

# **Benalla Migrant Camp**

## A Difficult Heritage

**Bruce Pennay**



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## **BRIEF**

Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. commissioned me in March 2014 to prepare a thematic history of the former migrant accommodation centre at Benalla. I took my task to mean that I should provide an understanding of (i) how the Benalla Migrant Camp fitted into the Australia-wide system of migrant accommodation for non-British refugees and migrants on arrival; (ii) how the camp and the town related to each other; and (iii) how camp residents saw and experienced the camp.

As my writing progressed, I was drawn to the question of how and why the Benalla Migrant Camp has been remembered at the national, local and family/personal levels. Nudged by the work of heritage practitioners and theorists, I viewed the collecting and display of memorabilia, together with the search for a permanent home for the Benalla Migrant Camp Photographic Exhibition in the remnant camp buildings at the Benalla airport, to be in essence heritage-making projects. This line of thinking has shaped this historical account. It explains why, in the final chapter, I outline not only changes in the fortunes of the physical fabric, but also the debates taking place at the time of writing about the future of the remaining fabric.

# FOREWORD

As is so often the case with local history, the story of the Benalla Migrant Camp was in danger of slipping away from us.

Most of the migrants who lived at the camp have moved away from Benalla. Many of the former adult residents have died. Those people who resided at the camp as children usually have happy memories of feeling safe within the camp community, but many admit they were unaware of what their parents went through as migrants. Even the strongest memories begin to fade with the years. Memories of the same event can rearrange themselves like a kaleidoscopic picture, depending on the person telling the story.

Our growing and developing Benalla Migrant Camp Photographic Exhibition presents the visitor with a powerful visual expression of life in the camp. Yet the individual stories can only represent moments of time, without a 'proper' history and the political and social context to hold them all together.

What we needed was a historical examination of why we had such a camp in Benalla in the first place, and why, some 50 years after it closed, local evidence of it had all but disappeared.

In 2013 the last remaining camp structures stood unrecognized and unprotected. Why, I wondered? In an early discussion with Dr Bruce Pennay, he said: 'I think what we want to find out is what the camp meant to Benalla, and what Benalla in turn meant to the camp.'

This is, in fact, a difficult history. We wanted the story 'warts and all' and we acknowledge that, as locals, we would not have been able to tell it ourselves – even if we'd had the skills.

With a historian's eye for poignant details, Bruce read through the personal accounts of the families, selecting revealing quotations and anecdotes. He looked at the entire photographic collection, selecting those images that he felt best illustrated the story of the camp. He examined the newspaper articles the Benalla Historical Society had gathered for him, combing through 18 years of the *Benalla Ensign* and the *Benalla Standard*. Beyond that, one needs only to look at the breadth of the references he has used to understand what a thorough and authoritative piece of work this has become.

As a result, we have a sharp-edged account of which the children of the migrant camp can be proud. Their parents were brave. Displaced from their home country and dispossessed of all they

had cherished, they found in themselves the strength to make a new life here in this camp, for the benefit of their children.

I hope that discussion of our own, local history of postwar immigration and our brush with multiculturalism will make us a stronger community. This history can teach us much.

This publication has been made possible with the help of a great number of people. First and foremost I am grateful to the 46 families that have so far shared their photos and/or personal recollections about life at the camp. (A list of surnames is printed at the end of this publication, under acknowledgements.) Their generosity makes this history rich and meaningful.

I also gratefully acknowledge the unwavering support of my fellow committee members, particularly as the controversy over heritage protection of the remaining camp structures on the site continues: Sophie Arendt (nee Golonski), Anna Castles (nee Brunner), Deb Randich, Deb Paez, Andrée Klopsteins and of course, my husband Mike Smyth.

We are proud that the funding for this publication has come from a number of sources within the migrant and local community, including the entry fees at the exhibition.

This revised edition has been issued to include as the final chapter our success with the State Heritage Listing of the site. This revised book will be available for sale for the first time as we hold the Benalla Migrant Camp - 50 Years On Celebration as part of the Benalla Festival in November 2017.

Follow the exciting journey of our continuing project on Facebook under [www.facebook.com/benallamigrantcampexhibition](http://www.facebook.com/benallamigrantcampexhibition)

Sabine Smyth

President, Benalla Migrant Camp Inc.





The former migrant accommodation centre at Benalla has been one of the least remembered of 23 similar centres set up by the Australian government to provide temporary housing for non-British new arrivals in postwar Australia. Former residents have rarely spoken publicly about their experiences of the place. Local citizens, librarians, museum curators and historians have, hitherto, not tried to collect, let alone interpret, town or resident memories or memorabilia. There is no plaque or memorial. Up until 2016 State heritage authorities had only given the battered hut remnants cursory attention. Until very recently the former Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre had been publicly ignored.

Any explanation of why it had not attracted popular, official or scholarly interest raises questions about the nature of the facility. How did it function? How was it perceived by the nation and the town? How was it experienced by its residents? How was it represented while and after it was operating? Why is there currently a growing urge to explore memory of the facility? Such queries raise broader questions about heritage-making, especially as it relates to postwar immigration at the national, local and personal/family levels.

In many ways the lack of public remembering might be expected. Government-operated migration accommodation centres were intended merely to provide temporary or short-term housing for non-British new arrivals to Australia. Unlike the three principal reception centres, the holding centres, such as Benalla, were small both in scale and in ambition. The centres were scattered, almost invariably, throughout inland Australia in disused defence establishments that had been built when the country seemed vulnerable to coastal attack during the war. There, they were out of sight. Latter-day cynics have noted that whereas British migrants were not denied the facilities offered by cities, non-British European newcomers were required to endure 'a sort of physical and intellectual sheep dip'.<sup>1</sup> In a pastoral country it was understood that holding paddocks were for holding stock until they were required. Holding centres were no more than similar laybys used in the processing of new arrivals from overseas.

The centres remain all but invisible within heritage traditions that prize fabric. The buildings were not architecturally grand, inspiring or even interesting. Indeed, they had been intended only to last the duration of the

war and in most cases no longer survive. Very little remains to bear witness to their postwar functions. Even when they were operating, the centres attracted little attention at the national or even the local level. Further, most of the residents themselves were transients and may have little recall of their stay. Now, as then, one camp seemed similar to any other. 'Benalla' was just another luggage tag.

As one of the nation's many bicentennial community events, a residents' reunion was held at Benalla in late October 1988, with a reunion ball and costumed folk dancers from Melbourne. Apart from this activity the camp had gone unnoticed. Other holding centres have been much more vigorous in their remembering. They, too, have held specific centre anniversary-inspired reunions, with functions such as celebratory balls and picnics, exhibitions and displays. Subsequently, commemorative parks or sculptures, tribute walls or plaques have been installed at most centres. Several have reached out more broadly, with website postings and print publications, including local histories, biographies and autobiographies that touch on or explore the experience of accommodation centre life. They have spawned literary and artistic works, including one commercially successful film. The activities at some centres sprang from or inspired attempts to conserve buildings and/or to win heritage listing, though more often there was little of the fabric left to use as a physical marker.<sup>2</sup>

But why has it taken so long for this kind of remembering to emerge at Benalla? At any one time between 1949 and 1967, the camp usually housed 500 migrants. Altogether, an estimated 60 000 people passed through Benalla. Yet in spite of its comparative longevity and, hence, the comparatively large total number of people who resided there, Benalla has not received the public attention drawn to much shorter-lived centres, such as West Sale, Cowra, Greta and Uranquinty.<sup>3</sup> Why?

One place to start is with fathoming what prompted and guided remembering elsewhere. Given the memorialisation that has occurred, there seem to be two prime interest groups that might be expected to take up the job of actively promoting public memory of a migrant centre – the former camp residents and the townspeople. Beyond them, there is a more nebulous third group of members of the wider community – that is, the many who had no direct relationship with the migrant centre

when it was functional, either as a resident or as a local citizen. They may have a broad interest in immigration without having had any physical contact with the site. Their interest may be channelled through heritage authorities as official memoirists, or some may have a casual interest as visitors encountering the place in passing.

Former residents have the highest claim on memory of a migrant accommodation place. Almost invariably, the historians of specific sites use oral history and family records to try to capture ex-resident perspectives. Among the earliest and least sophisticated histories are those by Catherine Murphy and Jenny Hayes, who wrote about Woodside and Cowra, respectively. They both compiled a collation of family-contributed stories. For a more ambitious state-wide survey of centres in Western Australia, Nonja Peters conducted 350 interviews. The efforts of these writers were devoted to conveying the experiences of migrants 'in their own words'; they gave 'eyewitness accounts'; they recovered the voices of those who had been voiceless; they drew on and added to personal histories that 'unravel from the inside'.<sup>4</sup> They proceeded by way of aggregation of individual testimonies supported by collages of family album photographs, which confirmed or added to their written memory pieces.

Common patterns emerge in the accounts historians have given of each specific site. There are descriptions of how a centre functioned and how it was experienced, often in graphic sensory terms. Accounts usually begin with the notion of arrival – the ship and train journey – followed by the initial impressions of the spare fabric. They move to the challenges of communal living. They depict encounters with food, flora and fauna. There are inevitably anecdotes about the initial search for work and a house, which often entail pertinent side stories about the acquisition of the language and/or new qualifications. The memory pieces convey the importance of family, friends and fellow workers. Very few of them mention local welcomes and support groups. The stories drift in similar directions: some dwell on the trials of migration and the inequities the newcomers faced; others mention acts of kindness. The overall theme is usually of triumph over adversity: migration was a bitter-sweet experience, and settlement a challenge and an achievement.

Second-generation reflections have been invariably edgy. Glenda Sluga and Catherine Panich wrote critically of the reception centres at Bonegilla and Bathurst. Sluga pictured

Bonegilla as 'a place without hope' and a bureaucratic nightmare. For Panich, there were brave memories of makeshift wedding ceremonies and grim stories of the experiences of women hospitalised for childbirth in Bathurst. She considered language the big divide between hosts and newcomers. She noted the ways in which the English-speaking British migrants were treated more favourably. Her non-British migrants felt that they were considered as factory fodder.

Those writing more generally argue that personal and family history is the driving force behind the memorialisation of migrant accommodation places.<sup>5</sup> For former residents, a specific centre is an 'ordinary' place: it still appears to be high on the emotional register of those who once were newcomers.<sup>6</sup> A migrant accommodation centre was a special place, a significant turning point in an autobiography or family story. Families continue this strong sense of place association. For the ex-residents and their families the accommodation centres are, first and foremost, personal/family/migrant heritage.

The centres are also local heritage. Their memorialisation has often been locally inspired. A local history society threw support behind Ann Synan to explore the centre at West Sale; a progress association helped Sherry Morris at Uranquinty. An individual benefactor, a service club, an ethnic group and a trade union organisation supported histories at Greta, Cowra and Woodside. Writing about migrant accommodation places more generally, John Petersen explained that the work he undertook at the Migration Heritage Centre in New South Wales was 'unashamedly [both] personal and regional'. Arrival places were memorable to both the newcomers and the local host community. Each centre left a mark on its local community. The theme of the migrant experience, which Petersen and others pursued, included the local host society's experience of immigration.<sup>7</sup> As Jock Collins says, 'Immigrants become neighbours.... Immigration not only fills labour shortages, it also changes neighbourhoods and the nature and character of host societies themselves.'<sup>8</sup>

Visitors/readers without direct experience of living in a centre as a resident, or of living with a centre as a townspeople, might be expected to relate any one centre to others, so as to form a bigger picture. They may see memorialisation as recognition of the importance of a postwar immigration foundational moment to modern-day Australia, told at places where immigration occurred. They may come to ponder present

and past immigration policies. How do local communities go about taking in strangers?

That which follows examines Benalla Migrant Camp from the perspectives of those I have nominated as the three prime interest groups – the nation, the town and the former residents. Associated with each of these perspectives is a set of difficulties that helps to explain why, thus far, no one has chosen to pursue or tell stories of the Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre.

Benalla Migrant Centre is difficult heritage from a national perspective. It was not a place associated with untimely deaths, violence, bloodshed or atrocities, like Port Arthur and the Myall Creek Massacre site.<sup>9</sup> But it was, in the words of one of the contemporary social workers, ‘sad and tragic’.<sup>10</sup> Another migrant centre officer described it as ‘one of the most difficult’ centres; a bleak place in which the buildings ‘did not inspire by their beauty’ and the view ‘down the lines’ between them was ‘not very attractive’.<sup>11</sup> Sad and tragic stories, set in bleak surrounds and with what was eventually a miserable ending, complicate the stories of the success of postwar immigration that form part of Australia’s nation-building narratives. Benalla does not fit easily with the ‘three cheers’ versions of Australian history: nationally it has, instead, evoked silence.

Benalla Migrant Centre is also difficult heritage at a local level. The local press saw economic advantage in having the centre, but was not curious enough to explore the impact of the migrant presence on the town’s social or cultural development. The town supplied goods and services to the camp; and it appreciated the usefulness of migrants as workers. It was only when some of the migrants began to settle in Benalla that the local newspapers gave them any considered notice. The townspeople of Benalla were, by and large, indifferent about what they called ‘the Balt Camp’. Officially, Benalla has remained indifferent to the memory of the centre, while acknowledging that it may be important to those former migrant residents who settled in Benalla and thinking more recently that it may possibly have tourism potential.

Benalla Migrant Centre is difficult heritage for former residents in a different sense. As noted above, they have rarely spoken publicly about their time there. That makes it difficult to find out what they were thinking about themselves, the camp, the town and Australia.

National silences, local indifference and former

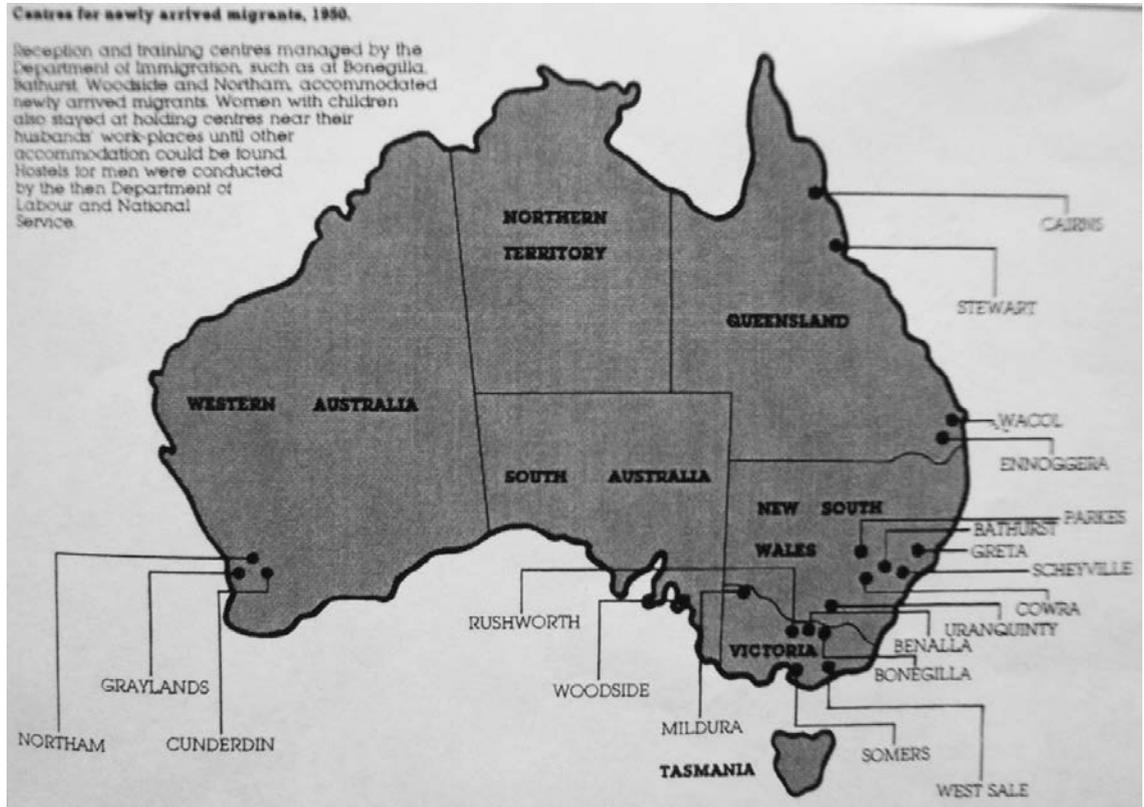
resident reticence make Benalla Migrant Centre difficult to remember. Argument persists about the need to conserve the former camp place. To understand the current phase of place remembering of Benalla Migrant Camp, I have emphasised, in what follows, the importance of personal advocacy and what I label as community readiness for the story being told.<sup>12</sup>

Portrayals of personal, local and national perspectives form a triptych in which no one panel might dominate. However, given the work undertaken so far on Benalla, it is only possible here to give close attention to the national perspective as the big narrative with which the other two link. It can be anticipated that other accounts will, in time, give precedence to either local or personal/family perspectives.

Independently of the size of the panels, I expect the colouring to remain similar. The national panel will remain dark, the local pallid with some brightness beginning to emerge, while the personal/family panel will have exuberant stabs of colour. Representations of Benalla Migrant Camp as a public memory place will be multi-hued.

