been naturalised. On 10 March 1942 he was arrested in Ingham — his wife was classified as an alien and required to report to the police although she did receive 8 shillings a week government support — and placed on a train that travelled south through Queensland picking up many other internees on the way (in total almost 500). He was taken to Gaythorne then to Loveday arriving on 20 March 1942 where because of his education he became one of the camp leaders.<sup>6</sup> Dalseno’s mother and sister (14 years old and without next of kin to support her) were interned at Tatura for about two years. (Dalseno, 1994:186, 193, 206, 216).

At Fremantle (Western Australia) the crew of the Italian passenger ship *Romeo* was arrested and interned when Italy declared war (Gentilli, 1983:96). Sicilian-born Frank Ianello, a Fremantle fisherman, was interned for the duration of the war whereas his younger Australian-born brothers, Joe and Con, were drafted into the CMF (Citizen Military Force) for home-front defence. Frank had not taken out naturalisation papers and in the 1930s had been an open admirer of Mussolini’s achievements. In April 1942 Frank and Con had the

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<sup>6</sup> Dalseno’s statement that he was “appointed” as one of the camp leaders may be due to a difficulty in recollecting events many years later when he was writing his memoirs. As Martinuzzi O’Brien (in press) points out, camp leaders were elected but then needed to be approved by the camp commandant.

strange experience of meeting at Narrongin, where Con was one of the men assigned to provide food for internees being transferred by train from Harvey Internment Camp to Kalgoorlie (Bunbury, 1995:23-24). Josephine Cabassi recalls how her father, Domenico Della Vedova, was arrested on his Pemberton farm leaving them 'desolate, in agony, mum nearly fainted' (Bosworth and Ugolini 1992:108). Market gardener Angelo Levis of Bayswater (east of Perth) and his family were registered as enemy aliens but he was not interned since he was not politically active and his work was considered important for wartime food production (Bunbury, 1995:28-29).

Claudio Alcorso, who because of his business activities in Sydney had formed friendships with upper class Australians, wanted to join the Australian Air Force. When he was registered instead as an enemy alien he felt 'cowered and terrified . . . I wanted to disappear' (Alcorso 1993:71). He was arrested on 4 July 1940 together with his brother Orlando and sent to Orange then to Hay internment camp. A determining factor was the discovery in their home of a number of books in Italian on literature, philosophy and other subjects as well as a few fascist publications (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:19-20). Bartolo Ferlazzo, a tailor from Lipari who had settled in Sydney, had his house raided and copies of the pro-fascist newspaper *Il Corriere degli Italiani in Australia* seized. The newspapers had been left there by one of its former editors. Bartolo was arrested and subsequently interned at Hay then Loveday.<sup>7</sup>

As well as those suspected of fascist sympathies, Italian Australians engaged in certain occupations were also targeted for internment. One category that received particular attention were fishermen on the grounds that their boats and seafaring experience could constitute a threat to national security since they could aid spies to get in and out of the country. The member for the South Coast in the NSW Parliament is reported as claiming that Italian fishermen had been going out to sea in their boats to celebrate Axis victories (Bevege, 1993:154). At Wollongong, Woolloomooloo, Ulladulla, Fremantle, Geraldton and Port Augusta fishing boats belonging to Italians were confiscated, fishermen had their licenses suspended and many were interned. Andrea La Macchia, who had arrived in Sydney from Lipari on 2 January 1940, was struck by the irony that someone who had lived by the sea all his life should be interned in what seemed to him the middle of the Australian desert. He was at Hay for about one year and subsequently Loveday for nearly two and a half years.<sup>8</sup>

Those engaged in other occupations seemed to fare a bit better than the fishermen in some cases. Mining, for example, was considered of strategic significance although life was not necessarily easy for Italian Australians who kept working in that industry. Jack (Loh, 1980:36-

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Maria Ferlazzo, Earlwood [NSW], 26 June 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Andrea La Macchia, Wollongong, 16 November 1984.

37) relates how at the Wonthaggi [Victoria] coal mines where Italians constituted over 10% of the workforce, the president of the miner's union, Bob Hamilton, persuaded Australian miners not to vote to have the Italians dismissed. After that the Italian miners were treated just like the Australians except three or four fascists who were interned.

