

BONEGILLA

Forty years later. Some observations.

by Charles d'Aprano

Charles D'Aprano came to Australia in 1937. He served in the Australian Armed Forces during WWII and was very active in the Italian migrant organisations in the post-war period. He has published several books and articles on Italian immigration. The most recent is From Goldrush to Federation - Italian Pioneers in Victoria 1850-1900, released in November 1994. D'Aprano is a committee member of the Italian Historical Society.

It is rather difficult, after more than four decades, to be absolutely precise about the events that took place at the Bonegilla Migrant Centre in the spring of 1952.

At that time I was the Victorian State Secretary of the Italia Libera Movement, an anti-fascist organization that had been set up in 1943 by a number of individuals and groups united by the fear and hatred of fascism. Apart from the obvious aims of defeating fascism, which had already been achieved on the battlefields if not in the social and political arenas, our main aim was to bring about a closer working relationship between the Australian people, and more particularly the Trade Unions, and the thousands of Italian immigrants then beginning to arrive in Australia. The members of our State Committee were constantly engaged in informing the newly arrived immigrants from Italy about their rights as workers: their salaries, their annual leave and the need to belong to their appropriate Trade union.

For many months in 1952, Italian assisted immigrants gathered at the Bonegilla Migrant Centre, having been brought to Australia by the government of the day to supply labour for developing industry.

But the government had not foreseen the approaching economic crisis; the expected industrial growth did not take place and industrial production regressed for a time. The idle occupants of Bonegilla were stranded without employment and with no foreseeable opportunity for work in the future. They idled away their time chasing rabbits and catching them for their meals, as an alternative to the military style food that they were being served.

Some of the men left the camp and came to Melbourne to seek work through friends or relatives. It was from these men that we heard of the plight of their friends and acquaintances at Bonegilla.

I decided to visit the camp in the company of other activists. Knowing that we would not be welcomed by the authorities, we smuggled ourselves in under cover of darkness and visited many huts where the residents were only too willing to tell us of the boredom and the lack of hope felt by many men in the centre. In fact, by our first visit, four young men had already committed suicide. I clearly recall one young Calabrese weeping unashamedly as he told us of how he had found his friend hanging from the rafters of their ablution block.

8.1.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SECRET

ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT
D BRANCH
BOX 51388 G.P.O.
MELBOURNE

18th July, 1952

MEMORANDUM for:
Headquarters, A.S.I.O. (2)

ITALIA LIBERA

Reference telephone conversation of 17th July, 1952.

2. Informed this office at 1100 hours on 17th July 1952 that a group of members of the above organisation was on its way to Bonegilla migrant Camp where at present there are some 1500 unemployed Italian migrants. suggested that the reason for the visit was to cause discontent among the migrants there. He stated that he had informed Mr. DWYER, Department of Immigration. The reason for belief is not known.

3. Mr. DWYER rang this office during the afternoon of 17th July to reiterate this information and was requested to furnish this office with a report, in due course, covering the names of those concerned and their activities if of a nature as suggested above.

for REGIONAL DIRECTOR, VICTORIA

REC'D
22 JUL 1952
A.S.I.O.
MELBOURNE

Original in

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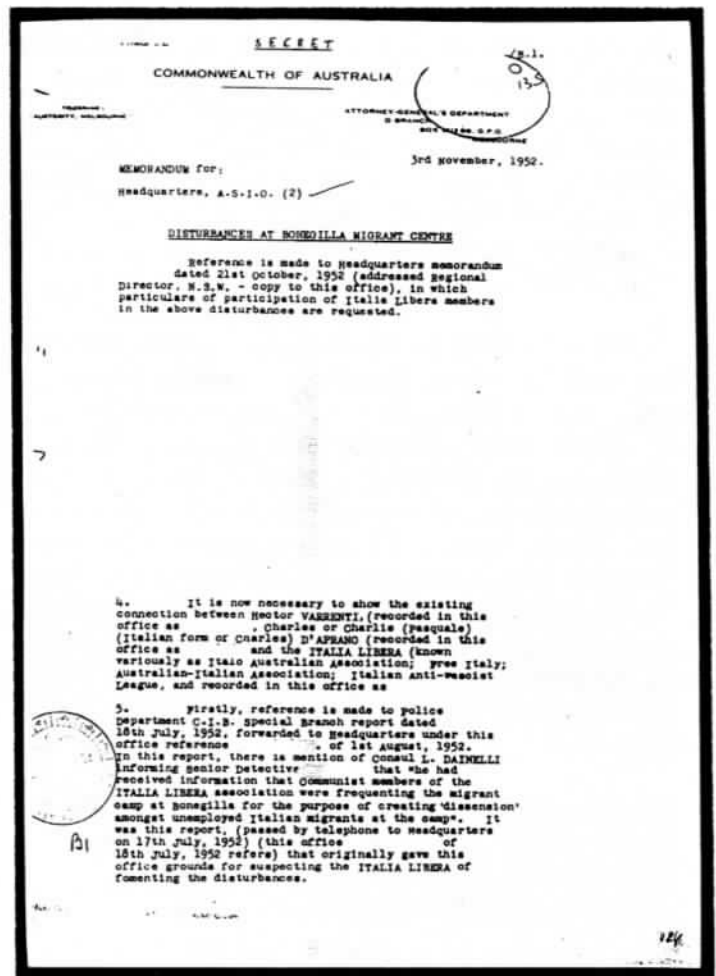
Source: Australian Archives (ACT): CRS A6122; XRI384.