## 2 NATION: BENALLA HOLDING CENTRE AND MIGRANT ACCOMMODATION CENTRE, 1949–1967

'Migrants go here on arrival' (*The New Australian* November 1949).



A clearer understanding of the role played by the migrant accommodation centre in Benalla requires, first, a more general explanation of the postwar immigration scheme and of the parts played by the network of migrant accommodation units as a whole, and holding centres in particular. Such explanation requires mention of immigration department policies on the allocation of work and accommodation, particularly the separation of families. It should point to the peculiar role played by Benalla as the major recipient of supporting mothers, and to the adjustments made to that role over time.

### Accommodating postwar refugee families

In the immediate postwar years, Australia launched a bold immigration program to increase the size of its population: a large workforce would boost economic development; more people could better defend the country. Unable to attract sufficient British migrants, whom it preferred, Australia offered assisted passage to displaced persons from war-torn Europe, provided they contracted to work for two years in allocated employment. When the

flow of wartime refugees slowed, Australia negotiated migration agreements with several European nations and then launched a more general assisted passage scheme to attract migrants from a wider range of countries. It also opened its doors to refugee groups, such as Hungarians and Czechoslovaks fleeing Cold War changes. All three migrant cohorts – the displaced, the assisted and the later refugees – were to meet Australia's ongoing needs for labour through a long-term economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s. The population of Australia increased from 7.5 million to 12.5 million between 1947 and 1971.

To attract people from Europe, Australia offered arrival services, including initial work placements and temporary accommodation. British families were accommodated temporarily in worker hostels. Some were managed by private or large government employers. Most were run by Commonwealth Hostels Ltd, a not-for-profit company established by the Commonwealth. In 1967 it was operating 28 such hostels, all close to major employment places – for example, in the Newcastle and Wollongong districts of New South Wales and in Melbourne suburbs such

as Altona and Broadmeadows. Over time the worker hostels expanded their remit to take most of the assisted migrants, non-British as well as British. However, until 1971, non-British new arrivals were directed first to 'reception centres', where, over about three or four weeks, their work arrangements were made. While waiting to be allocated work, they were subject to confirmatory medical checks and received instruction in survival language and the Australian way of life.

When Benalla began taking in refugees in August 1949, immigration authorities were trying to cope with the huge surge in the numbers of new arrivals after more ships became available in late 1948. They also had to manage change in the nature of the migrant intakes, for there were increasing numbers of families, many with non-worker dependants. Soon, the reception centres could not accommodate the number of new arrivals. More beds were made available at newly designated 'holding centres' for the non-British dependants. These holding centres were to provide short-term accommodation for the women and children dependent on a migrant worker who could not find family accommodation close to his allocated workplace. Because there was a shortage of housing and house-building materials, the holding centres, like the reception centres before them, were established in disused defence force facilities. They offered only basic accommodation, but that was considered satisfactory for the displaced, who had been housed in rudimentary refugee camps in Europe.

Together, the reception and holding centres were a means for government 'to attend conveniently and economically [to] the initial settling in of non-British new arrivals'.<sup>13</sup> By 1951 there were three reception centres and twenty holding centres, briefly housing 47 300 people. All the states were to have access to the newly imported labour, but over half of the holding centres were near country towns in inland New South Wales and Victoria. Almost all opened successively in 1949 in Cowra, Uranquinty, Greta, Rushworth, Parkes, Somers, Benalla, West Sale and Mildura. The decision to place reception and holding centres in country areas proved politically adroit, as it implied that the new workers might help meet the demand for labour in regional and rural areas. Further, country towns welcomed the opportunity to supply local goods and services to non-military establishments, as they had to wartime encampments. This geographic spread of government service posts fitted the rhetoric of decentralisation that postwar

governments espoused.

The holding centres, then, were established as temporary expedients to cope with the influx of large numbers of displaced European families. The number of migrant arrivals decreased markedly when the displaced persons scheme drew to an end in 1952. By 1953 the holding centres at Parkes, Mildura, Rushworth, Uranquinty and West Sale, together with the temporary reception centre at Bathurst, had closed. By 1958 there were only six government-operated centres nationwide – Benalla and Bonegilla in Victoria, Greta and Scheyville in New South Wales, Wacol (Enoggera) in Queensland, Woodside in South Australia, and Holden (Northam) in Western Australia. Benalla closed in 1967, just ahead of the Bonegilla Reception Centre which closed in 1971. Those two closures marked what the minister for immigration, Billy Snedden, and, then, his successor Philip Lynch, declared to be 'the end of a phase in the post-war immigration programme'. The lightly dusted-down defence force facilities had served their purpose in providing 'nothing more than temporary accommodation at a time when Government was faced with an acute shortage of housing and building materials'.<sup>14</sup>

The holding centres were, in effect, short-term camps for women and children. Dependants might expect to be housed there for between four and six months. They were no more than 'sitting camps' where newcomers were 'waiting for their lives to begin'.<sup>15</sup> The centres were networked with each other and with the reception centres. Migrants were shuffled between the centres principally to align accommodation needs with job availability, but at what seemed bureaucratic whim. The school register at Benalla shows periodic spikes in new enrolments from other centres, often in batches. The transfer of one group all the way from Northam (near Perth) in Western Australia caught the eye of the press.<sup>16</sup> At least one of the fathers had been dispatched across the continent to work as a labourer in the hop fields of the King Valley. One family remembers moving from Bathurst to Parkes to Rushworth and, then, to Benalla. Another remembers staying in Greta, Uranquinty and Rushworth before Benalla. The endless shifting, and the notion of forced movement that was behind it, was dispiriting. It contributed to uneasy feelings of lack of personal direction and life control.<sup>17</sup> At West Sale, one woman told Synan she had lived in thirteen camps, ten in Germany and three in Australia. Another complained: 'They [the camp authorities] controlled everything, where to go, where to work, where to live, where your husband

should live.... [Consequently, after] years of living in camps, many women had no spirit left. They didn't really do anything – just sat around, with “empty eyes”.<sup>18</sup>

From the beginning, Australia saw itself as competing with countries such as Canada and the United States for the best of the displaced persons to fill its population and labour market needs. At first, it recruited the young work-ready from the Baltic countries. The search for good-quality workers then widened to include all European countries deemed eligible by the International Refugee Organization. The pool of employable young men and women that Australia sought as a priority was soon exhausted. From mid-1948 on, families with at least one breadwinner were deemed acceptable. Widows, deserted wives and unmarried mothers with children were accepted from early 1949 and, then, later in that year, males without wives but with young children. It seemed to observers that the Australian officers recruiting from displaced persons camps gave priority to meeting Australia's labour needs. They had ‘skimmed off the cream’ and, from 1949 on, were dealing with ‘the residue’, ‘the left-overs’, the ‘hard core’ of people who were not readily employable.<sup>19</sup> Both Arthur Calwell, then his successor as minister for immigration, Harold Holt, portrayed the shift from importing the work-ready young to the not so work-ready family migrants as a shift in emphasis to longer-term population building. They were insistent that selection processes remained stringent.<sup>20</sup>

### **Family separation**

The arrival of families, then mothers or fathers without partners but with dependent children, created problems for immigration officers, who saw themselves offering arrival services, primarily in the form of providing job placements and temporary employment until that took place. Regulation notices were issued explaining the work obligations of women, and of children over sixteen years of age. A married woman was released from her employment obligation if she was caring for a child: child care was considered an ‘approved’ employment. All children over sixteen were required to undertake allocated work, and that might mean separation from their families. A complicated sliding scale of tariff charges was devised which relieved the cost of accommodation for those least able to afford it, but tariff obligations remained and were enforced. A breadwinner was required to pay not only for his own accommodation near his workplace, but also to contribute up to £3 per week for the accommodation costs of his wife and children in a holding

centre.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, when accommodation expenses were not paid, many migrants held in holding centres for any length of time amassed substantial debts to the government.

Holding centres were built on the notion of family separation, which was obviously going to be distressing for the newly arrived. Family separation was contested from its beginnings. During 1950, members of parliament peppered the minister with questions about the policy and its impact on family life.<sup>22</sup> Newspapers cited cases of married people being sent to opposite ends of the country. The Victorian Council of Social Services argued that families should stay together, for the family was a ‘potent stabilising factor’ that prevented ‘troublesome behavioural problems’ such as ‘perversion and promiscuity’. It worried about the effect on inmates of prolonged stays in ‘depressing conditions’ with ‘too little to do’. Yet, it predicted that prolonged stays were going to be inevitable, for it was difficult for families with a single income to accumulate sufficient savings to get alternative accommodation. Australia had to take up the responsibility for care passed to it by the International Refugee Organization. It called for ‘mitigation of a hard headed business’ to forestall people becoming institutionalised. It noted that the policy affected only the families of the displaced non-British, not the British.<sup>23</sup>

Politicians and department spokespersons explained that separation took place only when it was unavoidable, and it was usually for no longer than six months. Champions of the policy made much of the country locations of the holding centres. They argued that the movement of dependants to worker hostels in the cities would lead to them settling there and ‘undermine efforts to decentralise population’. In the country there were seasonal employment opportunities for migrant women. Experience showed that women could be influenced to learn English in country town holding centres. There was a ‘healthier and more wholesome atmosphere for growing up in country areas’. Further, the inconvenience of separation encouraged migrants to move more quickly from government-sponsored accommodation to normal private accommodation.<sup>24</sup>

However, there were other reasons for discontinuing the separation policy. Plainly it was not desirable that non-British migrants should receive discriminatory treatment, and there were humanitarian considerations. Togetherness made for ‘more contented’ family groups. The separation of dependants to holding centres placed pressure on fragile marital relationships, and parents sometimes

went their separate ways. Prolonged separation was a factor in the frequent breakdown of marriages. There were reports of infidelity, and of abuse arising from jealousy. Then, there were cost considerations. Ending the policy would reduce the travel costs met by the separated breadwinner. Perhaps even more forceful were the arguments that separation had an 'adverse effect upon efficiency and stability of workers'. Further, it was also more expensive for government to maintain a person at a holding centre than at a worker hostel.

## From holding centre to accommodation centre

The first families to arrive at Benalla came by bus from Bonegilla, where they left husbands/

fathers who had been found short-term 'emergency' work at an army establishment during the nationwide railway strike of 1949.<sup>25</sup> They were followed by families in which the breadwinner had been dispatched to seasonal grape or fruit picking. This often meant a family was transferred after harvest to Benalla from Mildura, Rushworth or Uranquinty. Other families had breadwinners working for government utilities such as the Victorian Railway, metropolitan water and sewerage construction agencies or the Post Master General. Some men appeared briefly as rural workers prior to being allocated a specific job, but were expected to leave when they took up their post. Others arrived to take up jobs at the centre itself and remained in residence. Some single as well as married women were sent to Benalla to take up jobs in the town factories.



Separated families in which the male breadwinner was allocated work at a military establishment (NAA, A2517).



Separated families in which the male breadwinner was allocated harvesting work (NAA, A2517).



Separated families in which the male breadwinner was allocated work in a public utility (NAA, A2517).

A slackening in the number of arrivals in the wake of an economic recession in 1952 gave an opportunity to review arrival policies and practices. Prompted by criticisms aired at the Australian Citizenship Convention in 1953, immigration authorities made changes to the accommodation scheme. Some of the least

satisfactory centres were closed. Non-British families could be housed in the worker hostels, which had hitherto been the preserve of the British. Breadwinners could, where practicable, be housed with their families at a holding centre. As a result, Benalla ceased to be a holding centre taking in only dependants.

From about 1953, Benalla took in assisted migrants, rather than the war refugees who had been displaced from Europe. They, too, came from a variety of countries. Among the first arrivals were people from the Netherlands and even, for a brief time, a few from Britain who were destined to be rural workers. More arrived from Southern Europe – Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and Spaniards. Some contingents were made up exclusively of males; others continued to be families. All had work-ready breadwinners. However, the change from holding centre to something else was gradual, and, indeed, incomplete. A considerable number of Benalla's first holding centre intakes remained resident.

At Benalla the first years were the busiest. The centre reached peak occupancy of 1 063 in 1951 shortly after Nissen huts were installed to increase capacity. By 1953, a total of 2 600 people had moved in and 1 730 had moved out. The resident population fluctuated around the 400 mark for most of the 1950s, with usually about 200 people moving in and out each year. 1957 was a busy year, with average occupancy of 451 and about 400 people moving in and out as in the early 1950s. During the mid-1960s the occupancy never exceeded 250, with an annual turnover of about 240.

In 1958 there was a formal name change to Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre. The kitchens were improved with new equipment, including electric stoves, stock pots and deep fat fryers. All the buildings were repainted 'to take away the military camp appearance' and to boost morale. Residents, it was hoped, would take pride in the facility. Indeed, they might be more likely to send favourable reports of it to would-be migrants in their home countries.<sup>26</sup> Henceforth, the centre provided accommodation for breadwinners and their families if the breadwinner worked in the Benalla district and could not find private accommodation.

In 1959 Benalla survived a second searching review of the nation's migrant accommodation needs, mainly because it continued to provide accommodation close to factories for 'compassionate cases where there was no male breadwinner'. Even so, that kind of accommodation – intended to meet a humanitarian need – was still expected to be temporary: 'in due course [families] moved to housing commission houses in Benalla'.<sup>27</sup>

## Benalla's widows and unmarried mothers

At any one time about a third of the resident population of the Benalla centre was made up

of supporting mothers with their children. Most of them arrived direct from reception centres. Some were transferred from other centres. A few came after they had completed a temporary stint of domestic service with private families.

Two years after Benalla opened, immigration authorities anticipated that problems might arise with an increasing number of people showing no signs of leaving what was intended to be no more than short-term accommodation for new arrivals. One administrator feared that some of the displaced men embraced separation from their wives and children as a convenient freedom from the encumbrance of family. Others did not miss their absent partners.<sup>28</sup>



In October 1951, Mabel (Bunty) King (pictured above), an experienced social worker based at Bonegilla, was dispatched to conduct a two-week social survey of the Benalla centre. She was pleased with what she found. Benalla seemed to be working successfully for the women and children: the residents were being absorbed into the community. Morale was high.<sup>29</sup>

Children were generally making good progress in the centre school, especially in learning English, though some children were still using German outside the classroom. Effective measures were taken to stop truancy. The children at St Joseph's were better assimilated than those who attended the centre school. Although the class sizes were larger, the Catholic school staff were sympathetic. There seemed to be good interaction between the centre and the local community. The churches, church clubs, Junior Red Cross, local show society and a friendship group organised by radio station 3SR were singled out as helpful community groups. Boys participated in the Benalla scout group and the Police Boys Club, but there was no equivalent for the older girls in 1951. More social and recreational clubs in Benalla might improve opportunities for adults

to mix and assimilate.

King's report focused in particular on widows and unmarried mothers with children. She used the term 'widow' to embrace those who were widowed before or after arrival, the estranged and the divorced, as well as unmarried mothers. Elsewhere they were described most commonly as unsupported mothers, rather than supporting mothers: they were, in effect, sole breadwinners who were 'encumbered with children'. In 1951, King noted, the 115 widows and their children made up over a third of Benalla's resident population: 77 were employed at the clothing factory; 24 at the centre; and 14 were unemployed.

The Latoof and Callil clothing factory was within a five-minute walk of the centre, and both the factory and the centre became 'dependent on each other'. King found that work at the clothing factory was routine, but not necessarily monotonous. The workplace was pleasant. Two-thirds of the 300 workers were New Australians. The other workers were young, but friendly. Most of them, however, usually stayed no more than twelve months, probably because the manager preferred juniors, whom he could pay less. King noticed that the centre women mixed easily with the

town girls and adopted their cardigan and cotton frock work-dress style. The centre women thought factory work was preferable to domestic work. Some stayed on at the factory after they found accommodation outside the centre. Nevertheless, factory work entailed disciplines some balked at: there were closely supervised production targets; and smoking was prohibited. Some phases of the work required workers to stand all day. It did not pay as well as work at the migrant centre.

King noted that work at the centre itself was highly prized. The work was known and less risky than that available in private employment elsewhere. Public service conditions prevailed and overtime was often available. Employment was based on a two-year contract. Accommodation costs were low. Staff had better-equipped sleeping and eating quarters. A staff club organised functions, pleasant outings and leisure-time activities. Married couples with two centre jobs could stay together. Some women worked as cooks or kitchen and mess hands; others worked in the hospital. A few found jobs in administration or worked as hygiene workers (toilet and ablution cleaners). All centre staff were required to attend evening language classes to become proficient in English. Many found this



Workers at Latoof and Callil Clothing Factory (Kolodziejczyk, BMC)

requirement irksome.

Some women found work in Benalla as domestics at the hotels, the hospital and in private residences. Private domestic work was riskier than all the other forms of work. Inexperienced and unsupervised private employers could be demanding. Migrants found that work within a private home was

often endless, thankless and sometimes demeaning. One woman remembers that as a cleaner she was not allowed to use the toilet in the family home, but had to relieve herself in the backyard.

None of the jobs readily open to the women as factory workers or domestics paid enough for them to accumulate sufficient savings for

Migrant workers at the Benalla Holding Centre (Kolodziejczyk and Pandik, BMC).



alternative accommodation. While work at the centre provided the best opportunity for women to save, it tied employment to ongoing residence.