In a few cases internment was self-selected, families and friends preferring to be together in the internment camps rather than be separated. Dalseno (1994:255) reports that three Italian Australian soldiers resigned from the Australian army and asked to be interned with their respective fathers at Loveday. One of the most unusual examples of self-selection was Joe Vozzo, a tailor from Yarloop (Western Australia), who asked the authorities to be interned because life had become very lonely after all his friends had been put inside. When he was refused he travelled to Harvey Internment Camp on his motorcycle every Saturday and gave the fascist salute to his friends inside the barbed wire until the exasperated authorities granted his wish (Bunbury, 1995:40, 42).

Enemy aliens not interned were often required to serve in the CMF or one of the other labour organisations. Luigi Strano, a well-known figure in the Sydney Italian Australian community because of his activities as interpreter and teacher of Italian and also because his poems appeared regularly in the Italian Australian press, had his home raided by the police shortly after the outbreak of war. His books and papers were scrutinised and a short poem 'Sydney' written in Italian which expresses feelings of empathy towards his adopted city evoked the comment "Very good Lou" from one of the officers.<sup>9</sup> Strano thinks that this may have saved him from internment but it did not prevent him from being drafted for three months in the civilian AWC as a 'carbonaio di guerra' (Strano, 1999:61) to produce charcoal in the bush near Coffs Harbour.

In 1942 the Civil Alien Corps was set up to absorb internees released from camps but not allowed back to their normal jobs. Internees worked at road or railway construction or in timber mills, under close military supervision. Andrea La Macchia recalls that about September 1942 he was sent from Loveday to Adelaide where he was locked up in barracks and subsequently sent to a camp in the desert near Oodnadatta (South Australia) railway centre where he worked with other internees to repair damaged railway tracks receiving £10 a fortnight in wages. Sometimes the trains would derail and damage the tracks because of the weight of the cargo and as a consequence Andrea and the other internees were accused of sabotage. However, an inquiry cleared them of any suspicion. After about a year Andrea received a telegram from his cousin in Sydney informing him that his (the cousin's) mother had died. Andrea was able to convince the authorities that his aunt was like a mother since

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Luigi Strano, Mt Wilson [NSW], 20 July 2002.

she had looked after him since the death of his father in World War I and was consequently allowed to travel to Sydney. His journey was undertaken under close police surveillance on the grounds that the Australians might harm him because he was the “enemy” and once back in Sydney Andrea had to report to the police every night. After his return to Sydney he obtained a medical certificate certifying that he should be sent back to Oodnadatta for health reasons. Towards the end of 1943 Andrea was able to obtain a fishing licence because of a “war effort programme” on the proviso that he exercised his trade in Ulladulla and not in Sydney.<sup>10</sup>

## **COPING ON THE INSIDE**

In the internment camps people from the same province in Italy tended to congregate together and there was almost total segregation between northern and southern Italians. Despite this segregation, activities within the camps were many and varied ranging from creating and managing a vegetable garden to classes in Italian language and literature and in English language. They included the production of handicrafts (especially objects made from wood), paintings and sculpture, sporting activities (soccer, boxing, tennis, *bocce*), clandestine stills to make *grappa* (perhaps to counteract the bromide the internees thought the authorities had ordered to be put in their tea!), musical groups and camp concerts. For the sporting and theatrical activities the internees built tennis courts, bowling alleys and theatrettes. The internees could also write letters to family and friends on the outside and receive letters although a quota applied and all correspondence was subject to censorship. Since most of the staff of the various Italian Australian newspapers had been interned irrespective of their political beliefs — even those who worked on anti-fascist newspapers were considered a security risk since they had been signalled out as opinion leaders in the Italian Australian community — handwritten camp newspapers and bulletins were also produced for internal circulation (Rando 1993:204).