During our visits, my friends and I would hold three or four meetings in one night, going from hut to hut, always a step ahead of the Commonwealth Police who had obviously been informed of our presence in the camp and were seeking to arrest us. But the immigrants protected us by pretending not to know our whereabouts or by sending the police in the opposite direction from the one we had taken.

On our return to Melbourne, we endeavoured to inform the general public of the plight of Bonegilla residents but to no avail. The dailies of the day played down the tragedy of these men, forgotten in a migrant camp miles from anywhere. Our only recourse was the left-wing press and our own paper *Il Risveglio*.

Italia Libera saw itself as the legitimate representative of the immigrants and made strenuous efforts to discuss the question of these men with the Italian Consul in Melbourne. To this end, Dr. Omero Schiassi, National President of Italia Libera, and I visited the Consul General in Punt Road. The meeting was a dismal failure. The Consul General flatly denied that there was anything to be concerned about and that work would be found for these men sooner or later. We left rather disgusted with the lack of care shown by the representative of the Italian Republic or, rather, the agent of the De Gasperi government.

There was an obvious conspiracy of silence which I was not to discover until later. While in Italy with three other Melbourne delegates on our way to the Vienna Congress of Peoples for Peace in 1952 I was asked to speak at a congress in Florence. When asked to say a few words about the lives of the Italian migrants in Australia, I told the audience about Bonegilla. They were stunned. In the meantime, I had received news from home that the disgruntled men at Bonegilla had held a meeting at which they threatened to go to Canberra to lodge a complaint with the Minister of Immigration if work was not found for them very soon. I was able to inform my Florentine listeners of the anger and the frustration felt by the men in the camp and that these men were ready to come home rather than continue an idle life in a desolate place. They had demanded work, for which they had been induced to come to Australia, and the government had sent tanks and personnel carriers to surround the camp to keep the 'revolt' under control. But the workers were defiant. "We want work" they shouted.



Source: Australian Archives (ACT): CRS A6122; XRI384



The Sun, 22 July, 1952.

The Florentines clapped and cheered the determination of the migrants to have their rights respected. At the end of the conference, the police came and cautioned me about spreading rumours regarding Italian workers in Australia. It was my turn to be stunned. When I protested that my facts were correct, they laughed at me and warned me to keep my mouth shut or suffer the consequences.

Three days later in Modena, the police arrested me and the three Australian friends travelling with me. When I was interrogated by the *Questore*, after midnight on a foggy Modena night, the policeman screamed at me that I had no right to travel around the world and spread lies about honest Italian workers who were bringing money and honour to their motherland. When I protested that I had seen thousands of men unemployed for months on end, he resorted to banging the table and threatening diabolic consequences for my filthy lies, for my gross stupidity.

"Communist inventions, fabrications, lies, that's all you're capable of saying. I will change your mind very quickly. You and your friends will be my guests for as long as I please..."

Naturally, I asked to see the Australian Consul as I was an Australian citizen, carrying an Australian passport. The policeman laughed in my face and told me quite openly that the Consular staff had supplied him with the most detailed dossier on my activities in Australia. *"They are my friends, not yours, Signor D'Aprano"*, were his words.

After several hours, when the people of Modena demanded our release, we were photographed, finger-printed like common criminals and escorted to the border.

Later, at a Press Conference in Vienna, the Congress organisers sent a protest to the Italian and Australian governments about our unfair treatment but nothing came of it.

The conspiracy of silence was adhered to by both sides. Truth, however, does eventually emerge from the dungeons of suppression.

It is with some pride that I was imprisoned for telling the truth.



A group of Italian immigrants at the Bonegilla Migrant Centre in 1952.