Child care was a problem for all workers. Over half of the supporting mothers had more than one child. School and school holiday programs helped care for the school-aged. In 1951 there was a basic preschool kindergarten that provided half-day care sessions for children over three years of age, and two sessions for children with working mothers. King observed that it was conducted by three New Australians who had no training; parents supplied bedding for the afternoon rest. There was no crèche for infants under three. The director was reluctant to admit to the centre any working women with children younger than three. Some working mothers arranged for other non-working mothers and grandmothers to care for their infant children at £1/10/0 each per week.<sup>30</sup> These carers were untrained, but the Welfare Officer helped with the arrangements and the director had to give his approval. King found one grandmother who was caring for seven or eight infants.

For King and the centre administrators the ultimate goal was to have a migrant move out of the centre to be absorbed into the community. Outside work helped achieve that, but marriage, too, helped migrants to leave.

This explains why King was excited about the way the centre acted as a matrimonial bureau. She boasted that there had been 26 marriages since February 1950 and another three were arranged. Staff enthusiastically helped with all the wedding arrangements, and King included a newspaper clipping depicting staff attending a wedding of two couples. King noted that most of the brides had met their grooms as friends visiting the centre with husbands returning for weekend family reunions.

Each of the reports of interviews King included with her report centred on a resident's plans to leave the centre, principally by marrying or by moving into accommodation with their eldest child, once he or she was working and could establish a home. Where there were no such plans, there was a problem.

Overall, King found that, at the Benalla Holding Centre, 'a successful attempt has been made to rehabilitate migrant widows'. Benalla 'offers decent and humane living conditions and a possibility of attaining economic independence'. There had been a satisfactory turnover of residents, with 30–50 coming in and going out in a month. King recommended that more supporting mothers should be dispatched to Benalla.

Hazel Dobson, the officer in charge of the Social Welfare Section, read King's report with

Brigadier Christison shared King's enthusiasm and was to be pleased to report that, by 1983, 50 widows had remarried. The cutting was from *Benalla Standard* 11 October 1951 (NAA A445, 276/2/10).



New Australians participated in a double wedding ceremony at St. Joseph's Church on Saturday, and after Nuptial Mass the bridal group, their attendants and friends from the Holding Centre, including the Administrator (Brigadier F. H. Christison) posed for this special "Standard" photograph. The group, from left to right, are: — Father Vozniczak, Miss H. A. Humble, Mr. Strazdas, Mr. Cichowicz ('groom'), Brigadier Christison, Mrs. Cichowicz (bride), Mr. Witwicki, Mr. Poplowski ('groom'), Mr. L. McKenzie, Mrs. Poplowski (bride), Miss Bizio, Mr. Kopczynski, Miss Zdanowicz, Mrs. Skrzypok (mother of the bride, Mrs. Poplowski) and Rev. Father Ryan.

half an eye on the wider system of holding centres. She ran to structural change. There was need for a crèche for emergencies, such as the hospitalisation of a mother. There was need for a full-time social worker to advise residents on how to move out into the community. Picking up on King's point that women were most likely to establish their own independent home life through marriage, she suggested training in homemaking, including cooking, hygiene and child care. English lessons might be better adapted to meet the needs and interests of the widows. Benalla could manage with more widows, but 'we must be careful to ensure that the present healthy balance of families and widows is maintained' and that it does not tend to become a 'widows' centre', thus curtailing opportunities for the women to meet men and perhaps prospective husbands. Plainly, many of the women were fitted only for domestic work or for routine factory work: they had few educational qualifications or suitable paid work experience. But factory work was offering a short-term solution. Living under temporary conditions for a long period was demoralising for both the women and the children. It did not give 'real security' or 'home life'.<sup>31</sup>

Ominously the findings at Benalla meshed with those from other centres, where it was found that 2 500 of the 6 000 women in holding centres had little prospect of leaving.<sup>32</sup> Centre directors were to be frequently directed to monitor closely the length of stay of migrants who were residents or members of staff. Both Tasman Heyes, the first secretary of the Department of Immigration, and his successor,

Peter Heydon, were to instigate special inquiries to solve the problems of long-stayers in worker hostels as well as holding centres in 1958–59 and 1966, respectively.<sup>33</sup>

## Long-stayers

In 1956, five years after the King report, the Immigration Advisory Council established a committee to investigate options for dealing with long-term residents. Like the holding centres before them, the accommodation centres were to offer only short-term housing, but that was not happening, particularly at Benalla.

In the latter half of 1956, social workers compiled three reports detailing the circumstances of Benalla's long-stayers, probing their plans to move on and suggesting strategies to move them into the community. As was their wont, the social workers sought solutions for particular cases. Among other things, they made judgements about each person's employment prospects and detailed her income and unmet tariff obligations. They assessed her marriage prospects and/or the likelihood of former husbands/partners or children accepting responsibility for housing her. The constant interviewing and prying into personal matters riled the women, and the centre director, R C (Bob) Bain, grew impatient with the social workers.<sup>34</sup>

In the first report, Viva Murphy, the social worker appointed to investigate the Benalla centre, found there were 425 residents at the centre; 61 of them were supporting mothers

with, in total, 125 children. Benalla was intended to offer an arrival service for up to about six months, but when the centre staff were included, 364 of the residents had been in Australia for 'more than three years'. Many of the supporting mothers had been there longer: nine of the women Murphy interviewed had arrived at Benalla between 1949 and 1951.

The interviewees, Murphy decided, fell into four categories: those with plans to leave; those who would need 'prolonged and considerable effort to help them move'; those who should remain longer in the interest of their children; and a 'special hard core' of six women 'for which I [Murphy] can envisage no solution at present'. Nearly half of the interviewees planned to leave: seven of them planned to marry; eight were to join working children; another eight had secured jobs outside the centre in Benalla. Some of those who needed vigorous encouragement to move were 'verging on middle age' and had young children at school; they were dependent on one wage and afraid they could not get a job outside the centre. In Murphy's judgement, about ten women needed to stay a little longer in the centre for the benefit of their children. Some had adolescent sons with behavioural problems. The mothers worried that they might not be able to help their boys find employment. The most difficult cases, the 'hard core' of six women, had no prospect of helping themselves or of getting support.

A constant thread which ran through Murphy's report was the worry that many women had 'lost initiative' and were 'fearful of leaving the protection of the camp'. For any change to occur, there needed to be some push and pull. Several strategies were proposed. Murphy encouraged naturalisation, which was now open to women who had been resident in Australia for at least five years. Naturalisation would enable them to become eligible for a widow's pension and to take up a housing commission tenancy, in Benalla if that was necessary to continue in employment.

A month later a small committee, including Murphy, conducted another series of seventeen interviews with the nominated problem cases. It pushed to get fathers to take on responsibility for their children or to get children to accept responsibility for their parent. It looked to the local community and wider church community for support applicable in each case. So, it suggested, the newly formed Benalla branch of the Good Neighbour Council might help with this one. Accommodation might be found for another in a Catholic home, through the good offices of a priest in Melbourne. It seemed to

think the individual problems Murphy had found were able to be solved.

Moving beyond individual case considerations, the committee recommended that a full-time social worker be appointed to tap the support of local community organisations. It recommended closing the centre church to encourage closer resident acquaintance with what could become supportive members of the local church communities. It recommended that a youth club be established to provide 'fatherless boys' with after-school supervision and support. It re-emphasised the importance of helping women to acquire English.

Florence Ferguson was appointed temporarily as a full-time social worker and, at the end of the year, reported on how she was following through the recommendations.<sup>35</sup> Ferguson relinquished her position early in 1958, leaving many of the problem cases unresolved. In 1959 a Public Service Review cut social workers from the establishment of the Department of Immigration on the grounds that the department had only limited responsibilities for settlement. Social work to assist new settlers was beyond its remit.

## Closing the centre

In the late 1960s there was widespread disquiet about conditions in the migrant accommodation centres, the worker hostels and the government-operated centres. Government embarked on a program of migrant accommodation refurbishment and renewal. Migrants were coming from conditions of improving affluence in Europe and expected better conditions than military-style camps with communal eating, washing and toilet facilities. Retention of the centres established hastily to meet the pressing need to house Europe's displaced had become 'less and less defensible'.<sup>36</sup> The renewal program did not include either Benalla or Bonegilla, for they were inconveniently placed away from the capital cities, where most migrants were finding work. Instead, new hostels were built in places like Randwick and Springvale.

A joint committee on public accounts conducted a public inquiry into the Department of Immigration in May 1967.<sup>37</sup> The inquiry was charged with determining, among other things, why taxpayers should continue to subsidise migrant accommodation by as much as \$5.2 million in the current financial year. Plainly, tariffs did not match operational costs. Department officials patiently explained the efficiencies and internal audits they had in place, but there was little room to increase

tariffs, which were calculated for each resident on a sliding scale based on earnings and number of dependants. So, for example, the maximum tariff payable for a mother with two children would let them retain \$8 per week. Consequently, there was a shortfall on the average tariff received of \$17.56 per capita. Benalla had cost the department \$96 708 in the last year.

Benalla was costly and catered for a small number of people. Over the previous five years, it had never had more than 250 people at any one time. In 1967 there were only 135 residents. Only half the adults were breadwinners: some were employed usefully in local industry, but others were employed catering for the centre itself. There remained a steady flow of about twenty people per month in and out of Benalla. But apart from these families in transit, Benalla continued to house supporting mothers; nine mothers with sixteen children had lived at Benalla for 'more than twelve months'. As other centres had closed, migrants 'unfitted for integration into the community' were transferred there. Benalla became a refuge for migrants 'unable to cope with their situation.' It seemed that the Benalla Migrant Centre '[served] a humanitarian purpose in accommodating families without a breadwinner'.<sup>38</sup>

Following the public hearing sessions of the inquiry, there were high-level inspections in July and early August. Acting on advice from the Department of Immigration, the minister, Billy Snedden, announced that Benalla would close before the end of the year. There was, Snedden said, no longer any need for the kind of accommodation offered at Benalla. Migrants were now finding private housing and worker hostel places more readily. The 31 staff would, where possible, be deployed elsewhere. Alternative accommodation would be provided for the last-remaining residents. Malcolm Fraser, minister for the army, assured Parliament that the Department of the Army had plans to use the vacated facility.<sup>39</sup> That assurance seemed to hold the prospect of gain rather than loss for the local economy.<sup>40</sup>

The advice, which Snedden acted on, detailed some of the careful arrangements which might be made for the remaining residents.<sup>41</sup> Mrs K Paterson, a psychiatric social worker, had been appointed in January to make a special study of the social problems of some Benalla residents and to recommend ways of having them 'absorbed effectively into the community'. She made contact with support agencies in and outside Australia and closely scrutinised the claims made by some that

a move might disadvantage their children's schooling. Decisions were made on how best to deploy the rest of the resident population. Those who held permanent or temporary positions were moved to Bonegilla or Melbourne. Casual employees were dismissed.

By mid-November, six families had moved to houses in Benalla and district. The Catholic church provided at least one family with furniture. The migrant centre provided others with basic centre furnishings via the Good Neighbour Council, leaving that group the notional responsibility of getting repayment. Even more encouraging, the department was prepared for six months to bear rental costs over and above the usual centre tariff. Several families moved to Melbourne and contact was made with support agencies to gather assistance for them. Initially the department had suggested that places might be found for 'persons with integration problems' at Bonegilla, if there was nowhere else. It even suggested that up to three families might have to be deported. At the end of the year, however, there was no need to resort to using Bonegilla and only one family was repatriated. That family comprised a mother with three children. She showed 'suicidal tendencies', but was reportedly 'sustained' by the prospect of possibly reuniting with her former husband in Germany.<sup>42</sup>

The press gave little attention to the demise of the migrant centre at Benalla. The *Canberra Times* had followed the public hearing in the national capital. The *Border Morning Mail* reported the minister as saying the centre had 'outlived its economic usefulness'. The *Age* acknowledged the role the centre had played in accommodating women and children so that migrant workers might be sent to jobs all over Australia.<sup>43</sup> *Good Neighbour* noted that 'recently the centre had provided accommodation for migrants working in Benalla or who have had special problems in integration'.<sup>44</sup> The local press, comprised only of the *Benalla Ensign* after an amalgamation in 1967, gave the closure scant attention, but there was an exchange of letters on the future of Benalla throughout October.<sup>45</sup> The newspaper was anxious to report on the future use of the site for Army training exercises rather than on the fate of those who had resided there, even for ten years or more.<sup>46</sup> Beyond the eyes of the press, the book value of the transfer to the Department of the Army was calculated at \$218 000 and to the Department of Civil Aviation at \$13 900.<sup>47</sup>

For all affected, this was a sad end and a broadly unhappy dispersal. It carried strong

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suggestions of blighted lives and immigration failure, rather than success. Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre ended with a whimper.

All holding centres are difficult heritage places. They indicate how the nation and local communities took in the most vulnerable groups of postwar migrants. They raise embarrassing questions about the cruel and discriminatory policy of family separation, forced movement, assimilation and the adequacy of support services. They are grim reminders of the host country's difficulties in meeting the needs of Europe's displaced and, at the same time, facing the challenges of postwar reconstruction. They form part of Australia's grey Cold War heritage.

This is perhaps important to visitors who come 'to place their parents as well as their own lives in a historical context'.<sup>48</sup> But heritage place visitors seem more intent on family, rather than nation. They seek to unravel personal and family stories from the inside. Bigger narratives are simply backdrop. Visitors, it has been suggested, rarely fuse the personal with the national.<sup>49</sup>

From a national perspective, Benalla tells a grim story. Migrant residents and nearby townspeople may have viewed it differently. What did/do they make of the Benalla Migrant Camp?

When he announced the closure of the centre in 1967, the minister for immigration, Billy Snedden, wrote to the Town Clerk declaring that the centre had made 'a significant contribution to Australia's immigration program'. Like other country towns near accommodation centres, Benalla had taken up the responsibility of being an immediate host community. Government had expected it to provide 'a homely introduction to Australia'.<sup>50</sup> And the people of Benalla and its district had done that. They had 'accepted the centre' and had extended 'helpful cooperation'. They had provided the migrants passing through the centre with 'a helpful and friendly introduction to Australia'.<sup>51</sup>

It is, of course, difficult to assess the acceptance, friendliness, helpfulness and cooperation the community did offer. Plainly there was no one community response to the Benalla camp, or to postwar migration more generally. Even within individuals, there was a mix of attitudes ranging through wariness, hostility, compassion, neighbourliness and indifference. So, for example, there is a report of 'Madge', from near Seymour, who was extraordinarily kind to a particular refugee, but would make known her views that

The New Australians 'made her sick, not only because they came shooting at weekends and left gates open, but because they were trying to take over the country ... they all worked too hard and made money too fast, then they bought better houses than decent Australians had. The way they gabbled got on her nerves; they should have been made to learn English before they arrived.'<sup>52</sup>

Benalla was no different from the many other Victorian country towns where anti-foreign feeling was strong.<sup>53</sup> Migrants recall examples of the kind, the unkind, the loudly opinionated and the snidely disdainful. They rarely encountered open hostility, but were aware of private discourtesies and the often publicly repeated preference for British immigrants. So, for example, one former Benalla camp migrant recalls: 'migrants, especially those without any English were considered second class citizens'. So, too, the family of the employment officer at Renolds Chains recall his distress at being called a 'wog lover' and getting 'a boot up the bum' at a local pub for employing 'I-ties' and not giving work 'to his own kind'.<sup>54</sup> From what may be gleaned from the local newspaper record, it seems that Benalla, like

other towns hosting a migrant centre, offered 'a limited hospitality'.<sup>55</sup> Many townspeople developed acquaintance and friendships with people from overseas. Most did not. Apart from the charitable few, most townspeople and district residents seem to have been indifferent.

Benalla prospered and grew from supplying goods and services to the centre, but in many ways the centre, like the No. 11 Elementary Flying Training School before it, was 'a self-contained town' literally just outside the town boundaries until 1956.<sup>56</sup> It sat out-of-sight on the periphery of the town, geographically and socially isolated from the community, and drawing the close attention only of those who had some economic link to it.

Through the years the centre operated, both the *Benalla Ensign* and the *Benalla Standard* were influential in reflecting and guiding public thinking about the centre and about immigration generally. They reflected local anxieties. They reassured their readers that the migrant camp was functioning smoothly and that the increasing migrant presence was benign, if not enriching. They congratulated the community on its hospitality and the newcomers on assimilating. They told of the efforts of many supportive individuals and organisations who helped the town and the nation take in strangers. Local journalists, however, were confronted with language barriers which made it difficult to personalise newcomer stories. As a result, much of their reporting was instigated or guided by centre officials or the town's service clubs. Otherwise, the camp received little notice. Still, as the town became longer practised in being a host community, the newspapers showed greater interest in the camp and the newcomers. Overall, however, the local community was indifferent to the camp and the growing migrant presence.

### Auspicious beginnings

In the 1950s, Benalla was a small rural service town dependent largely on supplying railway and government office services to a fairly prosperous surrounding pastoral and cropping district. It was situated on the North-eastern railway, 200km to the north of Melbourne and 40km south of Wangaratta, the largest provincial centre in North-east Victoria. Contemporaries worried that it was thriving on an unbalanced economy, much too dependent on the rural and public sectors. There were

a few small timber mills and butter factories, but the reach of the town was restricted. The pull of Melbourne to the south was strong. Benalla's bigger neighbour, Wangaratta, to the north, and the more distant Shepparton, to the west, were rivals for government funding.