Some paid employment was available inside the camp and internees could work for a shilling a day on hut construction, in the kitchens, on the sanitation squads, common room cleaning, firewood splitting, first aid. Giuseppe Zammarchi, an anti-fascist activist, was arrested at Tennant Creek on 14 June 1940 and interned at Tatura near Shepparton, subsequently being transferred to Hay, perceived work at Hay as being optional with only camp duty being compulsory: ‘ . . . every week or a fortnight it was peeling potatoes or cleaning’ (Loh, 1980:31-32).<sup>11</sup> At Loveday some internees could continue with their usual occupations to

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Andrea La Macchia, Wollongong, 16 November 1984.

<sup>11</sup> The police report produced at Zammarchi’s trial states that he was arrested because of his communist affiliations, his tendency to truculence and to safeguard his personal safety as the

meet camp needs — gardeners, carpenters, shoemakers, barbers, cooks, doctors, dentists and scholars all contributed to the self-sufficiency of the camp (Watkins, 1999:204). Some work was also available outside camp and those wishing to do so could work under guard on crops or other tasks although this was discouraged by the fascist activists on the grounds that it aided the Australian war effort. Osvaldo Bonutto joined a working-party that went out almost daily to cut timber so as ‘to get out of the depressing atmosphere of camp life’ (Bonutto 1994:68) while Gino Paoloni decided to go to work in the fields for a shilling a day so as to be able to send some money to his wife (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss, 1989:71).

At Loveday Domenico Ippolito, together with other internees, applied his agricultural skills to the camp kitchen garden<sup>12</sup> while at Hay rivalry developed as to who would grow the best and biggest vegetables. Curiously enough it was not a *contadino* but Phil Bossone, a metal worker and a devoted anti-fascist, who produced the best cauliflowers, carrots, lettuces and cabbages by the application of abundant human manure collected during the night before the arrival of the early morning sanitation squad (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:21).

For many individuals internment meant learning new skills. At Loveday Vincenzo Giuffré, who in the 1930s had been actively involved in teaching the Fascist-run Italian language classes for Italian Australian children in Sydney, learnt to produce wooden artefacts as well as teaching Italian to his fellow internees. Some forty years later he still had a polished wooden jewellery box that he would display with some pride.<sup>13</sup> Internees who worked on artefact production found the activity very therapeutic. Watkins (1999:207) reports that the initiator of this activity was Arturo, a sculptor and stonemason from Port Adelaide who had arrived in Australia in 1926. He decided to form a wood carvers’ group after seeing so many men idle. The group used wood gathered by work parties on the “outside” (Mallee root was the most popular) and made a range of artefacts — jewellery boxes, nests of tables, egg cups, mugs, wooden clogs etc. The production of wooden bowls, spoons, boxes and sculptured forms was also an activity carried out at Hay (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:21).

Many internees used the time spent in the camps to improve their English or Italian language skills or both. At Loveday Peter Dalseno offered English lessons in return for Italian lessons (Dalseno, 1994:250). Andrea La Macchia learned to speak English by attending classes at Hay and Loveday run, as he put it, by professors and others who knew how to speak English.<sup>14</sup> One of these was Giuseppe Zammarchi who, together with two other internees, taught English

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Australian gold miners at Tennant Creek were organising to run the Italians out of town (Bevege, 1993:64).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Domenico Ippolito, Rockdale [NSW], 3 December 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Vincenzo Giuffré, Sydney, 14 May 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Andrea La Macchia, Wollongong, 16 November 1984.

classes at Hay: 'We had two language classes . . . Some of the boys couldn't speak English at all when they got there but when they were released they all knew enough to get on. Some were illiterate when they came so we taught them to read and write Italian as well. The school had a left policy, all our references were against fascism, so the fascists organised against us . . .' (Loh, 1980:32)

One of the most unusual activities was that undertaken by Lamberto Yonna whose wife had been a member of the Sydney Fascio Femminile committee in the 1930s. Baccarini (1967) reports that Yonna, a noted Italian Australian artist as well as a businessman and language teacher, passed his time in internment by producing cartoons, which were affixed daily on the door of the camp canteen and provided a little humour to an otherwise grim existence. One of Yonna's best cartoons was produced at Loveday: the commandant, accompanied by a sergeant and two sentries with fixed bayonets, was shown examining a naked internee with a huge magnifying glass. There were no captions but the comment came after the cartoon was circulated in the Australian officer's mess when one of the officers remarked to the camp commandant: 'Sir, it seems the joke is on us.' No further strip searches were conducted.

