

BONEGILLA REBELLIONS A FIRST-HAND VIEW

by Maria Triaca

Maria Triaca is a third generation Italian Australian. She was the Melbourne Sun News-Pictorial's first ethnic affairs reporter in the early 1980s. She is author of Amelia A Long Journey, the biography of her maternal grandmother who came to Australia from Italy in 1904. She contributed to Growing Up Italian in Australia, published by the New South Wales Library Council.

The oral history component of this article has been left unedited to allow the natural form of the interview.

They were angry days. The conditions were rough: Army huts converted into rooms, stifling hot in summer, freezing in winter. It was 1952. The Commonwealth Immigration Centre at Bonegilla, near Albury, was Australia's largest migrant centre. More than 200,000 people passed through Bonegilla from its opening in 1947 until the doors finally shut in 1971.

But in 1952, among the immigrants who filled the converted Army barracks were close to 3,000 Italian men. They were agitated. They had come to Australia on two-year contracts with the promise of work. But two months after arriving at the camp there were still no jobs -- and no money.

Albino Papagno walked into Bonegilla in June 1952. Recently arrived from Italy, where he had learnt English while working in a British Airforce base near Naples, the 22 year old Papagno bore the title of Liaison Officer for the Italian migrants. Although Canberra paid his salary, he was working directly with the Italian Consul in Melbourne, Dr Luca Dainelli. His job: to pacify the increasingly angry Italians.

Mr Papagno recently recalled his first impressions of Bonegilla.

I travelled up on the 'Spirit of Progress'. I arrived late at night, it was about eight o'clock, and I was picked up at the Albury station. Travelling through the night through these vast fields and farms, it was very deserted. There were very few houses. They were expecting me. I was allocated to Staff Block 19. The supervisor handed me the blankets and sheets and pillows and told me to go to a hut. The staff huts were lined with canite -- a terrible thing, made from sugar cane



*Albino Papagno at the entrance of the Camp in 1952.
(Courtesy A. Papagno)*

stuck together. It was a single room -- very, very small -- just enough to fit a single bed and a cupboard. It was not a cupboard, just a rod on the wall with a curtain around it.

All the facilities -- toilets, showers were outside in different blocks. Block 19 was a staff block. The managers and directors had a different staff block. We were in what they called the clerical staff and then there was the working staff block.

Bonegilla was divided into two areas with a road in between, which was actually the main road from Wodonga going out to the Hume Weir. The migrants' blocks were on the other side. The camp was fenced by barbed wire, but very low. It did give you a shock, especially because I had worked for the British forces in a camp. I thought, 'Oh what have I done? I've left one camp and gone into another one'.

Albino Papagno remembers that he was warmly welcomed by the Director of the Employment Office, Mr Dobbins, who said "Thank God, we've got an interpreter who can speak fluently in two languages. We need you badly".

There were about 3,000 Italian migrants who had arrived since April, all single men. They occupied six or seven blocks. They had been unemployed for two or three months. They were agitated, emotional and upset. The Consul, before he left me at the (Spencer Street) station said, 'Try to keep them calm -- things will work out, be patient'. The Italians were very agitated. They wanted to go back (to Italy). They were receiving two pounds five shillings a week, which barely paid for cigarettes. And there was no prospect of employment.

While the Director of Employment and his superior were saying there was nothing they could do because there was a recession, the Italians were demanding that their work contracts be honoured.

A committee of Italians was formed. They protested several times in front of the Employment Office -- probably 800 or 1,000. They said, 'we can't help it -- we want jobs'.

Mr Papagno said the Italians used to ring the Italian Consul demanding to be repatriated.

The Consul kept on ringing me saying, 'Keep them calm -- jobs will come, jobs will come'.

A deputation of Italians to Melbourne to see Dr Dainelli, announced on return that they were going to march on Canberra. As the official interpreter, Mr Papagno was asked what he thought would happen. His advice was that the Italians would not go ahead and march on the national capital.

But the Australian authorities were frightened and they rang up the Army Camp at Bandiana, which was very close to Bonegilla, and they surrounded the camp with armoured vehicles. The soldiers were not armed -- I must stress this -- but there were soldiers in the armoured vehicles. You could not see them from the camp. The migrants could walk in and out of the camp freely. A lot of Italians used to go rabbiting in the fields there and they saw these vehicles standing there on the outskirts of the camp, a long way behind the hills, sometimes in farms... They came back and the rumour went around, 'They have surrounded the Camp... they do not want to let us march'. The Italians got very upset and the committee got together and another rumour started that they were going to burn Bonegilla. I was called late at night from my staff block by the directors and they said, 'Look, we've heard they're going to burn Bonegilla because we've surrounded the camp'. I said, 'I think it wasn't the right idea to surround it'. In the meantime I was in touch with the Consul and he said, 'Do what you can', but he wasn't going to come.

Migrants in "rebellion": Army called

From The Sun's reporter

ALBURY, Fri. — More than 200 armed servicemen in convoys, five armored cars and police units were called today to Bonegilla Migrant camp when 2000 Italians threatened to riot.

Tension mounted during the day at Albury and Bonegilla as first the police, and then the Army were called in.

All through Thursday, five police from Wodonga stood guard at the camp.

Early today, 10 police—from Wangaratta, 45 miles, and Chiltern, 22 miles—reinforced Wodonga and Albury police stations to help guard the camp.

By noon, Army Command in Melbourne ordered the officer in charge at Bandiana (Col. J. T. Simpson) to send two infantry companies to the camp. Police "riot" vans were also sent out.

The migrants had threatened to burn down camp buildings and march on Albury and Wodonga unless work was found for them.

The Sun, 9th July 1952.

