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Tales of Internment – The story of Andrea La Macchia

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Italy's entry into the second world war on 10 June 1940 was to have drastic and far-reaching consequences for many Italians who had settled in Australia, many of them ordinary folk who had emigrated to Australia in search of a better life and who had little if any interest in the political events of the times. Yet when prime minister Robert Menzies sent state premiers a coded telegramme on 9 June advising them of Italy's imminent entry into the war on the side of Germany (O'Connor 1996:173), the news aggravated the situation of Italian migrants who since 1939 had come under increasing suspicion of constituting a fifth column working to undermine Australia's war effort (Cresciani 1993:77). 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. They were forbidden to buy or lease land, to obtain bank loans or to travel. Torches, radios, cameras, trucks, tractors and boats were confiscated. In some cases land/buildings were also confiscated and in some areas "enemy aliens" had to report weekly to the police. 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.

All Italian Australian males were investigated and categorised by the security service and detention was considered 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 imprisonment in one of the purpose-built internment camps[1] in remote areas of the country. In all 7711 "enemy aliens" of all nationalities were interned (Fitzgerald 1981: 5) and of these 4727 were Italians constituting almost 15% of the Italian Australian community which by the 1930s had become the largest non-angloceltic migrant group in Australia (Cresciani 1988: 611). The internees were predominantly males but some women and children were also interned. By comparison the US interned about 2100 Italian Americans out of a total population of 600000.[2]

Numbers of Italian Australians interned varied from state to state. Queensland, the state which contained about one third of Italians resident in Australian interned a

comparatively greater proportion, both Italian nationals and naturalised Italians whether fascists or not. This was particularly the case after the Japanese occupation of New Guinea placed northern Queensland under threat of invasion. 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 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. 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 (Elkner 2002). In Victoria only those considered active fascists were picked up and interned while non-naturalised Italians had to report regularly to the police.

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 claimed that Italian fishermen had been going out to sea in their boats to celebrate Axis victories (Bevege 1993: 154). At Wollongong, Wolloomoloo, Ulladulla, Fremantle, Geraldton and Port Augusta fishing boats belonging to Italians were confiscated, fishermen had their licenses suspended and many were interned. Umberto Pittorino, a Fremantle fisherman from Filicudi (in the Lipari archipelago), was arrested at Geraldton where he was fishing at the time and had to make arrangements for his fishing boat to be taken back to Fremantle. The boat never got there because it ran aground at Port Gregory and was a total loss (Ugolini and Bosworth, 1992: 111-112). Luigi Camporeale, who had emigrated to Western Australia from Molfetta in 1931, was arrested together with his shipmates as soon as their boat docked at Fremantle on 22 June 1940 (they had been fishing off the north-west coast of Australia) and they were treated like criminals by the police (Cabrini Fontana, 199?: 11) At Fremantle Sicilian-born Frank Ianello 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 (Bunbury 1995: 23-24). Salvatore Puglisi of Ulladulla (NSW) had refused to support the collection of money in aid of Mussolini's

campaign in Ethiopia and had stated that the United Nations was right in imposing sanctions on Italy but was interned nonetheless (Zampaglione 1987: 49). One of the many fishermen subject to internment was Andrea La Macchia who was to become one of the 702 Italian nationals interned in NSW together with 145 naturalised and 8 Australian born Italian Australians.

Andrea la Macchia was born on 2 April 1912 at Spadafora in Sicily and after attending the first two years of primary school went to work with his father and older brother who were fishermen. At the beginning of the 1920s the family moved to the island of Lipari, off the north coast of Sicily. Times were hard and as the years passed Andrea realised that the life his family led was a poor one and that what they earned through fishing could not support them. It was then that he decided he would follow the many fellow islanders who had migrated to Australia and wrote to his aunt who had gone there in the late 1920s in the hope that she would sponser his migration to the new country. The sponsership process took some years and when the letter from his aunt informing him that he could travel to Australia finally arrived Andrea was a newly-wed of only two months. He did not really want to go to Australia but he knew that it was the only solution to his family's financial situation. At the age of 26 years, Andrea left Lipari on 19 November 1939. His wife remained on the island and would join him once he had settled in and earned some money.

Andrea thus joined a process of substantial chain migration from the Lipari archipelago to Australia which had begun in the mid 1880s and had led some 650 individuals to migrate to Australia between 1890 and 1940 (Price 1963: 89) as well as many thousands after the late 1940s forming a compact community that maintained some of the traditions of the originating culture, particularly the concept of unity and mutual assistance in the extended family, religious faith based on the Southern Italian variant of Catholicism, the concept of hospitality and an attachment to their place of origin (Rando La Cava 1983: 15-16). The economy of the islands was traditionally based on fishing, small-scale agriculture and trade (the men often found work as sailors) but a worsening of economic conditions in the late 19th century was to lead to widespread emigration particularly to the United States, Argentina and Australia (Rando La Cava 1983: 11-14). Most islanders who migrated to Australia went to live in urban areas (particularly Sydney and Melbourne) and went into non traditional occupations (in the initial period many went into the retail fruit and vegetable business as proprietors of local shops[3]). A few extended families such Pittorino in Fremantle and, from the 1950s, La Macchia in Wollongong continued the traditional occupation of fishing adapted to Australian conditions.