As well as the humourous side there were also grimmer aspects to camp life. Coexistence in the camps was sometimes difficult and there were episodes of violence. Giuseppe Zammarchi reports that when he was interned at Tatura in 1940 there were about 110 Italians and 900-1000 Germans and there was brawling between 'the Germans, fascists and anti-fascists and sometimes between the fascists themselves' (Loh, 1980:31-32). Peter Dalseno (1994:268) remarks on the presence of some Germans, Japanese and other nationalities at Loveday but apparently relations were reasonably cordial. However, when Italy signed the armistice the German internees displayed their antagonism by spitting on the ground as the Italians passed by and the Italians reacted by thrusting the offenders against the barbed wire though they had little remorse for Mussolini's defeat.

The most notable episode of violence amongst Italian Australian internees was the murder of anti-fascist activist Francesco Fantin, a labourer from the Herbert River area (North Queensland), at Loveday on 16 November 1942. The incident was a result of the practice of treating all "enemy aliens" as the same and interning people of different political beliefs in the same camp. Fantin had been interned in November 1940 on the basis of a police report that he was an active Fascist although his opposition to Fascism became apparent during the appeal process and his case was being reviewed at the time of his death. The Fantin episode has been

extensively researched<sup>15</sup> but here it is interesting to note the first-hand perceptions of some of his co-internees. De Conti (Watkins, 1999:239) notes that Fantin, a man who had the courage of his convictions, was refused a request for transfer after being assaulted in his hut. Dalseno (1994:267) considers him ‘a man who died for his principles and for his belief in democracy’ in circumstances which were, to say the least, ironical: ‘an anti-Fascist dying at the hands of a Fascist in a concentration camp designed to check Fascists.’ Zammarchi is suspicious about the way the case was investigated — ‘There were witnesses but nobody could get the real story’ (Loh, 1980:33) — while Papandrea (1996:127) considers that there might have been Australian government complicity in the murder since Fantin was an anarchist and something of a thorn in the side of the Australian authorities. Fantin’s assailant, fascist activist Giuseppe Casotti, a miner from Kalgoorlie in Western Australia (one of the two hundred sent to Loveday), was put on trial in Adelaide on a charge of manslaughter, not murder, was found guilty, sentenced to two years’ hard labour and deported to Italy in January 1947. According to Claudio Alcorso (Alcorso and Alcorso 1992:25-26) this occurred because Military Intelligence felt that it would prompt fewer ‘difficult questions’ about what was happening in the internment camps.

## **COPING ON THE OUTSIDE**

Italian Australians who were not interned or drafted into the various labour organisations found that they had to face a number of difficulties and restrictions. These included the closure of their businesses, forced relocation, the need for women and/or elder children to take over the role of the head of the family — in rural areas this often meant trying to carry on running the family farm — open hostility and discrimination from neighbours and in the workplace.

Bill Della Vedova found that he had to take full responsibility for the family potato and cattle farm near Pemberton (Western Australia) after his father, Domenico, was interned until June 1944 initially at Harvey Internment Camp then (from April 1942) at Loveday. The family was under too much pressure just surviving to appeal for Domenico’s release although they had no idea why he was interned since, according to his daughter Josephine, Domenico ‘didn’t give tuppence for Mussolini’ (Bunbury, 1995:33). Lou found life in a secondary school in an inner Melbourne suburb an extremely difficult experience since he was regularly beaten up by his Australian school mates two or three times a week until he managed to learn enough

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<sup>15</sup> See Faber (1989), Morton (1994), Nursery-Bray (1989). A theatrical representation of the murder of anti-fascist activist Francesco Fantin at Loveday internment camp was put on stage in 1991 by *Doppio Teatro* (Rando, 2000:74, 2004:200),

English to communicate with them (Loh 1980:40-41). Experiences in the workplace seemed to vary widely. Although Giuseppe was not interned he found, like many other Italian Australian workers, that it was extremely difficult to get work in Melbourne because Australian employers and unions did not want "dagos" and he spent much of the war unemployed while Ottavio, who worked at Myers Department Store in Melbourne, reported that he experienced no interference and maintained his job throughout the war (Loh 1980:38).