Benalla housed at least seventeen government department offices in the 1950s. It was forever seeking to protect or augment its role as a railway and public service town. It chased government largesse in the form of

decentralised secondary industries and in increases in its stock of housing commission residences. It was, to one outsider, 'a quiet town, a meeting place for prosperous farmers; but a determined town, tireless in its battle for decentralised industries'.<sup>57</sup> The town was proud of the new Latoof and Callil clothing factory and the prospect of a large Renolds Chains factory.<sup>58</sup>

In 1948 the *Benalla Ensign* had reported Arthur Calwell's prediction that there would be

Latoof and Callil clothing factory and Renolds Chains were the biggest employers of migrant labour in Benalla, with premises in close proximity to the migrant camp.



increased inflows of migrants with the greater availability of transport ships. Calwell explained that what had been a trickle of newcomers was about to become a flood. Further, he predicted that the proposed influx would impact on parts of regional and rural Australia that had hitherto been unaffected. Immigration, he suggested, was to become a 'practical method of decentralisation'. He called on community leaders to plan for expansion: some country towns could expect to grow rapidly, even doubling in size.<sup>59</sup>

There were to be, during 1949 and 1950, serious problems in finding sufficient accommodation and jobs for the increased number of new arrivals. There were further complications when a railway strike disrupted the distribution of new arrivals to workplaces. The Bonegilla reception centre, near Albury, doubled in size and sent busloads of migrant families to the newly established holding centres at Uranquinty and Cowra. In March there was a report from Melbourne that the Department of the Army was inspecting former army camps that might become accommodation centres for the increasing number of displaced persons. The camps 'may be used later for British migrants'. Additional holding centres, it was suggested, could be established at Rushworth and Benalla.<sup>60</sup>

The Department of Immigration carried out a detailed survey of the former air school buildings and grounds in Benalla. The survey team assessed the adequacy of the hospital, the staff quarters, the canteen, the cinema, and the ablutions blocks and sleeping quarters for single migrants and for migrant families. It suggested spaces that could be allocated for key personnel and key functions – the director and camp administration; the headmaster and the school; and the social worker. Capacity of the camp, the survey determined, would be limited by the cooking facilities: it would be difficult to cope with 600 residents.<sup>61</sup>

Members of the local branch of the RSL were not at all sure about having a migrant camp at the Benalla airport. A spokesperson alleged that in Albury there was a growing concern about the migrant presence at Bonegilla. The members feared the newest arrivals were the 'poorest looking lot of immigrants'. The mayor of Albury, Cleaver Bunton, denied any concern. There had been 'no untoward incidents' in Albury and, indeed, businesses were pleased with the increased custom. The migrants, he said, included many talented artists and they raised money for local charities. Hilda Sellars, from the Albury CWA, gave similar reassurances, but unlike Bunton, she had actually met and mingled with migrant people personally. There were

among them, she found, women of standing, many of them well educated, talented and well dressed. A Benalla resident, W Fogarty, added local voice to the rebuttal. He took the RSL representatives to task for prejudice in expressing preference for British migrants rather than non-British refugees. Many of the displaced were fine types who would meet Australia's workforce needs, he said.<sup>62</sup>

Benalla's mayor, Cr F R (Frank) Harrison, invited Arthur Calwell to Benalla to explain why a migrant centre was in the interests of the nation and the town. The editors and sub-editors of Benalla's two newspapers had little trouble in headlining his speeches as Calwell warmed to his nationally familiar talking points: 'Populate or Perish' and '20,000,000 population needed to hold Australia'. Looking around him, Calwell encouragingly declared Benalla's air facilities and their location in 'a thriving town backed by a thriving district' ideal for a migrant centre. There could be, he promised, 800 migrants in Benalla by the end of the year. He dismissed a challenge from an RSL questioner about their being non-British, saying he was in constant contact with RSL leaders and they agreed with him that the displaced people being recruited as migrants were fine types. Both Calwell and the mayor praised the 'Nordic' people, the Balts, who would be easily absorbed into Australia. They would come as family units, for there was work in the Benalla district for both men and women.<sup>63</sup>

Calwell would have been pleased with his reception. The *Benalla Standard* led with 'DP camp will mark a new phase in Benalla's history'; its editorial exhortation was titled 'Let us welcome them'. The newspaper explained that the newcomers were people 'down on their luck'. Benalla should help these people rehabilitate themselves. It cautioned that 'if we are insular they will form a self-protective colony'.<sup>64</sup>



BS 27 June 1949.



The first migrants arrived in early August. The *Benalla Standard* published a photograph of a young Hungarian couple, Joseph and Nataya Havel, with an interview its reporter had conducted in French. Both the Havel wanted to learn English and to be liked by Australians. They were members of well-established Hungarian families. Joseph was not only a Doctor of Laws but a sailing champion and a good tennis player. They were destined to take up their first jobs as a hotel useful and a domestic at the Broken River Hotel in Benalla.<sup>65</sup>

Calwell returned for the official opening in September.<sup>66</sup> He anticipated that the newcomers would receive a warm welcome in Australia and more particularly in Benalla.

*Here is a place to live and laugh, to work and play. Here is a land with a future which you and your children will be free to share alongside native Australians.... Here in this gracious town of Benalla, you will meet the real Australian – the man born and bred on the land. Here you will see the richness of the land. Here you will discover the treasure of friendliness.... This is the end of your wanderings. In our country, now your country, you have found a home.*

The mayor, Frank Harrison, welcomed the migrants to that part of Australia which was 'full of sunshine, green pastures, happiness and friends [where] I feel you will want to make your home'. The shire president, Cr M G B Meadows, assured them there was 'plenty of work for hard working farmers', but added his advice that they 'speak our language as fast as you can'.

## Living with a holding centre

Within the first twelve months, Benalla settled peaceably to the migrant centre presence.

It accepted 'the Balt Camp'. Calwell had promised fine Nordic types from the Baltic countries, so 'Balts' they were and 'Balts' they remained no matter where they came from within that place called 'Europe'. Local business people readily took to the tasks of supplying meat, fruit, vegetables and firewood. Anticipating new custom, one entrepreneurial retailer persuaded the newspaper to take an advertisement for his cycles in German. Before the end of the year, the Governor of Victoria visited and expressed his delight with the camp and the clothing factory where many were to work. The centre organised a concert. The CWA arranged a handicrafts exhibition. The newspapers reported enthusiastically on the newcomers' fine musical abilities and their extraordinary skills in embroidery, cross-stitching, crocheting and crafting jewellery. The local branch of the Red Cross delivered toys and books and ensured that there were flowers and gifts for the patients in the centre hospital at Christmas time.

To satisfy local curiosity, the *Benalla Standard* despatched a reporter to the centre. After a tour of the site with the welfare officer, she gave favourable first impressions. The living quarters were modest; the tariff was moderate; the food was plentiful; the grounds were being improved. There were neat gardens being made around the canteen. A piano was in the hut which served as a cinema. Reassuringly, the hospital was managed by Sister Clare McGill, a 'Benalla girl'. The general demeanour of the place was reflected in its busyness with painting and rebuilding. The migrants were settling in nicely.<sup>67</sup>

The town and the migrants continued to settle amicably to each other. Church congregations moved up to make room for another on the pew. The Methodist church lent its church building to the Lutherans to hold their services. The Catholic church organised an entertainment. The high school staff and pupils arranged a welcome event at the centre itself. The newspapers paid particular attention to the children: they lent colour to the Benalla East school fete when they danced in folk costumes; they enjoyed a visit from Santa at Christmas time; and they happily joined in National Fitness Council summer holiday activities.

The most common newspaper reports of migrant people were to be of road accidents and court appearances. Readers were shown pictures of mangled vehicles driven by hapless newcomers. There were reports of offences such as motor cyclists driving without a licence. Occasionally there were detailed tales

of marital discord and abuse. Some reports were exciting and even salacious: one man was accused of wielding a sword; a woman was accused of having no visible means of support and of having frequent men visitors to her hut. Magistrates warned those who appeared before them that they 'must realise they were now all New Australians and must become good Australians'. Newcomers obliged with occasional assurances that 'we will do our best to become true and good citizens of Australia'.<sup>68</sup>

The most confident encouragements that the settlement of the strangers was proceeding as it should were to be found in the record of their participation in local sporting and charity fund-raising activities. The migrants were welcomed as skilled and experienced table tennis and soccer players. They helped arrange parking at Rotary's Jubilee Air Pageant at the airport. They raised money for flood victims.

Migration was not easy, but neither was settlement, as both the newcomers and the hosts found. Those who worked at the centre with the migrants were given newspaper space to explain newcomer problems. Brigadier F H Christison, the director, assured Apex that the department had rigorous selection methods and was only admitting good types, some with extraordinary talents. There was a need for family migration, but he admitted family separation was stressful.<sup>69</sup> Mr Kentman, a member of the centre staff, told an Apex-Rotary dinner of difficulties with language and the non-recognition of qualifications. He reassured them that country town friendliness, particularly from church folk, led newcomers like himself to shun the cities where they would be an 'unknown stranger all [their] life amidst a multitude of indifferent people'.<sup>70</sup> Elvira Hogg, the chief instructor teaching English to adults at the centre, reminded district newspaper readers of the difficulties that came with the language barrier. She urged readers to look beyond the stereotype of foreigners knifing each other and called for understanding and patience for these 'fine people struggling with English'. She cited the praiseworthy example of a Latvian woman who had three children, but found time, after her factory job and child-care duties, to settle to her delicate needlework craft. She reminded readers that the newcomers had come to make Australia their home and to bring up their children as Australians.<sup>71</sup> Father Patrick Collins, the chaplain at Bonegilla, explained to a Catholic diocesan audience that the displaced had wasted years in camps where they were 'not living but existing'. He called for compassion and asked for migrants to be considered as

people, not just labour.<sup>72</sup>

In April 1950, Harold Holt, the new minister for immigration, visited the centre with his wife, Zara. They expressed their delight to hear the centre children sing 'Baa, baa black sheep'. But the women ignored the minister, the official speeches and the pleasantries. Instead, they surrounded Mrs Holt and peppered her, woman-to-woman, with complaints about family separation. Through the interpreters accompanying the ministerial party, they complained that their husbands were not earning sufficient money to be able to afford to travel to see them. The living conditions of the camp were not good: their huts were unlined and had no power points. Zara Holt was a practised politician's wife and reminded the complainants that they would only be at the holding centre for a few months. They should be patient. Although the protest got scant local attention, the disregard for the minister was considered newsworthy enough to be reported nationwide.<sup>73</sup> This was the first of other more vigorous holding centre demonstrations at Uranquinty and Cowra in which migrant women complained forcibly about conditions in the holding centres.<sup>74</sup>

Although Zara Holt promised that she would 'mention the matter', nothing was done. The huts remained cold. In September 1952, five children died in a fire at the migrant centre hospital at the Somers holding centre and, in consequence, immigration authorities enforced more rigorously bans on unsanctioned kerosene heaters and on radiators connected through light fittings, labelling them fire risks. However, the Benalla branch of the Australian Labor Party took up the cause of the residents in the particularly cold winter of 1953 when temperatures dropped below freezing. It made representations to have power points installed in the huts so that women with young children might use electric radiators, as they did in Melbourne worker hostels. The department was reluctant: it did not want the radiators used for cooking, and more importantly 'Benalla was not a permanent hostel'.<sup>75</sup> At the end of the day the department did, however, grant the request.

Benalla Borough Council had both immediate financial concerns and longer-term town development concerns. It worried about additional costs that might accrue by providing health services for the mothers and their children. Plainly the influx of more people was going to strain Benalla's ten-bed bush nursing hospital, which depended on local volunteer support. Caution was needed to protect not only the newcomers, but also the community

at large, against infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, poliomyelitis and diphtheria. Additional resources were needed for immunisation and for infant care.<sup>76</sup>

Council had deeper worries about the nature of the holding centre. It argued that Calwell had given it reason to expect a worker hostel, like that at Wangaratta. It wanted families to settle to work and to homes in the district, not transients, here today and gone tomorrow. Council took its complaints to Calwell and then to Holt.<sup>77</sup> The change in function, then title, to a migrant accommodation centre overcame council's difficulty, especially when primary production became a job allocation priority. More workers would be sent to take up jobs in the local district. Nevertheless, some councillors continued to view the migrant presence as temporary. The Balts, in their minds, were forever to be transients and not part of the 'real population' of Benalla.<sup>78</sup>

## Living long-term with a migrant accommodation centre

The Benalla centre survived nationwide pruning of accommodation centres first in 1953 and, then again, in 1959. It may not have become permanent, but the Benalla centre had a continuity that stretched beyond those in other places. Consequently, local attitudes might have been expected to shift. The local newspapers made some adjustments to the ways they reported on the centre and its residents, but reflect, overall, an ongoing social distance between centre and town. There remained a 'them' and an 'us'.

Local celebrations of the Coronation in 1953 and the Queen's visit to Benalla during the Royal Tour of Australia in 1954 brought unusual attention to the migrant centre. Both the celebrations gave Benalla opportunities to demonstrate its British character; they gave non-British migrants opportunities to demonstrate their willingness to join in plainly important community activities.

As the early complaints of the RSL had indicated, Benalla, along with the wider national community, was troubled by the large number of non-British migrants who were arriving. Many feared that Australia might lose its British connection and orientation. Immigration authorities seized on the two royal occasions as opportunities to assure the community that migrants were embracing 'the traditions of their adopted homeland'.<sup>79</sup>

During the Coronation celebrations, the children from the migrant centre marched with all the other school children and appeared in national costumes on a float.<sup>80</sup> The royal visit was an even more special occasion that required more flags, bunting, processions, speeches and special food treats. Crowds from near and far lined the street for a glimpse of the royal couple. About 16 000 children from Benalla and from North-east Victoria more generally attended; 3 000 of them from Wodonga and Bonegilla. The Benalla centre prepared one of the 24 floats for the official procession and several centre children paraded in their national dress.

Extensive street decorations were organised and produced by Danko Martek, a migrant working at Bonegilla. At Benalla railway station, where the Queen would arrive, Martek displayed some distinctively Australian motifs and also large canvas and Masonite posters featuring coats-of-arms, and portraits of Her Majesty and Prince Philip and each of the Tudor kings and queens. It seemed that the Benalla railway station was the best dressed of the whole royal tour.<sup>81</sup> New Australians added colour and verve to a local community celebration.

The large poster pictures and the folk dress had a big visual impact and continued to exercise influence after the event. The royal portraits and other pictures were returned to Bonegilla. There they formed part of an ongoing display in a recreation hut renamed 'Tudor Hall', which reminded migrants that they had come to a British Australia. The carefully crafted folk dresses were kept in family suitcases in Benalla (or were made again) to be proudly worn on local celebratory occasions. Their making and display drew on regionally differentiated traditions which were most precious where wartime and postwar occupations had tried to suppress national traditions – as, for example, in Poland, Latvia and Estonia. The national costumes showed Australians something of the richness of a variety of homeland cultures. They were worn on occasions such as the feast of Christ the King, following the Coronation celebrations. Subsequently they would be used by a Polish dance group and in street processions and displays for Benalla's Rose Festival. They asserted an ongoing Polish presence in the town.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Benalla was settling to being a long-term host community. At the time of a Back to Benalla festival in 1960, Keith Hall, the mayor, acknowledged: 'Our New Australian friends have played their part in making our town what it is today.' That was a bland enough cover-all



Camp children participated in the Coronation celebrations in 1953.



Decorations at the Benalla railway station for the royal visit (Australian Railway Historical Society (Victoria Division)).



Left: Benalla holding centre marchers in the procession, (BS 8 March 1954).

Right: Portraits of Tudor Kings and Queens at Benalla Railway Station

Children performed Polish dances on celebratory occasions (Szymanek, BMC).

expression that meant little, but with longer-term intermingling, community attitudes were shifting.

The newspapers continued to carry reports of migrants appearing before the courts and an occasional sporting club achievement. They showed photographs of a 'pretty wedding' involving at least one partner from the centre. The centre had been in Benalla long enough for the papers to feature farewells to long-serving, Australian-born centre staff, such as Bob Bain, who served as director from 1953 until 1963. Some Australian-born centre staff had become local familiars.

The economic recession of 1961 hit the unemployed new arrivals hard. Many were forced to stay longer at the centre than they would have normally. With newspaper encouragement, the town's well-meaning residents responded to requests from the centre director to help break the migrants'

loneliness and boredom. There was a flurry of newspaper supportive activity. The *Benalla Standard* reported that the Junior Chamber of Commerce was orchestrating a 'drive-a-migrant' Sunday outing to Loombah weir, which unfortunately had only mixed success.<sup>82</sup> In a refinement of earlier coverage, the newspaper nominated the newcomers' countries of origin with a cheery photo of new arrivals from Greece, Italy and Spain. It ran a story on how new arrivals were processed, which showed how administratively slick the processing was. As part of its new interest in the migrants and the centre, the paper thought it newsworthy to publish a photograph of one of its reporters actually dining with a newly arrived family.<sup>83</sup> It was apparently considered strange in Benalla to break bread with a newcomer from overseas.