Andrea La macchia arrived in Sydney on 2 January 1940 after a journey of almost 40 days on the *Romolo*. His first impressions of the new country were not very good, however he had come to work and that was all that mattered. After settling in with his aunt he immediately found work as a fisherman in Sydney. Wages were low however he earned more by fishing than the other Italians who worked in the factories and the fruitshops. After six months in Sydney Andrea went to work at Jarvis Bay. In the meantime Italy had entered the war and the Jarvis Bay police came looking for Andrea almost every night because as a newly arrived migrant he thought he was suspected of spying for the enemy. They did not want him to work as a fisherman because he was a recent arrival and also because he did not have a licence to fish. Andrea's boss tried to help him because he was very good at his trade and was also able to mend damaged nets which the boss did not know how to do. Nevertheless the police came one day and told him he could no longer work as a fisherman and ordered him to return to Sydney. Andrea went back to Sydney and stayed with his aunt where two weeks later he was arrested by the police and taken to Long Bay jail. From that point on he was to be an internee and his dream of sending money back home to help support the family and of getting his wife to join him in Australia was shattered.

Detention at Long Bay lasted a few weeks. Andrea was then sent to Orange where he remained for a few months, subsequently transferred to Hay where he remained for nearly a year and then sent to Loveday where he stayed for nearly a year and a half. In these "concentration camps" Andrea and the other internees spent most of their time locked up although they were allowed to roam around the camp grounds but they were always enclosed by barbed wire. It was while he was in these camps that he learned to speak English. There were professors and others in the camps who knew how to speak English and they taught it to their fellow internees.

The next stage in Andrea's odyssey was a transfer to Adelaide where he was locked up in barracks and subsequently sent to the desert at a camp near Oodnadatta railway centre. The irony of the situation did not fail to strike him – he had lived all his life by the sea and here he was in the middle of the desert as far away from the sea as possible. His final destination was a camp called "Bourke"and here Andrea worked with other internees repairing damaged railway tracks. They were paid ten pounds a fortnight. Sometimes the trains would derail and damage the tracks because of the weight of the cargo that was going from South Australia to Central Australia (near Alice Springs). Andrea and the other internees were accused of sabotage, that is of deliberately making the trains derail. An inquiry was held which cleared them of any suspicion.

Andrea remained at camp "Bourke" for about a year repairing the railway tracks and it

was while he was there that his aunt in Sydney died. His cousin sent him a telegram informing him that his mother had died so that when Andrea requested permission to go to Sydney and showed the telegramme to the police they believed that it was his mother and not his aunt who had died. The next day he was given permission to travel to Sydney via Adelaide and arrangements were made to for him to take the 2am train (this was the time the trains passed through and stopped when necessary to offload the internees' fornightly pay and food). The railway line however only went as far as Quorn (SA) and the police had to organise a place for Andrea to stay. He subsequently travelled to Port Augusta where he was kept by the railway authorities for 4 or 5 days. He was given food and board and was later sent to Adelaide. The police would always keep Andrea under close guard because they were concerned that the Australians would harm him since he was the enemy. By this time the police had realised that it was Andrea's aunt and not his mother who had died however Andrea lied to them, saying that his aunt had looked after him since the death of his father during the first world war so that he could be sent back home to Sydney. Andrea spent eight days in Adelaide and was then sent to Melbourne where he had to report to the police. He then went to Sydney where he had to report to the police every night. A few weeks later, while Andrea was still in Sydney because of the death of his aunt, the police wanted to send him back to the camp in the desert. However Andrea refused because he could not stand the heat and he obtained a medical certificate that prevented him from being sent back.

It was now late 1943. Italy had withdrawn from the war and Andrea thought he was no longer an internee. He did everything he could to obtain his fishing licence. His cousins eventually took him to a government department in Sydney where he got his licence because of a "war effort programme." However he could not fish in Sydney and had to go to Ulladulla. At Ulladulla Andrea worked as a fisherman for a few months. His boss then went to Wollongong and so did Andrea. It was while he was working at Wollongong that he hurt himself. He got tangled up with a cable, broke his ribs and had to stay two weeks with his ribs strapped so that he did not return to Ulladulla. He later found work with an Italian fisherman in Wollongong who had a 22 foot boat with a four horsepower engine. Andrea worked for two years with this man and saved a fair amount of money.