The greatest difficulties, however, were faced by Italian Australian women. Very few women were interned as Military Intelligence did not consider them a security risk. Most remained at home to look after their families, carry on the economic activities of the household and bear the brunt of hostility towards Italians expressed by Australians. Many women remember the war years as times of fear and great hardship while some suffered malnutrition, sickness and depression.

Carolena De Conti found herself completely ostracised and isolated on the family tobacco farm at Pukunja (North Queensland) which she had to work on her own. She had to report fortnightly to the police and had to support herself and her children on a government subsidy of 17 shillings and 6 pence per fortnight. The worry and the cruel spartan life caused depression and insomnia but when she requested to be interned with her husband she was rejected on the grounds that internments were only made for security reasons. Her Australian-born daughter Wilma was given a hard time at primary school by her Australian schoolmates who called her "dago," bullied and beat her. (Watkins, 1999:185, 213, 226). Shortly after her husband's arrest Egle Bonutto encountered severe financial difficulties when the Australian Taxation Department confiscated the proceeds of tobacco sales and other money deposited in her husband's account and the licensee of their Texas hotel stopped paying rent on the grounds that the local population was boycotting the hotel because it belonged to an enemy alien. (Bonutto, 1994:54, 74).

Angela Wayne and her two younger sisters were left to fend for themselves in the streets of Fremantle when both their parents were interned (Bosworth and Ugolini, 1992:113) while Frances Ianello recalls that after her father was interned there was no money in the house and food was in short supply. In 1940 her father was working in Fremantle as a barman for the Casa degli Italiani (founded by an extreme Italian Australian right wing group) and because he was well known and popular the authorities thought he might have something to do with giving information to the enemy (Bunbury, 1995:19, 21).

Maria Paoloni (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss, 1987:70-73) relates how she and her baby were left to fend for themselves when her husband Gino was arrested shortly after the outbreak of war and eventually transferred to Loveday. Customers stopped coming to their Sydney shop,

others who owed money did not pay, vandals broke windows and caused other damage. Unable to sell the business, she was forced to close the shop and went to live on a poultry farm on the outskirts of Sydney, facing isolation, monotony and hard times. Life in rural Victoria was also hard for Bianca's family when, after the internment of her father, a convinced fascist, they had to survive by producing some of their own food and doing all sorts of odd jobs from washing and ironing to selling rabbits to the local freezing works in a social climate where some of the local Australians discriminated against the family while others helped (Loh, 1980:39).

Dependents who had remained in Italy also suffered substantially since they could no longer receive money or direct news of what was happening to family members. Silvana recalls how her father migrated to Australia in 1938 but war broke out before they could join him there (they eventually did in 1948). Her father was interned (together with his brother who had a photo of Mussolini in his car window) and could not send money. However, he found that he could communicate with his family by sending letters to an uncle in America who would send them on to Italy. Her mother had to support the family working as a day labourer picking olives and oranges. (Loh, 1980:36).

## **THE LONG ROAD TO RELEASE**

Many internees were simple folk who had low literacy levels or were illiterate and consequently did not have the ability to state their case for release. An added difficulty was that the onus of proof rested with the internee. Even for the few who were articulate enough to petition the authorities, the process of obtaining release was a long, slow and difficult one — tribunals established in late 1940 granted fewer than 150 releases after a year of operation (Bevege, 1993:120). And when release came it was often subject to certain conditions such as to delay the internees' return home.

Roberto De Conti, who was able to write English, initially objected to his arrest on the grounds that he had never acted in a manner prejudicial to the safety of the Commonwealth. In December 1940 he appeared before a three-member tribunal but despite his protestations that he was not a fascist, the Minister decided that he should be transferred to Loveday in late June 1941. His solicitor subsequently refused to provide any further assistance since 'he wanted no part in the defence of an Alien' (Watkins, 1999:202). Roberto kept up a steady stream of appeals from Loveday and early in 1943 the camp commandant recommended a limited category B release which meant that he could not go into a war zone and hence would be unable to return home. A factor in his release, as in that of many others, was the Fantin incident. Another condition of his release was that he would take on work as directed and he

was swiftly recruited into the manpower scheme and sent to a banana farm at Coomera (south of Brisbane). On 11 November Roberto was finally given permission to return home although he had to report regularly to the police, a restriction order not revoked until July 1945. (Watkins, 1999: 14, 17, 201, 202, 246, 252, 270).