Through the 1960s the newspapers gave a great deal of space to two migrant-related functions. There were reports of the annual

Folk costumed children celebrate the Royal visit BS (8 March 1954) and the feast of Christ the King. (BS 1 May 1954).





New arrivals in 1961 were 'happy to be here' and at least one family was made welcome with a cup of tea, (BS 3 August 1961).



BS 22 August 1961



centre anniversary cabaret, which a few townspeople attended, and reports of civic naturalisation ceremonies, which involved local community groups. The *Benalla Standard* ran a story about migrant children adapting well at the centre school.<sup>84</sup> It showed young people from the centre supporting the local hospital.<sup>85</sup> They pictured migrant women 'cheerful and busy' at the clothing factory: 'They're the United Nations of Benalla.'<sup>86</sup> Some migrants, instead of centre officials, were reported speaking in the first person of the migrant experience. Alfred Rzezniczek, for example, outlined his circuitous work history to a Rotary meeting, explaining how he had worked at a joinery, on a baker's cart, in a saw mill, at Renold's Chains, and at the camp itself, until he joined the staff at Benalla High School. Rzezniczek also explained how he began life in Benalla living in a garage which he converted into a house.<sup>87</sup>

The centre and the town, the immigrants and non-immigrants, were learning to live together.<sup>88</sup>

# THEY'RE THE UNITED NATIONS OF BENALLA

"I went with Alan Day to the Latoof and Callil factory last Tuesday and found "The United Nations of Benalla," writes Tom Rudd. It was surprising. They were so cheerfully busy. There were women from Poland, the Ukraine, Latvia, Russia, Germany, Italy, Holland, Greece, Malta and France, and from the United Kingdom, working with born Australians.

They were making some of the 3,500,000 garments West Brunswick headquar-

ters in Benalla, Watsonia, Werritee and Euros, and all the manager of the Benalla branch, Mr. Alan Do-

lan, told me that the weekly production here was approximately 14,000 separate garments of various kinds - women's and girls' clothing, frocks and night dresses.

"Frocks made in Benalla are worn by the women and girls of all Australia. We send clothing as far north as Darwin and Charles Towers."

**Clean and trim**  
The factory, opposite the Benalla and District Memorial Hospital, is beautifully clean and trim, and astonishingly practical.

Some genius in founding secured steel bunks from the Royal Australian Air Force Camp, now the Immigration Centre at Benalla.

Those bunks still serve as racks for clothing. They contrast sharply with the clean polished look of the wooden racks and yet seem very much in place.

Fabric goods arrive in the firm's own transport at one end of the large factory building itself and become clothing at a speed that seems miraculous.

**Patterns**  
Robert Finarity was at work near the cases in which the cloth pieces arrive. His job was to mark the patterns on the layers.

Working nearby was a cutter, Ted Boshnek, and a spreader, Tony Allison. Tony was using a cloth spreading machine to place the ma-

terial on the table in readiness for the cutting.

There were 25 dozen separate pieces of cloth already spread on the table on which Ted was working.

"We go to 35 dozen in some cloths and as low as seven dozen in others," Mr. Doolan explained.

**An art in it**  
Ted worked on... following the pattern with his machine cutter. It seemed to be so easy, but there was an art in it all.

From the cutting section the shaped designs go to the other end of the building where six separate teams of girls do the mach-

ining. Then the materials begin to move back across the factory through the finishing section, which includes the pressing before final inspection and crating as clothing in the original boxes in which the cloth arrived.

Through it all there was an economy of movement.



Inside Latoof and Callil's of Benalla. This is a section of the factory as seen from the cutting tables.



THE LAST STAGE... Mrs. Sherlock packs a nightgown into its container.



Button-holing and button sewing by machine seems easy to Miss Sandford and French.



This is Mrs. Miles sewing on collars with a safety-stitch machine.



And here is Miss Poyser inspecting a collar.

## STAFF OF 170 EMPLOYED AT BENALLA

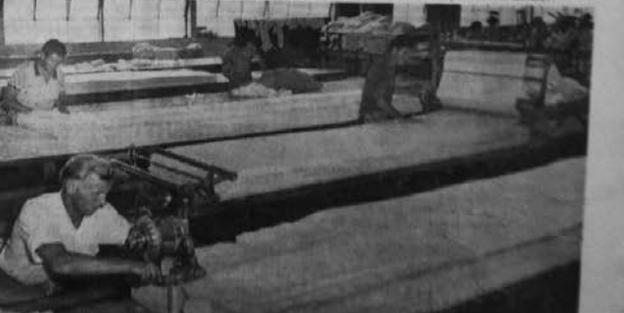
Mr. Doolan told me as we watched Mrs. Sherlock folding up an "Economy" nightgown preparatory to placing it in a plastic bag, that there were as many as 70 different processes in the making of just one garment.

"And every garment is carefully inspected before packaging," he said.

It was a most interesting experience to go through the factory. I watched button-holing and button sewing by machine, saw how collars were made, with a safety stitching machine, saw large sections of a garment and small ones, and watched girls cordoning a collar.

It was a busy scene. "We have a staff now of 170," Mr. Doolan told me. "The factory could accommodate 240."

"We have our own cafeteria and serve a two-course meal for 20c. We have a sports room and two lawn tennis courts in the grounds. Our site here covers 11 acres."



In the foreground here you see Ted Boshnek busy with his cutting machine. In the right working a spreader is Tony Allison; on the left, preparing more cloth is Harry Boyd.

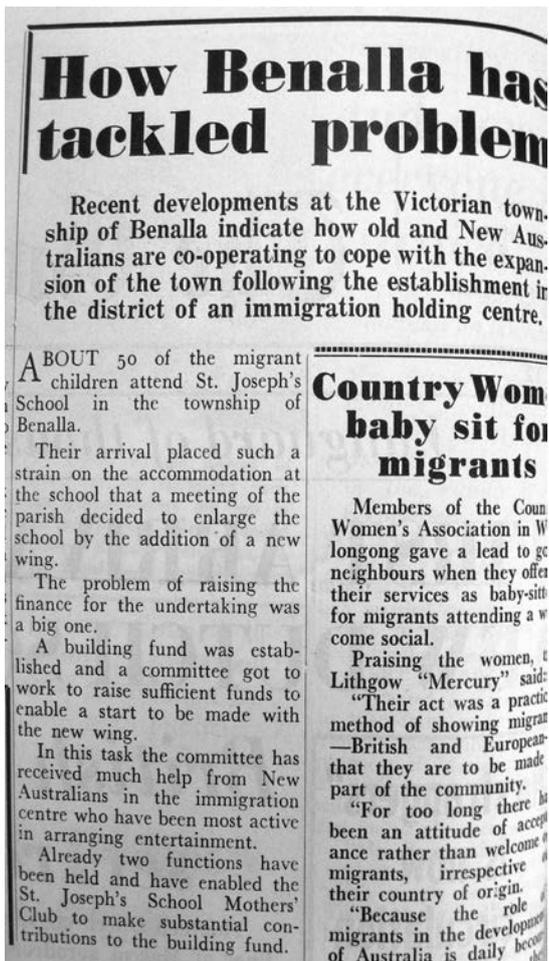
## What to see on GMV6

<p><b>MONDAY, 21st JANUARY</b>                  8.30 GMV Juniors                  8.45 Benalla the Magazine                  8.50 News and Weather                  9.00 Park-Road                  Australia's top rated quiz program complete</p>	<p>                 9.15 by Bob Lynn and his wife Dolly                  9.20 I Love My                  9.30 The Unfortunates                  9.40 The British YAC                  (A)                  10.00 News and Weather and Epilogue</p>	<p>                 Paradise                  (A)                  8.50 Perry Mason                  9.00 Ben Franklin Road                  (A)                  9.00 News and Weather and Epilogue</p>	<p>                 8.30 Top Way Annual                  8.45 Benalla the Magazine                  8.50 News                  9.00 Park-Road                  9.10 Benalla the Magazine                  9.20 News and Weather                  9.30 Park-Road</p>
<p><b>TUESDAY, 22nd JANUARY</b>                  8.30 GMV Juniors                  8.45 Benalla the Magazine                  8.50 News and Weather                  9.00 Park-Road                  Australia's top rated quiz program complete</p>	<p>                 9.15 by Bob Lynn and his wife Dolly                  9.20 I Love My                  9.30 The Unfortunates                  9.40 The British YAC                  (A)                  10.00 News and Weather and Epilogue</p>	<p>                 Paradise                  (A)                  8.50 Perry Mason                  9.00 Ben Franklin Road                  (A)                  9.00 News and Weather and Epilogue</p>	<p>                 8.30 Top Way Annual                  8.45 Benalla the Magazine                  8.50 News                  9.00 Park-Road                  9.10 Benalla the Magazine                  9.20 News and Weather                  9.30 Park-Road</p>

Perhaps an indicator of how well town and camp were living together lies in the fortunes of a local branch of the Good Neighbour Council. The council played an important settlement function, providing advice on buying land or houses, health and schooling. Gradually it became more focused on helping newcomers learn English. A first attempt to form a branch in 1950 had faltered. There was greater success in 1956, and again in 1958 and 1959. But the branch needed revival in

1967, when, with the closing of the centre, greater community support was needed for the residents who had become homeless. Long-term supporter and champion Alfred Rzezniczek thought the local community had been more supportive in the early years, but saw less need to give assistance when longer-settled newcomers appeared to be more integrated.<sup>89</sup> A New Settlers League, formed by the migrants themselves, had a similarly fitful existence.

Town and Camp seemed to be working well together, Good Neighbour 1 July 1951



There were other indicators. With time, came better opportunities for intermingling. New and longer-term residents would increasingly rub shoulders, for example, as neighbours and fellow churchgoers as well as workmates. So, for example, neighbours exchanged vegetables over backyard fences. Migrant mothers and native-born parishioners of St Josephs joined together in raising funds to extend the Catholic school building. The church supplied Fr Feliks Wosniczek, a camp-resident Polish chaplain, who acted as a local parish and centre go-between for about six years. Within and outside congregations, many people developed acquaintances and friendships.

Those opportunities for interaction were restricted in several ways. Workplace interaction was limited, for many migrants worked principally with other migrants in the factories. As the social workers observed, town/centre interconnection was restricted when migrants were involved only with the centre school or the centre church. Not many working women could readily join mothers' clubs, tennis clubs or bridge clubs, as they did not have time and were daunted by language barriers. Town and centre remained geographically and socially distant. Opportunities remained restricted even when

former residents moved to houses in the town, for they often clustered in housing commission homes, though those estates were scattered through the town.

In calling for community support during 1961 the *Benalla Standard* had challenged its readers 'to realise that the Holding Centre does mean something to the town'. It was sure that, if nothing else, the presence of a large, often underemployed labour force advantaged the town in its pursuit for more secondary industries.<sup>90</sup> There was a local building boom during the 1950s and 1960s, with increased investment in housing, schools, shops and town facilities. So, for instance, by 1967 Benalla had acquired 364 Housing Commission houses. Overall, however, the economic impact of the centre was rarely acknowledged directly.

The year 1967 proved difficult for both the centre and the town. The centre was diminishing in size and impact. The numbers of new arrivals were declining. The school had closed in 1963, with students transferring to Benalla East. The immigration department agreed in February 1966 to sell some of the land for an aged care facility. In 1967 came the news that the camp was to close.

The 1966 census had confirmed a downturn in the local economy. The population of Benalla had grown from about 7 000 in 1947 to 8 234 in 1961, but slumped to 8 213 in 1966. The newspaper tried to explain that the inclusion of the centre in the figures was an inclusion of transitory people not Benalla's 'real population'.

In October 1967, after the two newspapers amalgamated, Jim Scott, the editor of the former *Benalla Standard*, felt freed from the compulsion a country newspaper editor had to promote the town's successes. In a letter to the *Age* he depicted Benalla as a 'dying city'.<sup>91</sup> It was losing the workers employed at the migrant centre and the gang employed building the standard gauge railway. School leavers were leaving for Melbourne. There were fears that the Army was not going to take over the centre. There were other rumours that the railway loco shop was going to close. Checkheaton's acquisition of the Latoof and Callil factory engendered some uncertainty. Victoria's Department of Decentralisation had launched a selective decentralisation program in which it would focus its decentralisation efforts on five centres, none of which was Benalla.

The closure of the centre rarely featured in the

discussions of lost facilities that took place in 1967, perhaps because the promise of army activity seemed likely to be even better for the local economy. In January 1968 the local member was still giving assurances that the facility would continue to be used and projected the imminent arrival of CMF and cadet training groups.<sup>92</sup> No one set of occupants of the accommodation at the aerodrome was more or less worthy than another. As during the war and the postwar years, all occupants of the basic units were transients. Town businesses would be pleased to provide them with supplies. But townspeople might expect whoever they were, they would not disrupt town life.

Through the 1970s, it seemed that Benalla was changing just a little. George Gruzewski, an enterprising young man and former centre resident, opened a coffee lounge with a coffee-making machine. He served espresso and cappuccino and played ambient music, even after the pictures on Saturdays and Sundays. The *Benalla Ensign* boasted that with George's coffee lounge, 'our progressive town' had something that was 'certainly up to Melbourne standards'.<sup>93</sup> The proprietor himself recalls his further venture of turning the coffee shop into a restaurant and serving continental cakes and wiener schnitzel, as well as his mainstay – sandwiches and milkshakes. He worried that locals might find the use of table-cloths too 'posh'. His big profit maker, he recalls, was the chicken rotisserie, rather than his continental cuisine.



Nevertheless, for the most part contemporary analysts do not seem to have reflected on how the growing migrant presence impacted on local economic, social or cultural development. The expanded labour force simply underpinned the operation of the two local factories through the long postwar economic boom. There was no comment about the change in the ethnic composition of Benalla, perhaps because the numbers were small. In 1971, 512 people, or 6 per cent of Benalla's residents, were born in non-British European countries, principally Germany (180), Poland (74), the Netherlands (48) and what was called Yugoslavia (39).

The proportion of European-born (10.5 per cent), as in many country towns, was lower than the state average (20 per cent). Although some migrant centre residents lingered in the town, most moved, presumably to take up job opportunities in the city or elsewhere.

Alfred Rzezniczek found it necessary to remind people in 1972 that 'this town has benefited on a great scale, from the flow and residence of refugees from Europe'.<sup>94</sup>

# 4 THE CAMP RESIDENTS: OBSERVATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS; PERCEPTIONS AND MEMORIES

Those who lived at the camp knew it best. At present, the principal resident informants about camp life are a few immigration department officials who were only there a short time and a few migrant residents, predominantly those who were children at the camp. The public records of resident officers contain observations on the morale and social composition of the camp. The memory pieces donated by those who were children provide insights into the feel of the camp and of the migrant experience of the town.<sup>95</sup> Still, the most substantial memory record of the camp is in the photographs people took, both the official promotional pictures taken by visiting departmental publicists and the unofficial pictures drawn from the family albums of the migrant and non-migrant residents. Both the photographs and the memory pieces are similar in orientation to those retrieved at other holding centres. They convey impressions of camp life and the challenges of migration and early settlement.<sup>96</sup>

The overall impression the words and pictures give is that the camp was physically and socially a safe, self-contained village for the majority of its inhabitants, women and children. Within a confined space organised around communal eating, bathing and washing facilities, people shared their lives with little opportunity for privacy. The camp village offered protection from an outside world. Migrant residents felt they were 'other' – camp people, as distinct from townspeople. Proud camp kids had little to do with townies. For migrants as well as townspeople, there were 'them' and 'us'.

This close village atmosphere of the camp had strong appeal. Some of those who left to take up accommodation in the town returned to attend camp church services. Those who became town dwellers often remained at the clothing factory or other workplaces in the company of their former camp fellows. Across both town and camp the largest ethnic group, the Poles, grouped together to share Polish music and culture. They created and enjoyed Polish community support.

## Camp officers

Both resident language instructors and visiting

social workers got to know the camp and its residents well. As part of their duties they reported on the social character of the camp. Two of them, Bunty King and Lois Carrington, have recorded memory of the place.

## Social workers

Bunty King's views of Benalla changed. In 1951 she had given a positive impression of the place. Less guarded in retirement and after a longer acquaintance with Benalla, even though it be from the distance of Bonegilla, she recalled how Benalla never really moved beyond its holding centre beginnings:

*Benalla was a sad and tragic camp where widows and single mothers were sent. The plan was that they would be able to find work in Benalla fruit [sic] factories. It was psychologically a mistake to isolate the women and the children from the men. The Commanding Officer there was an army man with little idea of how to cope with their problems. The morale of the women was low and assimilation into the community poor.<sup>97</sup>*

Bunty King worried that Benalla left some people unassimilable. By that she meant too few felt they were able to move out and on and find a place in the Australian community. That was a failure of the camp and the migrants themselves.