It was at this point that Andrea decided he wanted to return home and as he knew someone at the Swiss Consulate (Italy had not yet re-established diplomatic missions in Australia) he asked if there were any way he could get back to Italy since there were no regular services to Italy at the time. His contact told him that he could arrange his trip home but that it would be costly. Andrea had the money and he obtained a permit to leave Australia from the Swiss Consulate as he had lost his passport. He boarded a sea

plane that was headed for England, however he had to send a telegramme to the government authorities at each stop to get permission to enter. This involved sending telegrammes to Indonesia, Singapore, Rangoon, India, Iran and Egypt. The journey took seven days and cost him 400 pounds (including telegrammes and air fare). He arrived in Lipari on 24 June 1947.

Andrea had no intention of ever returning to Australia. He had suffered greatly during the war and hoped that when he was in Lipari things would be different. However post-war Italy was a disaster. The country had been ravaged during the war and much poverty now existed there. Andrea worked with his brothers on their fishing boat but the money he earned was not enough to support his wife and family. His father had died in 1941 and he felt the responsibility of looking after the family. Although Andrea worked hard his wife had to withdraw the savings he had brought from Australia (about 500 pounds) from the bank to help make ends meet. Once again Andrea realised that the only solution to their problems was to emigrate to Australia for a second time. However this time he would bring his family – all his brothers and sisters – as he knew that they would have a better life there. His permit to re-enter Australia was still valid so he, his wife Rosa and their two infant children Tony and Orazio arrived at Circular Quay on 6 January 1950 after a month's journey on the *Sorrento*. In the following years Andrea was able to sponsor all his siblings (except his eldest brother who decided to remain in Lipari) and from humble beginnings the extended La Macchia family were to make an important and significant contribution to the fishing industry in Wollongong and Ulladulla.

Andrea La Macchia was interviewed in Wollongong on 8 September and 16 November 1984 as part of a story-collecting project of the Italian migrant experience in the Illawarra region.[4] By this time had already retired from fishing and until his demise in 1991 was considered very much a patriarchal figure in the Wollongong fishing community (the *Santa Rosa A,* one of the biggest and most modern fishing boats in the Wollongong fleet owned by the La Macchia family, had been named after his wife who had passed away a few months before the boat's construction in 1980). At the time he was the only person interviewed who had been subject to internment and who was willing to talk at length about his experiences, though he preferred to be more expansive about events before and after the time spent in the camps than during. He told his story in Sicilian and in an expressive oral narrative style which in its simplicity graphically expressed the sense of frustation, the worry and anxiety over his wife Rosa who had remained in Lipari (although he knew the family would look after her), the loss of freedom and, to some extent, the sense of fatality arising from being interned in places and contexts which were to him totally alien. In keeping with

the Sicilian oral popular narrative genre it was a subjective and highly personalised account of his experiences and perceptions with little awareness of the “bigger picture” and with very approximate time lines as well as some approximation in toponomastic details.

Andrea’s story provides a valuable contribution to the piecing together of the internment experiences of Italian Australians during the second world war, experiences which present a number of points in common but also many differences since the story of each internee contains highly individual elements. It is one of a series of accounts which over the years Italian Australians have told. Other direct accounts are to be found in Luciano (1959). Baccarini (1967), Loh (1980), Kahan-Guidi and Weiss (1989), Alcorso and Alcorso (1992), Ugolini and Bosworth (1992), Bonutto (1994 – originally published in 1964), Dalseno (1994), Watkins (1999) and Cabrini Fontana (199?).

Like many internees Andrea La Macchia was bewildered about the reason for his internment although he soon realised that he was considered very much an enemy despite a total lack on his part of hostile thoughts or intentions towards Australia. He had come to this country exclusively because of concerns for the economic well-being of his extended family (in traditional Sicilian society considered far more important that the government which was often perceived as hostile) in search of a better life and had not participated in any political activity either in Italy or in Australia. His lack of competency in English as well as a total lack of knowledge of Australian legal processes meant that like the majority of his fellow internees he was in no position to be able to state his case for release in a process which was particularly complicated since 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). Instead, Andrea made use of his native intelligence when the opportunity arose with the death of his aunt by initially obtaining a limited release and then managing to go back to his beloved trade of fishing.

Despite its many negative aspects, the time spent in the camps had one positive outcome for Andrea in that he was able to learn English. In fact many internees used the time spent in the camps at improve their English or Italian language skills or both. At Loveday Peter Dalseno offered English lessons in return for Italian lessons (Dalseno 1994: 250). Another teacher was antifascist activist Giuseppe Zammarchi who, together with two other internees, taught English classes at Hay: “We had two

language classes, one in the evening for advanced students and an afternoon class for beginners. There were about a hundred students. 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).