Within a fortnight of his arrival at Gaythorne Osvaldo Bonutto lodged an appeal which was heard a few months later and was supported by Country Party senator E. B. Maher, then leader of the opposition in the Queensland parliament, who stated that Bonutto was a loyal Australian proud of his Italian ancestry. Bonutto was released but was re-interned a few months later (April 1941) subsequent to complaints that he had obtained his release because of political influence. Bonutto's appeal on re-internment was supported by the vice-president of the Texas Returned Services League. On the grounds of this and other supporting evidence Bonutto was offered release on condition that he sell all his assets in North Queensland and go to live elsewhere in Australia but because of the hostility towards Italian Australians he soon found himself faced with having to choose between internment or the forced sale of his assets under ruinous circumstances. Bonutto made a further appeal a few months after arrival at Loveday. He was released in September 1943 on condition that he would go to work in an Adelaide factory and a month or so later was allowed to return to Queensland. (Bonutto, 1994:66, 70).

Selection for release and the imposition of restrictions, however, was perceived by Italian Australians as varied and as enigmatic as selection for internment. Dalseno (1994:271) remarks that 'some were allowed to return to their properties in North Queensland, some were ordered to remain one hundred and fifty miles from the seashore, and others were ordered not to venture in any direction unless a permit was issued by police. The less fortunate were consigned to work-gangs along the Oodnadatta/Darwin railway line. Fascists and the unnaturalised had to wait longer.' Dalseno himself was released in early 1944, assigned to the Civil Alien Corps and sent to the Northern Territory to work on a railway construction project then transferred to a clerical staff position in the Civil Construction Corps. He was allowed to return home in March 1945. (Dalseno, 1994:275-276).

Gino Paoloni's appeal against internment was rejected in March 1941 despite his openly honest statement that he had never been a Fascist party man, that he loved Italy as his birthplace but also Australia and that he 'was ready to respect the laws of Australia but could not deny feeling Italian in his heart' (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss, 1987:70). A subsequent appeal also failed although it was supported by his former employer who agreed to be a guarantor and re-employ him as a condition of his release. Eventually Gino was released after the armistice and returned home on Christmas eve 1943 (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss, 1987:73).

Claudio and Orlando Alcorso presented their case before the Aliens' Appeals Tribunal in February 1941 with the assistance of Clarrie Martin, a leading NSW attorney. Despite the favourable testimony of their many Australian friends and the Tribunal's decision favouring their release, the objections of Military Intelligence, who believed the Alcorso brothers to be enemy agents, meant that they were retained in internment and transferred to Loveday. They were released in October 1943. (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:22-25).

One of the few to obtain a relatively early release (September 1941) was Giuseppe Zammarchi. In April 1942 he enlisted in the Australian army because he wanted to fight against fascism and was assigned to the Fourth Employment Company made up mostly of Greeks and Italians. Giuseppe initially worked on the Melbourne docks as a driver then was transferred to Tocumwal where his unit loaded vehicles between New South Wales and Victoria trains (the two states had different railway gauges at the time) where he organised a strike over the bad food (maggots in the meat) persuading even the Greeks, who were hostile because of the fascist invasion of Greece, to join in. (Loh, 1980:33-34).