Migrant centre staff, King says, found that the displaced, who predominated among the long-stayers at Benalla, were different from later assisted migrant cohorts in the way they approached settlement. The assisted knew why they came; the displaced lacked that sense of purpose and self-confidence; as a result, they did not mingle easily with townspeople, and that, to King, was the key to assimilation.<sup>98</sup>

Social workers Viva Murphy and Florence Ferguson worried that prolonged government care sapped initiative. Time and again they refer to the long-staying women as being fearful of leaving the protection of the camp. Their case study reports were brutally honest. This one was a 'peasant type woman' with few job prospects; that one was a 'trouble maker'; this one was manipulable; that one a

'good mother'; another had a ne'er-do-well husband. One was defiantly dependent: 'if you brought us here you look after us'. Yet another felt set apart: 'she did not have good enough clothes to wear to work in town'. The general conclusion was that the long-stayers 'lacked energy'. They avoided notice. Their survival strategy was to be invisible.

The widows of Benalla have remained faceless and voiceless. Only at the closing of the camp did two of them find public voice. Mrs J Kozolowski told the Melbourne *Sun* that although many long-term residents were upset, she herself was happy to leave after sixteen years: 'We have finally to leave and set up a real home somewhere else. Now we have a chance to start a proper life like other people'. On the other hand, another long-term resident, Mrs J Omielczuk, told the *Canberra Times* that she regarded the centre as her permanent home: 'This has been my only home and I do not think I can turn around and start a new home all over again.' Mrs Kozolowski's ambition matches that reported from other places.<sup>99</sup> Mrs Omielczuk's daughter suggests that her mother was reluctant to leave the protective village life of the camp.

### Language instructors

Elvira Hogg established adult education language instruction at Benalla. When she became ill and stepped down in late 1950, she was replaced by Lois Carrington. Carrington was an astute observer and recorder. She subsequently gathered the memories of her fellow resident language instructors as part of a larger project.<sup>100</sup> With the distance of memory, she writes more positively than the social workers on the ways in which challenges were dealt with. Her task of language tuition was a smaller one than theirs and, consequently, her successes may have been more apparent than her failures.

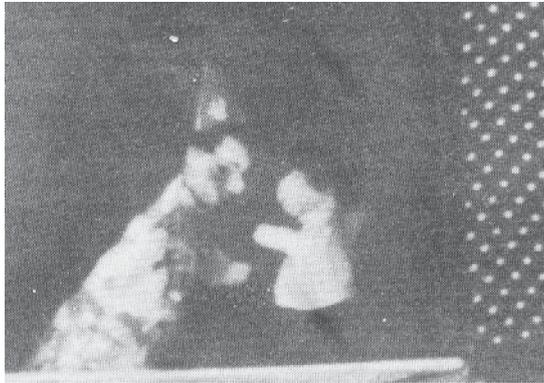
Nevertheless, Carrington leaves no doubt that the Benalla centre was a bleak and challenging place. It was isolated, a half-hour walk to town. It was compact, a short ten-minute walk around. It was neither pretty nor joyful. She pictures children riding tricycles in a barren streetscape. She quotes Joan Murray's recall of 'our living quarters [were] door to door to the crying children and amidst the seething activities of the tin huts'.<sup>101</sup> But although it was physically grim, Carrington stresses it was a safe place for her and her colleagues, as well as for the migrants.

The language instructors and the social workers were not always in agreement.

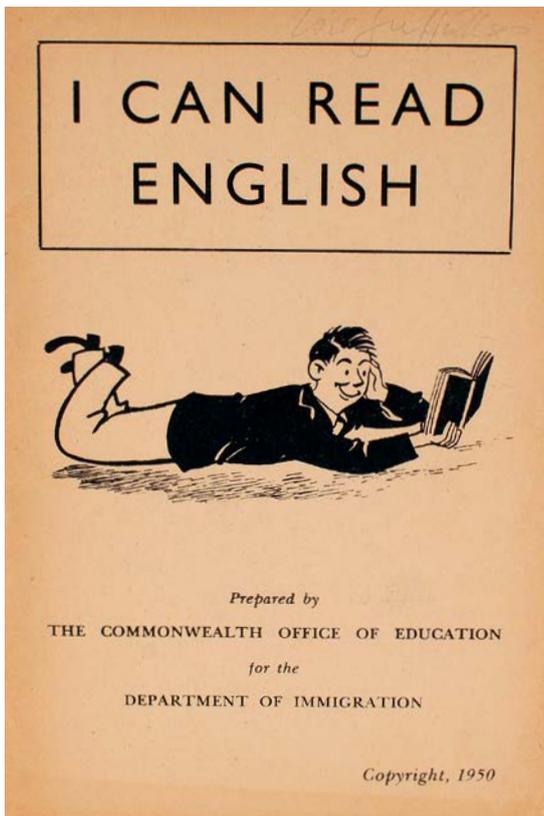
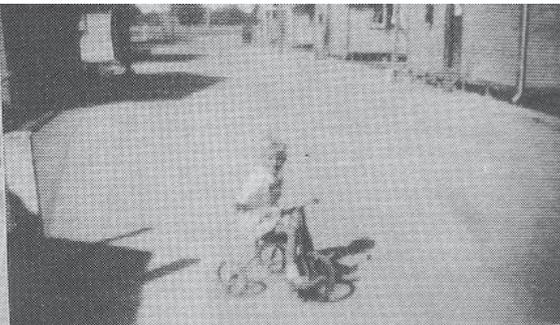
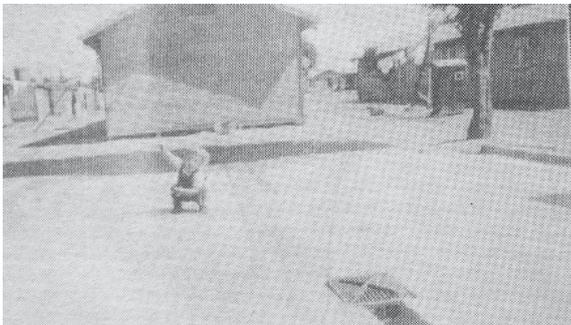
Carrington found Brigadier Christison 'fairly supportive'; King thought he was an army man with little idea of how to cope with the problems the women faced. To her, he appeared to be a man's man, who was content to enjoy his Rotary connection with the town's influential citizens. Both King and her superior, Hazel Dobson, bemoaned the fact that only about ten per cent of those eligible to attend the afternoon and evening English lessons did so. They recommended that the lessons might be better adapted to meet the needs and interests of the widows; they might be more practical and deal with homemaking, cooking, hygiene and child care.

Carrington and her fellow English teachers heard and responded to their working mother students complaining that they were always too tired to go to class: 'we come home, we wash ourselves, we wash the rooms, we wash the clothes, we wash the kids – we are *too* tired to come to your classes.'<sup>102</sup> She tells of ways they used to address the problem. At Bonegilla, the language instructors had motivated reluctant learners with the mantra 'No English, no job'. At Benalla the mantra became 'Learn English or you will not understand your children'. That mantra was not nearly as effective. Within the fug of Benalla huts, families spoke their mother's tongue. In the streets and playgrounds they used what keen-eared refugee camp language instructors knew as 'DP Deutsch'.

Some instructors found that the women in their classes responded well to nursery rhymes as something they could share with their children. Others ran to cooking lessons with demonstrations of frying eggs and making jelly. All the instructors used coloured paper, Indian ink and broad-nibbed pens to create posters to brighten 'bleak and item less' huts. Carrington made hand puppets and, with the aid of a centre handyman, devised a puppet theatre. With two hands, she constructed dialogues between a puppet of a clown, a universal figure, interacting with another, whose role changed with his hat – sometimes railway employee, post office clerk, shopkeeper or whoever. The puppet shows proved popular and by request were on occasions staged as an entertainment for the children'.<sup>103</sup>



The grainy photographs in Carrington's book depict Elvira Hogg; the unattractive 'but safe' play environment; the uninspiring view 'down the lines' at Benalla; and one of her puppet shows.



In her retirement, Carrington retained some of the puppets she had made, including one that looked very much like Carrington herself. She also retained some of her teaching materials, which are now held at the Albury LibraryMuseum.

The teachers were set on the task of language instruction, not simply 'keeping the women amused', as Christison is alleged to have said. The nursery rhymes had simple story lines and repetitive phrases. The puppet conversations, about buying railway tickets/picking up mail/making a purchase, provided graded sentence patterns and slowly extended vocabulary within everyday story settings. Elvira Hogg had had to insist on the worth of what she was about and went about doing her job professionally. Language instruction had to be done carefully and properly, be it with a minimum of resources. There was no prissy insistence on grammatical niceties. The instructors used specially selected library books, films and film strips to explain Australia in the course of practising English. After leaving Benalla, Hogg was to take up a job with the ABC devising five-minute 'English for New Australians' radio segments, within which storylines carried by familiar characters illustrated some of the logics of language set in everyday situations.<sup>104</sup>

Even the otherwise acerbic Florence Ferguson reached the conclusion that, although a great deal was done to ensure the women at Benalla were encouraged to improve their English and to make that process pleasant and easy for them, many, after working in the clothing factory or the centre all day, just had no energy to learn.<sup>105</sup> Overall, it seems that at any one time there was at Benalla a large body

of supporting women struggling to meet the demands of child care and paid work. A few were unemployed and were without the dignity that came with work and the companionship of the outside workplace that motivated language acquisition.

## Refugees and migrants

The photographs donated to the Benalla exhibition collection have become externalised memories which the donors make available to others. In sharing them they allow their personal memories to become public memories. They seem to be ensuring that any composite story attempted with the photographs is sufficiently differentiated to include their kind of migration. Overall, however, the photographs of the Benalla camp emphasise the importance of family and community life.

Photographs point to the importance of the camp as a workplace for many. Non-migrant camp officials, language instructors, primary and preschool teachers were fellow residents with the migrants. Their informal, sometimes amateurish images capture workplace camaraderie at and beyond the camp, in contrast with the artfully composed official portrayals of camp and outside work.

An official publicist's photograph of pre-school centre workers. NAA A12111, 1/1955/22/34,



An official publicist's photograph of a migrant worker employed as a clothing factory machinist. NAA A12111, 1/1965/22/24



(Braumberger, BMC)



Cracknell, BMC.



Left: Brunner (BMC)

Right: O'Loughlin, (BMC)



George Gruzewski and Solly Kosher carting hay (Gruzewski, BMC). Bruno Golonski and Boleslav Swist tended hops in the King Valley (Swist, BMC).



Photographs record social occasions, often organised by the staff social club; anniversary cabarets were times of good cheer. Well-rehearsed Christmas concerts in the camp

theatre gave way to New Year merriment. The staff social club had billiard tables and a tennis court, and organised family picnic outings.



Taurins, BMC (left),  
Kolodziejczyk, BMC  
(right)



Swist, BMC



Tillmanns, BMC

Churches provided a steadying presence for the uprooted. Resident Protestant and Catholic chaplains re-created some aspects of old country life with familiar forms of worship and traditional ceremonies associated with

important family events. The chaplains often spoke home country languages and, like Fr Wosniczek, became familiar friends and neighbours within the camp village.

Farken, BMC (left), Braumberger, BMC (right)



Omielczuk, BMC



## Camp children

Children dominated both the official and the unofficial photographs of the Benalla camp. The migrant children were the Australian citizens of the future, and immigration authorities took particular care to demonstrate that they were careful of their welfare and that the children were adapting easily and well to Australian ways. Resident families took photographs to record their growing children. Those who grew up at Benalla have obviously felt the need to keep images of their teenage friends.

## Representations

The official record lends itself to explaining the achievements made in fostering infant

health, child care and assimilation activities for the young. Officers were proud of the crèche, the preschool, the camp school and the youth club which opened in about 1960. In 1953, for example, Christison was pleased to report that the preschool was helping the young to acquire English. He explained how the children at the camp school were involved in town softball, table tennis and soccer competitions. He described at length how the centre had followed the department's directive to celebrate the Coronation and enclosed newspaper clippings to show how the centre's participation was reported.<sup>106</sup>

In 1955, immigration publicists paraded the merits of the new specially equipped preschool kindergarten, which, they said, cared for the children of supporting mothers who worked

at the nearby clothing factory. Six of the 21 photographs they took of neatly dressed 'robust and healthy' children happily playing under the supervision of a trained kindergarten teacher were published in the *Good Neighbour* under the heading 'They are assimilated while

at play' and with a subheading, 'They are off to a good start'.<sup>107</sup> The publicists and the photographers returned in 1956 and again in 1962 to take more photographs of the preschool, this time in colour.<sup>108</sup>

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## THEY ARE ASSIMILATED WHILE AT PLAY

Recent improvements to the building and equipment of the kindergarten conducted by officers of the Department of Immigration at the Migrant Centre, Benalla, Victoria, emphasised the important work which is being done in the interests of migrant children in the Department's various kindergartens in Immigration Centres throughout Australia.

The 38 children attending kindergarten represent Polish, German, Latvian, Yugo-Slav, and Lithuanian nationalities, and their ages vary from three to five years.

**T**HE trained kindergarten teacher, Miss Mary Edmonds, has two assistants to help with the children, who are divided into three groups—those from three to four years attend from 9 a.m. to 11.30 a.m.; those from four to five years are present from 1 p.m. to 3.30 p.m., and others from 7.45 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The children of widows or mothers who are the sole wage earners attend for the full day, but have a luncheon interval during which they join their mothers in the Centre mess. Most of these women are employed in a nearby clothing factory. All other children attend only for a half-day session, either in the morning or afternoon.

When Miss Edmonds takes delivery of her young charges in the morning there has already been planned a comprehensive programme of activities carefully designed to mix education, play, assimilation, and relaxation.

In the two play rooms their interest is held with a variety of specially-selected Pre-School educational play material, such as large building blocks, poster paints with which they produce delightful creations of modern art, clay,

carpentry tools, home corners, fitted out with child-size furniture, dolls prams, miniature brooms, crockery and kitchen utensils, etc.

A piano provides music for rhythmic movement and accompaniment for kindergarten songs, which are sung in English with much enjoyment. Through the medium of stories, songs, nature talks and general conversation, the children readily learn English and so are receiving a valuable preparation for their near future school life. Miss Edmonds states that all are active, alert and well behaved.

The effect of colours upon child psychology has been carefully studied in planning the environment for these young children. The play-rooms are painted cream, with yellow floral curtains at the window. Small tables and chairs in yellow, green and blue, brighten the room, which, in the cold mornings, is warmed by a stove and electric radiators. The children are given warm milk and fruit during the mornings and afternoons.

A stainless steel sink with hot water laid on, is a convenience for washing up the utensils. A small towel is provided for each child and is hung on a hook, identified with the child by a pictorial symbol.

The kindergarten's playground, when fully developed, will contain a large area of lawn and another of tan bark. A sand pit which has been in use for some time is always well patronised. So are the jumping boards, trestles and swings. The small boys do vigorous work with an improved punching ball and oddments of junk material.

With small watering-cans the children enjoy watering the plants and shrubs which they have planted in the small garden adjoining the kindergarten. In fine weather story groups or other indoor activities are held outside in the playground, under one of the trees.

Among the children are: Leo Kevalaitis, 4½, Lithuanian born, whose mother works in the local clothing factory, and who is one of the kindergarten's many

enthusiastic gardeners; Jan Boss, 4½-year-old Estonian, who bangs a carpenter's hammer on to a block of wood, both nearly as big as himself; Trena Smidt, 4½, Polish born, who delights in filling the watering cans for the "gardeners" from the kindergarten tap, and Margarita Nickolsky, Polish, four years, and Celina Swiste, four years, Russian. The last two like a "double dink" on the kindergarten's tricycle, and Margarita has a special interest in the new pot plants which have been placed in the re-built entrance hall to the kindergarten.

The kindergarten children are particularly robust and healthy. Each quarter they are taken into the medical section of the Centre and are checked over by a visiting doctor from Benalla and, where necessary, advice is conveyed to the parents as to treatment.

So in this charming pre-school Centre, as in other Centres throughout Australia our little new Australians are being given every opportunity to develop healthy bodies, sound minds, kindly behaviour and ability to get on well with others—a sound foundation toward easy assimilation.

The young lady on the right is Margarita Nickolsky from Russia. She is inspecting her cold-water 'paints' before launching out on some satisfying job of work.

Young gardeners with their toy watering cans:— Leopold Kevalaitis, four years, Lithuanian; Michaelo Berjanec, four years, Polish, and Bernadetta Scislo, five years, Polish.

Life is fun — inside . . .

. . . or outside . . . when you're at play centre

The top picture shows a general view of the main playing room which is painted cream and has floral curtains at the windows. Bottom picture shows the children using some of the outdoor equipment under supervision.

They are off to a good start







(Good Neighbour August 1955), In the 1950s, preschooling was not at all common in the wider Australian community, so the preschools established in the migrant holding centres showed how the department was taking unusual steps to meet the special needs of people within its care. The article noted that the child care allowed supporting mothers at Benalla to work.



An official publicist's photograph of the pre-school facilities (NAA A12111, 1/1955/22/47, 42 and 53).