Andrea, however, does not mention other activities within the camps which were many and varied and included creating and managing a vegetable garden, the production of handicrafts (especially objects made from wood), paintings and sculpture, sporting activities (soccer, boxing, tennis, *bocce*), clandestine stills to make *grappa*, musical groups and camp concerts. 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[5] handwritten camp newspapers and bulletins were also produced for internal circulation. In these the Australian authorities were criticised for their treatment of the Italian internees, news was provided about camp activities and essays were written on issues of current interest (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, states that at Hay work was optional with only camp duty being compulsory: " . . . every week or a fortnight it was peeling potatoes or cleaning" (Loh 1980: 31-32). At Loveday some internees (but clearly not Andrea) could continue with their usual occupations to 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 internees who were fascist activists on the grounds that it aided the Australian war effort. Osvaldo Bonutto relates that he 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).

Ultimately work proved to be a compulsory option for Andrea whose assignment to a work gang on the Oodandatta/Darwin railway line parallels, among others, the experience of Australian educated Peter Dalseno who remarks in his memoirs that on release from the internment camps "the less fortunate were consigned to work-gangs

along the Oodandatta/Darwin railway line"(Dalseno 1994: 271). Dalseno was released from internment in early 1944, assigned to the Civil Alien Corps and sent to the Northern Territory to work on the railway construction project then transferred to a clerical staff position in the Civil Construction Corps. He was allowed to return to his North Queensland home only in March 1945 (Dalseno 1994: 275-276).

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 many it presented a bitter blow to their faith in Australia even to the point that a few contemplated leaving the country.

Andrea La Macchia was not the only one who desired to leave Australia. Gino and Maria Paoloni too decided to return to Italy because of the suffering they had endured in during the war. Gino had been interned shortly after Italy's entry in the war, ultimately ending up in Loveday, and despite appeals supported by his former employer was not released until after the armistice, returning home on Christmas eve 1943. His wife Maria Paoloni relates how she and her baby were left to fend for themselves. Customers stopped coming to their Sydney shop and others who owed money did not pay up, windows were broken and other damage was done by vandals. 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. However the Paoloni were dissuaded from their intention to return by reports from family members in Italy who wrote that everything was in ruins and that it would take many years for things to improve (Kahan-Guidi and Weiss 1989: 70-74).

Even for those who did not contemplate voting with their feet by leaving the country internment left a bitter aftertaste. Osvaldo Bonutto states that the experience nearly shattered his faith for and love in Australia and claims that he was a victim of racial suspicion. Internment 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 expresses dismay that naturalisation and allegiance to the Crown were rendered valueless in a moral and civic sense. 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 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; [and immediately after release] not able to mix with other Italians for fear they were Fascists" (Watkins 1999: 252). The most eloquent and possibly the most judgmental reflection comes from Claudio Alcorso who found that he was not able to talk about his internment for many years: and that " . . . 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 . . . 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: 28).

Both the internee's reflections on their experiences as well as most studies on internment concur with the judgment expressed by Robert Pascoe (1987: 46) that "internments were, on balance, a pointless exercise, instigated by irrational fears." For the vast majority of internees as for Andrea La Macchia internment was not only unjustifiable but outrightly unjust and endangered the economic security they had tried to establish for themselves and their families, one of the prime reasons for migrating to Australia. Australian attitudes, policies and practices were fluid, contradictory and double standards often applied partly because it "involved a continuous interplay between the basic structure of society - its laws and values - and the demands of achieving victory"(Bevege 1993: xiii) but also because of the prejudicial nature of mainstream Australian society. During World War II simply being Italian or of Italian extraction was 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. Andrea La Macchia was one of the many Italian Australians caught up in this entangled web of events.

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ENDNOTES

[1]A precedent existed in that Australian Germans had been confined in internment camps during World War I.

[2]Press release posted on H-ITAM, 8 October 2002: When America's Italians Were America's Enemies: An Exploration of Civil Liberties in Crisis At the Italian American Museum in mid-Manhattan.

[3] So much so that in the oral literary tradition of the islanders there is a short poem in dialect that goes: "Grab the migration guarantee / like a fish rushes to the hook / and you think that pound notes / are like toilet paper**.** / Go to Australia, go to Australia / go to polish, go to polish / go to polish apples and pears / from morning until night." (Rando 2004: 232).

[4] The permission granted byAndrea's brother, Franco La Macchia, on 8 June 2005 to publish Andrea's story is gratefully acknowledged.

[5] Even those who worked on antifascist newspapers were considered a security risk since they had been singled out as opinion leaders in the Italian Australian community.