## **APPRAISALS OF AND REACTIONS TO THE INTERNMENT EXPERIENCE**

The accounts provided by ex-internees clearly indicate that internment was a traumatic experience that was to leave its mark for many years to come. All agree that it was unjust and for some it presented a bitter blow to their faith in Australia even to the point that a few contemplated leaving the country.<sup>16</sup>

More than a financial loss, internment for Osvaldo Bonutto nearly shattered his faith for and love in Australia and led to the sad reflection that the naturalisation certificates of those who had taken British citizenship 'were not worth the paper on which they were written' (Bonutto, 1994:73). He considers that he was a victim of racial suspicion and that internment was a mistake since it 'caused much grief and many hardships which were not justified from the point of view of national security nor for any other reasons. It was a policy that was economically and morally wrong and harmful to the internees and their families and not, by any stretch of the intelligent imagination, beneficial to Australia' (Bonutto, 1994:51).

Peter Dalseno also expresses dismay that naturalisation and allegiance to the Crown were rendered valueless in a moral and civic sense since naturalised persons of enemy origin were

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<sup>16</sup> The perceptions expressed by the ex-internees in this sample coincide to a large extent with those reported in other testimonials. Martinuzzi O'Brien (in press), for example, notes that internment and its associated incidents had a major impact on the life of Alf Martinuzzi for some years after the war and that Giuseppe Cantamessa (who died in 1947 aged 55) never recovered from his internment experience. Giuseppe Sardi, on the other hand, describes internment as being "in collegio".

relegated to second class status and questions why Australia differed from the policy adopted by its allies claiming that Australia interned 20% of Australian Italians while Great Britain interned 2% and the US less than 1% (Dalseno, 1994:200, 271). Writing in the early 1990s he states that 'it is interesting to listen to the comments of those [internees] who are still alive today. The boastful eulogises [sic] the 'paradise' enjoyed as a prisoner. The conservative calls for an apology and a recognition that his internment was not necessarily the result of his political views. Unfortunately, neither attracts acknowledgment' (Dalseno, 1994:280).

For Roberto De Conti internment was a bitter disappointment because civil liberties and citizenship rights had become meaningless or non-existent. 'He could never come to terms with this treatment, his freedom of speech taken away; not able to mix with other Italians for fear they were Fascists . . . As an educated man who had adopted this country whole-heartedly - as a British subject - he had only wanted a new life' (Watkins, 1999:252). As a consequence life in Australia had become for Roberto 'a bastard of a life' (Watkins, 1999:270).

Giuseppe Luciano who was Consular agent for Italy in North Queensland and who also held Australian government commissions until 1942, considers his personal experience of internment (11 months) a blot on an otherwise positive relationship with Australia: '. . . one may be justified in saying: "What a shameful way to treat hundreds or thousands of loyal and law abiding citizens" . . .' (Luciano, 1959:215-217).

Domenico Della Vedova's homecoming was extremely emotional. He cried all the way from the gate to the house. His daughter Josephine states that 'the experience was always with him. He wasted forty-four months of his life [and] must have suffered a tremendous disappointment, being interned . . .' (Bunbury, 1995:47). Josephine herself thought that her father's internment 'was an absolute waste of time and a great heartache. We never knew why he was interned for the duration and we still don't understand' (Bosworth and Ugolini, 1992:110) while Angela Wayne speaks of the extreme emotional trauma experienced by both her parents until their deaths (Bosworth and Ugolini, 1992:113).

Vincenzo considers that that there is no sense in dwelling on the internment experience but is still puzzled why many like him who only wanted to earn money and buy a house were herded like beasts in Loveday (Papandrea, 1996:126-127) while Giuseppe Zammarchi's account provides a brief but telling comment: 'An enemy alien. They were nuts. I hadn't committed nothing. I was an active anti-fascist . . . I was a militant since I land in Australia [in 1927] and I still am too but I have never broken any law at all' (Loh, 1980:31).

As a result of the internment experience Andrea La Macchia vowed that he would leave Australia forever. He went back to Lipari in June 1947 after saving the money for the airfare

and obtaining permission to travel. However, conditions in post-war Lipari were so bad that he was forced to return to Australia in January 1950 where he worked in the fishing industry, mainly in Wollongong, until his retirement in 1980.<sup>17</sup> Gino and Maria Paoloni too decided to return to Italy because of the suffering they had endured in Australia. However they were dissuaded from doing so by reports from family members in Italy who wrote that everything was in ruins and that it would take years for things to improve (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss, 1989:74).