Another bold venture in caring for the young at Benalla was the youth club for primary and secondary school-aged children. Its development coincided with a shift in national attention from assimilating the very young during the 1950s to caring for those in primary, and then secondary, schools throughout the 1960s.<sup>109</sup> The department encouraged the Children's Library and Crafts Movement to open Creative Leisure Centres at Bonegilla and Benalla to meet the leisure needs of children aged from about seven to sixteen. As the name implied, the youth club was focused on the arts – creative dance, music and craft activities.<sup>110</sup> A professional artist youth worker, Menno Van der Staal, was employed to coordinate a variety of expressive activities. Under his supervision, boys and girls were involved in cooking, pottery making, woodwork, and visual and performing arts. A youth library was established. The young people used the staff club tennis court for tennis lessons. They went on hikes and camps to Mount Buffalo and nearby farms. They organised concerts, themed on at least one occasion around the contemporary Beatlemania. The puppets they created and

performed with were marionettes, not the simple hand puppets that Carrington used to teach English. They had use of a kiln, a piano and gym mats. Van der Staal organised the children in three age groups – seven to ten, ten to thirteen, and a 'special club' of thirteen- to sixteen-year olds. He seems to have been successful in winning the help of talented residents.

Van der Saal's reports tell of problems he encountered. First, there was the competition television posed for the attention of the young when it arrived in 1964. Second, his brief was to help youth assimilate, and that meant involving their town peers in the club. He was able to get some boys from the gliding club to join in, but not many others. Third, the newsletter, the plays they performed, the very activities, were to come from the children themselves. Like supervisors in other creative leisure centres, he found himself challenged to help the older children to 'develop their fantasy' and take the initiative.<sup>111</sup>

Immigration publicists in 1962 took photographs of the youth club, showing primary-aged children cooking, painting and playing fiddlesticks at the Creative Leisure Centre, (NAA 2/1966/26A/12 and 13).



Sidorczuk, BMC



Bihun, BMC



### Camp kid memory

Those who were children provide more intimate accounts of camp life than what can be gathered from camp officer reports or from their parents or departmental publicists. For them, Benalla was about their own growing up. Their stories are similar to those told from other migrant accommodation centres, except the children at Benalla were more often long-term residents.<sup>112</sup> Many spent their entire childhood, their preschool and school years, living in the camp.

Camp children provided the principal connection between town and camp. At school, on the street, at the river, camp and town mixed face-to-face. But not in house visits. Camp kids remember the strange richness of possessions in town houses, which they accessed rarely, for example on Girl Guide bob-a-job tasks. Town kids remember the sparse furnishing, religious icons and odd smells they encountered on similarly rare visits to a camp hut.

The friendships formed in primary classrooms helped meet the challenges of coming of age (Bragiel, Klopsteins and Kulbars, BMC).



Camp kids remember camp togetherness. 'We stuck together'; 'no one could mess with us'. At high school, camp boys were protective of camp girls when town boys teased them about their accent. They all could run, swim and spit as far as any town competitor. On the sporting field, few town children could keep up with camp kids individually or collectively.

Clannishness was not the preserve of camp kids. One town child remembers riding bikes around the camp and yelling rude names at what they knew as 'the Bolts'. At the same time, play was too important to create permanent divides. Her younger sister remembers 'Bolt' allies in the contest between north and south Meadows Avenue children for the play space created by the end of rail services down the middle of the street.

Togetherness was important. At the camp, street-wise scallywag twelve-year-olds would run together down the lines of huts with brooms beating against the corrugated walls, or they teased a particular night patrolman into chasing them. Girls remember girl gangs and boy gangs going about things differently.

Younger children had a strong sense of camp belonging: growing up, they had 'dozens of mothers' to help tie their shoelaces. One remembers the neighbourliness at base of her never possessing a key to her family's hut.

There were nationality dimensions within that sense of tribe. German children remember the hostility of Polish people. Polish children remember Polish food and customs. In memory they retain the taste of the Polish kabana and smoked herrings from the canteen, the pickled dill from a visiting vendor wheeling a pram through the camp, or the salami and other produce sold by the Polish/Jewish man who regularly visited the camp, and later the town. It was the Polish community who organised a pre-Christmas visit from an angel and a devil to inquire if a child had been good. They may have been acquiring Australia, but they were also retaining something of Poland.

Performing Polish dances, first, as youngsters, then, as teenagers.

(Szymanek, BMC)



(Swist, BMC)



There was also the feeling of not quite being Australian. One remembers the strange fuss being made of the death of King George VI. The film projectionist at the camp theatre interrupted the screening of *Quo Vadis* to make the announcement. Another remembers getting a letter at sixteen advising her she was an alien and that this was an impediment to her being awarded the Queen's Guide Badge for which she had otherwise qualified. One girl remembers the fisticuffs with which they were greeted at Benalla High School by town girls not wanting them in their school.

A sense of belonging did not always come easily. Helga Leunig, now a professional photographer, recalls:

*My parents felt homesick and I really wanted them to love Australia. Some of my pictures have a melancholic atmosphere which partly celebrates and partly still feels alienated from the local culture. My parents really struggled making Australia home, and I don't think I felt like a proper Australian because of that.... Taking photographs [later as an adult] was a way of understanding my environment and being present to its beauty and reality.<sup>113</sup>*

The memory pieces from Benalla, like those from elsewhere, show that sensory memory is strong. It seems to have been perpetually summer in Australian holding centres. There are stories of climbing trees, swimming in a river, catching rabbits or yabbies, and gathering mushrooms. For the young the centres were like a holiday camp. Maria Zintschenko remembers Benalla 'as the biggest playground in the world'. The children 'did not see the shabby huts and sad faces'; they were happy it was summer and school holidays. There was a large number of play friends.

Food plays a big part in children's memory. They mention the special treats of chicken at Christmas and chocolate eggs at Easter, and the more common indulgences of Violet Crumble Bars or Columbines, with the picture of a ballerina on the packet. There was the cold lemonade from the canteen. Memories of celebratory occasions outrun foodstuffs. They remember Empire Day bonfires, Easter gifts, Santa at Christmas, and more common ventures to the weekly films at the cinema centre, or even the town pictures or town swimming pool.



Food memories are associated with becoming acclimatised to Australia. Observant children remember uneaten minted peas remaining on the plates being returned after the first meal in Australia at Seymour Railway Station en route to Benalla.

Among the unpleasant memories were spending time hospitalised in isolation with mumps or measles. There were the alcohol-inspired domestic fights on Friday nights. There was what seemed to the young the cruel culling of the camp's many cats. State high school teachers are remembered as not being encouraging. Girls remember the lack of privacy in the communal washrooms for teenage experiments with waxing or hair colour. Others recall the wire-based stretcher beds, the thin mattresses, the lumpy pillows and even bed-bug fumigations.

Family hurts and challenges have been passed down across the family dining table. One woman remembers her father's qualifications not being recognised in Australia, so he was employed and paid at Renold's Chains as a labourer, although he did skilled work. Another recalls her parents explaining that their sparse wedding reception involved canned pineapple pieces to accompany the champagne. Some family memories were more sensed than stated.

One former resident alludes to the stigma his mother felt at being a single mother. Another recalls that her separated mother brought up three children alone: she 'struggled with life'. One remembers how her mother moved to Benalla so that she could work, rather than have her children placed in an orphanage. Nearly all the memoirists show affection, gratitude, respect for the way their parents endured difficult times on their behalf.

Finally, in the children's memory pieces gathered so far, come their recollections of outgrowing the camp and their need, at the end of secondary schooling, to get away to Melbourne. With their departure, that of their families and the closing of the camp, it is principally via photographs that they retain memories of growing up and coming of age which are at the base of their connection with the place. Their stories move beyond personal nostalgia when set together to form part of a wider picture about feeling both migrant and Australian in a migrant country.

## 5 PLACE: PUBLIC REMEMBERING OF THE BENALLA MIGRANT CAMP PLACE

There have been various explanations of how and why some places are recognised and valued as heritage. The heritage-making processes scholars explore help in understanding the current phase of the public remembering of Benalla Migrant Camp.<sup>114</sup> In many ways the most helpful work has been undertaken by American scholars Tim Cresswell and Gareth Hoskins who have traced the campaign to win heritage recognition for a similarly invisible place which challenged patriotic versions of their nation's immigration past. Their work is particularly helpful in the way it points to the importance of advocacy and what I label as community readiness for the story being told.<sup>115</sup>

War memorialisation has always loomed large in Australia, no more so than in country towns. It is not surprising, therefore, that public memory has focused on the original but comparatively short-term wartime uses of the Benalla aerodrome as a pilot training facility, rather than on its subsequent postwar use as a migrant camp.

A landing ground built by the Port Melbourne Flying Club in 1928 had been resumed and used between 1941 and 1946 to give RAAF recruits elementary flying instruction. Altogether nearly 3 000 pilots learned to fly at Benalla as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. At any one time there would be about 60 trainees undertaking an eight-week course that involved them in about 75 hours of flying time, usually in Tiger Moth

planes. Appropriate accommodation was built for the planes, trainees and instructors.

The air training school closed at the end of the war and the accommodation was used as the migrant camp until 1967. Since then the airfields have continued to be used for civil aviation purposes, principally for recreational gliding and ballooning. In spite of the politicians' promises, the Army used the hut accommodation for only about twelve months to run school cadet training camps. Benalla Council acquired ownership and the huts became the Benalla Recreation and Accommodation Centre. Council gave short-term leases or permissive occupancy of designated buildings to the Gliding Club of Victoria and to community groups such as the Benalla Light Opera Company and a scout group. Most of the huts were demolished or sold and removed to make way for the steady expansion of the aged care facility which had first acquired part of the site in 1966.

Public memory of the place stirred in the 1990s. A municipal heritage study in 1992 suggested that the aerodrome's wartime connections might make it an item of state heritage significance, but recommended, first, a comparative study of other elementary training schools. Subsequently, the other pilot training school in Victoria at Ballarat was deemed to be significant to the state, for it had retained more fabric and was consequently a better representation of the

The look of the entry changed from 1966, through the 1990s and 2000s to 2015.



wartime training activity. Nevertheless, the Benalla aerodrome precinct was acknowledged as an item of local, if not state, significance. The local community mustered support to establish a civic war memorial, eventually unveiling a war memorial airport entrance in 1995.

In preparing a contextual history of Benalla for the heritage study, Judith Bassett referred to the migrant centre's beginning and end, and the estimate of possibly 60 000 people passing through it between 1949 and 1967, but did not, given her brief, trace or allude to its economic or social impact. The authors of the heritage study concluded that the importance of the migrant centre was secondary to the aerodrome precinct's wartime connections.<sup>116</sup>

In 1996 and 1997 a proposal to establish a museum of former military armoured vehicles and aircraft was considered. The *Benalla Ensign* welcomed the proposed revitalisation of the 'historic' airfield and its huts.<sup>117</sup> But the revitalisation carried a threat of destruction, even though council had stipulated that the developer renovate existing building stock. The danger of demolition was brought to the attention of the National Trust of Victoria. It carried out a heritage assessment of the former pilot training school and in 1997 classified it as an item of state significance.

For the National Trust the RAAF base was a war heritage site. Its listing explained the function of the pilot training school. Almost as an afterthought the National Trust acknowledged the existence of the former migrant camp, as if to strengthen its argument for significance: 'The Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre is of social importance for its part in housing migrant families, including many from the Baltic States, some of whom settled in the Benalla district.'<sup>118</sup> The Balt Camp, which Benalla had accepted, was of social importance because of its connection with those who adopted Benalla as their home.

Former resident memory of the place remained private, though there were early signs of resident public memory taking root. On the Australia

Day celebrations of the 1988 bicentenary, two former teachers supplied the *Benalla Ensign* with a photograph and story which was to prompt pupil recall of the Benalla Aerodrome School no. 4651 ahead of a reunion celebration held in October. When Lois Carrington visited the site during the course of writing her book in the mid-1990s, she encountered other former resident visitors on a similar memory mission.<sup>119</sup> In making its 1997 assessment, the National Trust was aware of local migrant interest.

The first former resident to give public voice to the former camp's importance to the migrants was Ziggy Kulbars, who spoke in support of the National Trust listing. Kulbars was disgusted with the way the place had not been maintained. He said it had once been 'a showpiece' with painted buildings, cared-for roads and well-tended gardens and lawns. The residents had taken pride in the huts, both inside and out. He urged council to see it did not deteriorate further, as the huts might help meet the needs of the homeless. Further, the place needed to be respected for what it once was: 'unfortunately a lot of the younger generation don't know what it is all about'.<sup>120</sup>

Kulbars' championship was not surprising in that the migrant camp had been an important part of his family's life. The Kulbars had been among the first contingents to arrive, and his father was allocated work as a centre patrolman. On turning sixteen soon after arrival, Ziggy, too, got work on the centre staff. He stayed in the camp from 1949 to 1955. For him, like others who worked there, the Benalla camp was not a mere footfall; it was a landfall. Many centre workers stayed for years. Some found their on-the-job training helped them to get jobs elsewhere. Most found the compulsory English lessons for staff helped them to master their new tongue. Not unexpectedly, former staff and their children have retained a strong personal connection with the camp and are among the first to claim it as a memory place. They usually view it fondly. So, for example, Annie, a daughter of Jan Michel, a long-term cook at the camp, tells how the families of loyal employees remain sure that the camp filled a worthwhile purpose:



A resident's proud photograph of a colourful and well-tended garden set off with a bird cage, a white-stoned edge and white fence matches the Christmas cards produced by centre officials. (Omielczuk BMC).

*I felt it was good to have this centre for the migrants, as they were able to support one another, have a sense of belonging and adjust to a new country life... [It was] a stepping stone to a new future. It must have been hard for them – especially those with young families.*

Nevertheless, Benalla continued to ignore memory of the former migrant camp. Old huts were of little interest to locals or visitors. Instead, that which might be branded 'Benalla heritage' centred on the development of the town and celebrated the local connections of two national figures, Ned Kelly and Weary Dunlop.<sup>121</sup> The migrant story was not interwoven with that of the town. It did not sit high in local memory. If anything, the former migrant camp was migrant business.

## Reawakening place memory

Two recent developments have reawakened public memory of the migrant camp: first, the compilation of an exhibition by Sabine Smyth; and, second, the proposed redevelopment of the airport site.

### Personal advocacy

Sabine (Burczik) Smyth, a Benalla resident, began the self-imposed task of gathering memorabilia related to the migrant centre in

2012. An immigrant herself, she had arrived in Benalla in 1984 as a nineteen-year-old from Germany. She was born of a German mother, whose family was badly damaged during the war, and a father, who was displaced from Silesia when it was returned from Germany to communist Poland at the end of the war. Her life story had echoes with those of Benalla's postwar migrant settlers.

Smyth took an immediate interest in the former camp where she and Mike, her long-term Benalla-resident husband, lived. She spoke with ex-residents who put her in touch with a widening circle of others. With the help of the Benalla Family History Research group, she framed her investigation as a quest for families and built up a database of about 40 family connections. She assiduously collected names, then memories, memorabilia and photographs. She attracted about twenty volunteer helpers, incorporated a Benalla Migrant Camp Incorporated organisation and established a blog.<sup>122</sup>

Smyth won council permission to organise a photographic exhibition in hut 11, one of the disused buildings. The exhibition was launched with a 'Kaffee und Kuchen' afternoon tea on Australia Day 2013 in celebration of the national theme 'We are One'. The exhibition included clothing, kitchen utensils, suitcases, bedding, documents, written stories and about half of the 350 photographs she had collected from 22 families. Among the documents were





## Community readiness

Much of Smyth's work preceded a mid-2014 pre-election announcement by the Victorian Government that it would fund the development of a master plan for the Benalla airport ahead of the World Gliding Championship in 2017.

Smyth argued, on behalf of Benalla Migrant Inc, for recognition and conservation of the migrant camp remnants in the airport precinct. The draft report indicates she was successful in convincing the planners that some account should be taken of the former camp presence. Indeed, in explaining the current community arts functions of the site, the planners proclaimed, at Smyth's prompting, that the former migrant centre was of 'cultural heritage significance to the city'. It 'demonstrates a number of values that were formative for the city both physically and culturally'. Further, the story of the centre complements the story of postwar immigration told at Bonegilla, which is on both the state and national heritage lists. As Kemp had shown, Benalla was 'potentially of cultural heritage significance to the State of Victoria'. Nevertheless, those preparing the master plan felt they had to balance the needs of gliding enthusiasts, belly dancers, potters and thespians, and, at the same time, not lose sight of developing a tourist destination based principally on the gliding centre and the Benalla Aviation Museum.<sup>125</sup>

With additional state government funding for regional planning, a Benalla Business and Tourism Growth Strategy has brought together the draft airport master plan with several other plans.<sup>126</sup> In looking to create a tourism brand for Benalla, it reviewed the local heritage assets, noting not only the local costume and pioneer museum and the aviation museum, but also the migrant camp photographic exhibition.

Smyth has raised local awareness of the migrant camp remnants and lobbied successfully to win recognition of the camp as potentially a local asset that would play a part in winning outsider interest in Benalla. For her the test of success still depends on the Council providing a permanent home for the exhibition in that part of the former camp that is still extant.

## Expectations of the public memory place

### The nation

Nations have responded differently to heritage items that challenge promotional narratives of nation. Cresswell and Hoskins suggested that it was in the pursuit of national inclusiveness that the United States decided to include the challenging stories told from the Angel Island migration station as a recognised part of its national heritage. As Australia moves to become a Big Australia, there is in popular and scholarly circles an increasing tendency to revisit its complicated immigration history. Some of the challenging displays at Melbourne's Immigration Museum illustrate this point. The National Archives of Australia has mounted two major exhibitions based on its collection of publicity photographs related to immigration. It reports wide public interest, and its research officers field each month about 250 queries about immigration records.