The Camp director's assistant then gave the young interpreter 24 hours to find out if a match would be put to Bonegilla. Having befriended the Italians and used to eating with them at weekends, Mr Papagno went back to the Italian blocks and discovered that indeed they had several tins of kerosene hidden under the huts which they were intending to use to burn down the camp.

When I told that to Mr Dawson and the other officers they immediately wanted to do something.

Mr Papagno tried to calm them, saying: "Italians threaten a lot." It was Thursday, July 17, 1952.

According to a diary of events leading up to July 17, based on information from the Camp director, Russell Dawson, there had been a series of demonstrations in the days leading up to the 'riot'.

Monday, July 7: By this date there existed in Bonegilla Camp a body known as the Italian deputation, which had been formed by taking two migrants from each of the seven blocks holding Italian migrants. During the late afternoon a demonstration was carried on outside the main office to the effect that the meat served with the meal was too fat to eat...

Tuesday, July 8: The Italian deputation approached Mr Dawson and requested that the Consul should be asked to attend the camp. The deputation also stated that the boots of many of the migrants were nearly worn out.

Thursday, July 10: The Italian deputation was informed that the Consul for Italy in Victoria (Dr Dainelli) would arrive at the camp on July 11.

Friday, July 11: The Italian Consul visited Bonegilla camp and had audiences with the migrants during most of the day. It is understood that a form of submission to the Minister of Immigration was partly prepared, and that the Italian deputation accompanied Mr Dainelli back to Melbourne so as to assist him in the final preparation of this submission.

Monday, July 14: Migrants in Block 2 appeared to be very excitable.

Thursday, July 17: Shortly after lunch, Mr Dawson received information from several sources, including his patrolmen, that groups were forming in the blocks, were moving around

the blocks collecting supporters and a procession arrived at the office at approximately 1430 hours. It is believed that the number of migrants taking part in this procession was about 1,000 -- i.e. about half of those in the camp.

Mr Dawson promptly rang Inspector Boyd of the police station at Wodonga ... and the crowd who were now beginning to demonstrate noisily demanded Mr Dawson ... demonstration and noise continued for another half an hour with the demonstrators remaining adamant. By the end of this time, Mr Dawson considered the situation was getting dangerous and accordingly he then decided to go out and face the men. He told them that the subjects in dispute were being referred to Mr Holt [then Immigration Minister and later Prime Minister]. Mr Dawson noticed at this point there was a hard core of some 20 or 30 Italians who shouted together repeatedly that, failing a satisfactory answer to their demands by 1630 hours on the 18th, the camp would be burnt down. Mr Dawson informed them that no guarantees of an answer by any specified time could be given. By about 1600 hours the crowd began to break up."¹

After telephone calls between Mr Dawson, the Immigration Department in Canberra, Dr Dainelli in Melbourne and the Italian delegation, it was decided a deputation would see Mr Holt the next day in Albury.

Albino Papagno recalled the fiery July 17 meeting.

They all arrived, shouting and screaming that the Italian Consul wouldn't come near them. Mr Dawson retorted, 'We know you're going to burn the place down'. I practically sank through the floor, because I was in it. Naturally an uproar and nearly a riot started. I was trying to explain in Italian what was happening. I was called traitor and all sorts of things. The authorities walked off the stage and left me on my own. I walked among the crowd trying to pacify them and reason with them. I was prepared to accept the fact that the Italians are temperamental and I had a feeling that nothing was going to happen.

The Italians then announced they were going to hold Mr Papagno hostage until the Consul came. Mr Dawson was poised to call the police but decided against it after Mr Papagno persuaded him to call Dr Dainelli. That night Mr Papagno



Migrant's quarters - Bonegilla 1952.

slept in the Italian migrant quarters. The next day the Consul and Vice-Consul duly arrived at Bonegilla, only to be met by a crowd of angry Italian men who proceeded to rock and shake their car, almost turning it over.

"The Consul and his Vice-Consul were abused and called all sorts of names," Mr Papagno said. Among the Italian migrants' demands was that three empty ships be sent from Italy to take them home. The ships never arrived but Mr Holt came to Albury where he met with the consular staff and a delegation of Italians from the camp.

Mr Papagno recalled:

At this meeting, Holt announced that they had the money to create temporary jobs with two months' guaranteed employment. You can imagine the uproar in the camp. But the migrants said they wouldn't accept them until they saw the men working, so the Vice-Consul had to stay there until the jobs came through.

Within a few days the Italians were leaving Bonegilla for jobs.

The interview with Mr Dawson notes in his diary of events:

Tuesday, July 22: "During the afternoon it was

broadcast over the public address system that the Commonwealth Government was taking special measures to ensure the finding of early employment for the Italian migrants now in Bonegilla. Following on the announcement, the situation in the camp rapidly improved ... together with the visible evidence of the Government's intentions, shown in the moving of 400 Italians to work during this week, has resulted in the situation gradually coming back to normal."²

According to Mr Papagno, food was also a source of perennial problems. He remembered a Sunday when angry Italian men protested about the spaghetti they had been served.

A car picked me up and took me to Dawson's hut. When I arrived there were more than 600 angry men each holding a plate of spaghetti, demanding that Dawson come out. 'Is this the kind of food you expect us to eat?' they chanted. Amid the ensuing uproar, Dawson yelled back: 'I don't like spaghetti -- I never eat it and I will never eat it'. With that the angry 600 hurled their spaghetti to the ground in front of the director's house. There was always trouble because of the food and finally Dawson agreed they should employ Italians as other cooks resigned.

NOTES

¹ Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office. Series A6122XRI, Item 384, pp. 59-62.

² Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office. Series A6122XRI op.cit.

Maria Triaca is researching material on the Immigration Centre at Bonegilla. Any information that may help this project can be sent to her, care of the Italian Historical Society.