The most eloquent and possibly the most judgmental reflection in the corpus comes from Claudio Alcorso who found that he was not able to talk about his internment for many years: 46 years later I would be the first to agree that my unjust internment was insignificant when compared to the tragedies which happened every day during the war. But the behaviour of the people responsible for the policy, both inside and outside the army, was and remains significant. Just like Hitler and Mussolini they scorned and despised democratic beliefs . . . They were fascists without knowing it' (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:34).

## CONCLUSION

The reflections of ex-internees comprising the corpus consulted for this study clearly concur with Pascoe's (1987:46) evaluation that 'internments were, on balance, a pointless exercise, instigated by irrational fears.' They perceive internment as not only unjustifiable but also outrightly unjust. It also endangered the economic security they had tried to establish for themselves and their families, one of the prime reasons for migrating to Australia. They see Australian attitudes, policies and practices as fluid and contradictory and claim that double standards often applied partly because it involved a continuous tension between the moral and legal values of Australian society and the demands of achieving victory but also because of the prejudicial nature of mainstream Australian society. In the perception of some ex-internees during World War II simply being Italian or of Italian extraction seemed to be considered sufficient grounds for internment which was one of the ways of defining Australia as part of the British world by clearly isolating and identifying "the other" — the Italian/German/Japanese enemy. The bitterness felt by those who had been subject to internment or had indirectly suffered its effects was to last for many years,

Despite the injustice, official recognition took half a century in coming. The various proposals requesting a formal apology from the Australian government such as the request addressed to Prime Minister Bob Hawke for a 'bipartisan agreement to acknowledge that

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<sup>17</sup>Interview with Andrea La Macchia, Wollongong, 16 November 1984.

what happened to the Italians was wrong'<sup>18</sup> did not receive a positive outcome until 1991 when both houses of federal parliament passed unanimous motions of apology. Recognition at state level did not come until the 1990s either (Bosworth and Ugolini, 1992:105) and it is perhaps no accident that many accounts of internment were not published until this time.

By contrast the experience of the 18500 Italian prisoners of war brought out to Australia was in general more positive than that of the internees although there were also negative aspects in some cases.<sup>19</sup> Many of the POWs accepted the offer to work on farms rather than remain in the camps and relations with their Australian employers were generally cordial enough. Among other things, POWs on farms introduced Australians to spaghetti with meat sauce made with rabbits! (Bunbury, 1993:11). Whereas some of the internees wanted to return to Italy, some of the POWs escaped in an attempt to remain in Australia after the war ended and they faced repatriation according to the provisions of the Geneva Convention. One of the most spectacular cases was that of Domenico (Mick) Camarda who married a local girl and managed to evade capture for more than two years before being caught and deported although he was eventually allowed to rejoin his family in Australia.<sup>20</sup>

Both the internment of Italian Australians and the presence of Italian POWs were to have a lasting effect on relations between Italians and Australians and provided one of the links in Australia's transition from a traditional British society towards a more broadly based multicultural society in the quarter century after the end of the war. H. V. Evatt had been instrumental in obtaining the release of a number of internees (Bosworth and Ugolini, 1992:113). Arthur Calwell became convinced that non-British people had a lot to offer Australia and would make excellent citizens (Bevege, 1993:226). He became minister for Immigration in 1946 and initiated Australia's vigorous mass immigration policy which was to lead to the influx of over a million non-Angloceltic people (including some 360000 Italians) in the next 25 years. The Italian POW and internee workers had demonstrated how useful Italian workers were and this proved a determining factor in the Australian government's decision to set large post-war migrant intakes from Italy (Alcorso and Alcorso, 1992:34). About one fifth (some 3700) of the ex POWs — in many cases sponsored by the farming families they had worked for (see, for example, Lucia, 2003:79-80, 93-94) — were to constitute part of this intake.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>'Locked up — just for being Italian,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 June 1991, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Biagio Di Fernando, Leichhardt [NSW], 24 September 2002.

<sup>20</sup>Cfr. Camarda (2000) passim and *Reluctant Enemies*, ABC-TV documentary.

<sup>21</sup>*Reluctant Enemies*, ABC-TV documentary.

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