There seems to be a place for the Benalla Migrant Camp in formulating the idea of Australia as a migrant nation with multiple histories of arrival, contact and settlement in accord with the new national interest. Victoria has begun to embrace Benalla as part of that state's geography of postwar immigration, especially as it deals with the reception and settlement of women and children.

Stories will differ. It should be noted that difficult heritage places in Australia almost invariably have redemptive features, and the positives of the postwar reception and early settlement arrangements at Benalla deserve attention. So, for example, Ann Mari Jordens baulks at the lack of regard given to the attempts by the Department of Immigration to generate public acceptance of the immigration program. She gives close attention to the practical strategies devised by departmental personnel to facilitate the economic and social absorption of non-English speaking arrivals. She proclaims 'bureaucratically led reform',<sup>127</sup> which was demonstrated in the child care and youth recreation facilities provided at Benalla. So, too, Benalla centre officers described the camp as having 'peculiar difficulties', but still insist it provided security, safety, protection. The camp functioned longer than any other holding centre because officials recognised that it fulfilled a humanitarian purpose. Present-day critics might rail against the paucity of welfare support services and smugly insist that 'we do things differently now'. Contemporary officials, however, were more likely to see

Benalla as an illustration of how some of the socially handicapped and vulnerable were gentled into postwar Australia.

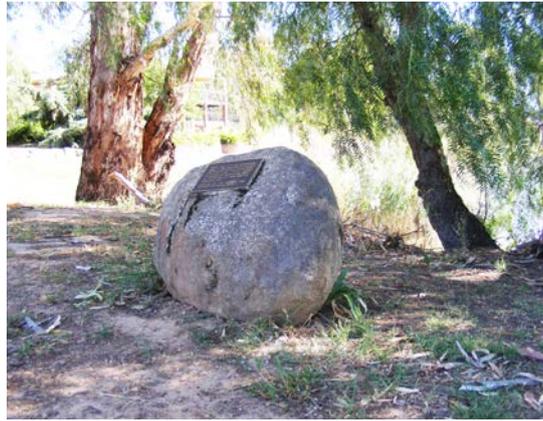
Although many people will focus on its redemptive features, some will, I suggest, follow Sara Wills who hopes that places like Benalla and Bonegilla give rise to a 'productive sadness', which leads to more welcoming national and local communities.<sup>128</sup> Since Wills wrote and since I first prepared this history in 2015 several historians based in South Australia have produced accounts of migrant accommodation centres which advance and contextualise understandings of Benalla. They published a special issue of the academic journal *The History of the Family* on the theme of what they labelled 'constrained compassion'. They argued that many unsupported mothers made the choice to continue living in what social workers called a 'sad and tragic' holiday centres like that at Benalla where they could build stable and protective home lives.<sup>129</sup> My contribution to the special issue, 'Remembering Benalla Migrant Camp', emphasised the way contemporary officials were likely to see Benalla as an illustration of how some of the socially handicapped and vulnerable were gentled, even if imperfectly, into post-war Australia.<sup>130</sup> Elsewhere Alexandra Dellios has given close attention to the impact of the policy of separation, which gave rise to Benalle Migrant Camp.<sup>131</sup> Jayne Persain has carefully unravelled the 'who, why, where, when' of displaced persons, who persisted so long at Benalla.<sup>132</sup> For me the overarching questions for a Benalla migrant camp visitor to ponder will remain confronting. How did the national and the local community go about taking in strangers? How do they go about it now?

## The town

At a local level, too, the stories will differ. Town readiness for a troubling story has yet to be tested. Locals may feel uncomfortable with what may be interpreted as local indifference towards postwar newcomers. Some will, instead, emphasise the roles played by the charitable few, like, for example, Frank Harrison, who not only made welcoming speeches as mayor, but also employed newcomers in his hardware store.

There are several reasons for having confidence that the local stories will continue to be explored, however oriented.

First, Benalla Historical Society has shown an interest in how Benalla went about taking in strangers by compiling a collection of



newspaper clippings related to the migrant camp. That collection will hopefully inspire more work on matters such as how postwar migration affected the town. Much more needs to be done on how newcomers and the longer-settled rubbed – and continue to rub – shoulders with each other every day.<sup>133</sup> Such interest in a local immigration past fits comfortably with government-funded initiatives to localise heritage.

Second, the society has already indicated its interest in pursuing the silenced stories of how Australia has been peopled. It has placed a plaque on a large boulder set beside the lake to mark the Faithfull Massacre. Near there, on the banks of the Broken River, in 1838, a group of Indigenous warriors from the Taungurong and Waveroo peoples attacked a party of overlanders, killing eight of them. To ease the subsequent panic and to contain reprisals, Governor Gipps ordered police huts to be built and town settlements formed at the Murrumbidgee, Murray, King, Ovens, Broken and Goulburn river crossings. Gipps, in effect, founded several new river crossing towns, including Benalla, as part of a military strategy to make safe the route to Port Phillip. The military-guarded crossings would help secure the land from the Indigenous people and assist in apprehending runaway convicts. The attack at what is now Benalla and its consequences are part of the creation stories of those towns and of a more general story of how this part of inland Australia was peopled.<sup>134</sup> There is no postcard or brochure that elaborates on the Faithfull Massacre plaque. The marker is not referred to in the town's tourism literature. Yet, like the migrant camp, it indicates a powerful story of the peopling of Australia set in, connected with and emanating from Benalla.

Third, the Council of the Rural City of Benalla has indicated its approval of and support for the camp exhibition by bestowing an award on the opening event and on its originator. It seems to be prepared to make a place for the exhibition in the redeveloped airport.

That may be because it sees the camp as a possible tourism commodity: the place may be marketable if out-of-town visitors are attracted to view a place where immigration actually occurred. More to the point, the council appears to be supportive of its arts and cultural sector which has to be involved in fostering the remembering of the camp.

The camp is most likely to be adopted as a local 'field of care' if it serves present-day needs and is future-focused. That involves townspeople exploring and expounding on their past, present and future part in what has been called 'Australia's Immigration Revolution'.<sup>135</sup> Locals are beginning to reckon with the former migrant camp as part of Benalla's social and cultural development when they choose to stage events related to it on Australia Day. Plainly, Benalla is firmly planted within a migrant nation. Recognition and care of the camp both declare and explain Benalla's Australianness.

### Former residents

As Sabine Smyth realised, the memories, photographs and memorabilia of the former residents are vital to creating and sustaining a public memory place. The exhibition will encourage families to share further stories and to help craft the way in which the stories are presented.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing the representation of Benalla is the absence of literary or artistic works related to the camp, either while it was operating or after it closed. Yet we know that visitors respond to creative literary and visual representations, especially if they convey emotion as well as understanding. Indeed, scholars suggest that people go to heritage places to feel.<sup>136</sup> Bonegilla had artists such as Danko Martek, Paul Chimin and Nico van Dalen, whose visual records capture something of the mood and character of the place. West Sale had the artist Gunnar Neeme; Parkes had the poet Peter Skrzynecki; Greta had the filmmaker Sophie Turkiewicz. Public artists have crafted representative pieces at Bonegilla, in Wodonga and in Uranquinty. Other holding centres have bold attention-gathering markers.

In 2015 I was able to locate an unpublished story by Maria Zintschenko and photographs taken by Helga Leunig.<sup>137</sup> At that time it seemed that only those works and the Benalla Migrant Camp Photographic Exhibition, with its collages of contemporary photographs, came close to an imaginative presentation. Wordsmiths, image makers, sculptors,

playwrights and filmmakers had yet to give Benalla Migrant Camp their creative attention.

Since 2015, Helga Leunig has continued her moving photographic explorations of the post-war immigration experience.<sup>138</sup> Helen Topor, a Benalla Migrant Camp kid, has published a compendium of traditional children's games 'inspired by play at the Benalla Migrant Camp'. The stories of that play, used incidentally throughout the text, are illustrations of the inventiveness of the young in devising games with a bare minimum of resources. They also give insights into camp life: there is a keen sense of the local geography especially of a variety of swimming places; the stories of spying on courting couples underscore the intimacy of communal living; the Polish names given Easter activities and food delights help make memory of a distinctive form of play. Above all else, there is a sense of protective togetherness. Camp life was friend-surrounded. The camp provided a rich, indeed, loving form of home life.<sup>139</sup> Such works help us understand how many children remember their experiences of migrating to and settling in Australia. I expect similar memory work to appear, and I still hope for a public art piece to commemorate the migrant camp residents as a companion piece to the war memorial entrance gateway.

It seemed when this book was first prepared in 2015 that Benalla Migrant Camp had had a difficult heritage: difficult to hear with equanimity; difficult to tell, given the complexities of locating and using resident and local testimony; and difficult, at that stage, to place firmly in the townscape with any confidence. Now I am more confident that the stories the Benalla children tell will break the silence that had descended on the 'sad and tragic' camp and complicate representations of the place with hope and love. They add exuberant stabs of colour to an otherwise dark and grim picture of Benalla Migrant Camp.

## The struggle to win heritage listing

On 7 April 2015 Sabine Smyth nominated the place for inclusion in the State Heritage Register. On 10 July 2016 Heritage Victoria recommended that the Heritage Council of Victoria (an independent statutory body responsible direct to Government reject Smyth's recommendation.<sup>140</sup>

On 10 and 11 February 2016 about 100 people, principally former Benalla Migrant Camp children together with their families, friends and supporters, attended a two-day heritage registration hearing in Benalla to argue for the place to be included in the state Heritage Register. Some had come from other states. Several others posted video messages, one from overseas had organised and lodged a petition signed by a 1000 people, which called for the recognition of the camp's historical and social significance.<sup>141</sup>



100 people, join together to support the push for Benalla Migrant Camp to be placed on the State Heritage Register.

The review panel at the hearing rejected the advice of Heritage Victoria and recommended that the place be listed as the Former Benalla Migrant Camp. Its record of the hearing proceedings observed, among other things, that the former camp had a particularly strong association with the former residents and their descendants, the strength of this association was particularly demonstrated by way of numerous moving personal stories, both written and oral, of living and growing up at the Benalla Migrant Camp. Associations with the place contribute to the identity of many people who have personal family connections to the place. The review panel acknowledged that draft chapters from this history informed the heritage assessment process.

On 12 May 2016 the Heritage Council of Victoria determined to include the Former Benalla Migrant Camp in the State Heritage Register:

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of historical significance for its association with post-World War II non-British migration. It is

an example of one of only a small number of surviving centres which had been part of a network of camps that were established and used to accommodate migrants throughout Victoria and Australia. Benalla was Victoria's longest-lasting holding centre and played a distinctive role in settling vulnerable groups of non-British migrants into Australia in the post-war years.

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is rare as one of only a small number of examples of a post-World War II holding centre for non-British migrants.

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of social significance for its connection with former residents and their families and for its ability to interpret the experiences of post-World War II non-British migrants to the broader Victorian community.



Twelve people made oral submissions in support of the listing at the Registration Hearing (L to R): Veronica Schilling, Wendy Gray (nee Mackowski), Sabine Smyth, Maria Fruhwirth (nee Holodniak), Bruce Pennay, Rozalie Dean (nee Fergin), Jim (Elmars) Klopsteins, Helen Topor, Krystyna Topor and Judith Fleming. Two other supportive presenters Deb Kemp and Helga Leunig are not pictured.

Benalla Rural Council commissioned a Conservation Management Plan which would, when accepted, ensure that the integrity of the site was respected and would form the basis for planning interpretation and/or tourism activities.

# ENDNOTES

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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- <sup>2</sup> *Benalla City Ensign* 1 November 1988.
- <sup>3</sup> Among the histories of the reception centres and holding centres are: J Hayes, *Australia – a New Country, a New Life*, Cowra and District Historical Society and Museum Inc., Cowra, 2007; C Keating, *A History of the Army Camp and Migrant Camp at Greta, NSW*, Uri Windt, 1997; S Morris, *Uranquinty Remembers*, Uranquinty Progress Association, Wagga Wagga, 2001; C Murphy, *Boat Load of Memories*, United Trades and Labour Council, Adelaide, 1994; C Panich, *Sanctuary? Remembering Post-war Immigration*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988; N Peters, *Milk and Honey – but no Gold*, University of Western Australia, Melbourne, 2001; G Sluga, *Bonegilla, a Place of No Hope*, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1988; A Synan, *We Came with Nothing: Story of the West Sale Holding Centre*, Lookups Research, Sale, 2002; and NSW Migration Heritage Centre, *Fields of Memory [Scheville]*, [www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/fieldsofmemories/](http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/fieldsofmemories/).
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- <sup>5</sup> For example, Jayne Persian, 'Displaced Persons (1947–1952): Representations, Memory and Commemoration', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Sydney, 2011, pp. 289–398.
- <sup>6</sup> Sara Wills, 'Between the Hostel and the Detention Centre', in William Logan and Keir Reeves (eds), *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with Difficult Heritage*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2009, pp. 263–280.
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- <sup>8</sup> Jock Collins, 'Multiculturalism and Immigrant Integration in Australia', *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2013, pp. 133–149.
- <sup>9</sup> Logan and Reeves, *Places of Pain and Shame*, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Bunty King, quoted in Sluga, *Bonegilla: A Place of No Hope*, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>11</sup> Lois Carrington, *A Real Situation*, Tara, Canberra, 1997, pp. 120–123.
- <sup>12</sup> G Hoskins, 'A Place to Remember: Scaling the Walls of Angel Island Immigration Station', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 30, 2004, pp. 685–700; T Cresswell and G Hoskins, 'Place, Persistence and Practice', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 98, no. 2, 2008, pp. 392–413.

## 2 NATION

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- <sup>14</sup> Snedden to Cox 26 April 1968, NAA MP1404/1, 1967/4009; Lynch Ministerial Statement, 12 January 1970, NAA A2567, 1970/86B.
- <sup>15</sup> Morris, *Uranquinty Remembers*, op. cit., p. 42; Synan, *We Came with Nothing*, op. cit., p. 53.
- <sup>16</sup> 'All new citizens and all under ten', *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill) 16 March 1952, p. 7.
- <sup>17</sup> Karen Agutter, 'Displaced Persons' in M Kleinig & E Richards, *On the Wing: Mobility before and after emigration to Australia*, Anchor, Spit Junction, 2013, p.141 and p.147.
- <sup>18</sup> Maria Pastuszyn and Hanna Stipic, in Synan, *We Came with Nothing*, op. cit., p.165 and p.179.
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- <sup>21</sup> For example, 'DP Employment Policy Part 3', NAA A445, 1979/9/5; 'Centre Instructions', A446, 1960/65857.
- <sup>22</sup> Questions asked in the House of Representatives, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* 23 February 1950, p. 46; 9 March 1950, pp. 654–656; 28 September 1950, p. 72; 18 October 1950, pp. 1015–1016.
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- <sup>25</sup> Work destinations derived from individual Bonegilla cards, NAA A2571.
- <sup>26</sup> Report on building improvements, 7 August 1958, NAA A12799, 8.
- <sup>27</sup> Report to Secretary from TT McElroy, Acting Migrant Accommodation Controller, 2 April 1959, A446, 1967/71173.
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- <sup>29</sup> M King, 'Report on Widows and Unmarried Mothers at Benalla', October–November 1951, 'Social Welfare', NAA A445, 276/2/10.
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- <sup>32</sup> Ann Mari Jordens, 'Migrant Supporting Mothers, 1948–54', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 37, 1993, pp. 47–57.
- <sup>33</sup> See 'Social Welfare Problem Cases Queensland', NAA J25, 1966/2798.
- <sup>34</sup> V Murphy, 'Report on Single Women in the Benalla Migrant Centre, IAC committee on hostels and centres part 1', NAA A446/1962/6541.
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- <sup>59</sup> *BE* 1 October 1948.
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- <sup>62</sup> *BE* 10 June 1949; *Benalla Standard (BS)* 23 June 1949
- <sup>63</sup> *BS* 27 June 1949.
- <sup>64</sup> *BE* 1 July 1949; *BS* 23 and 27 June 1949.
- <sup>65</sup> *BS* 18 August 1949.
- <sup>66</sup> *BE* 26 September 1949.
- <sup>67</sup> *BS* 10 November 1949.
- <sup>68</sup> *BE* 9 December 1949, 5 March 1951.
- <sup>69</sup> *BS* 3 November 1949.
- <sup>70</sup> *BS* 28 September 1950.
- <sup>71</sup> *Border Morning Mail* 29 July 1950; *BE* 24 August 1950.
- <sup>72</sup> *BE* 27 March 1952.
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- <sup>75</sup> *BE* 11 June and 2 July 1953.
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- <sup>89</sup> Minutes, Good Neighbour Council, 17 August 1967, NAA M691, BENALLA.
- <sup>90</sup> *BS* 7 June 1965.
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- <sup>92</sup> *Border Morning Mail* 10 January 1968.
- <sup>93</sup> Undated newspaper clipping about 1970.

<sup>94</sup> Rzezniczek to Secretary Good Neighbour Council, Victoria, 11 May 1972, NAA M691, BENALLA.

#### 4 CAMP RESIDENTS

<sup>95</sup> Much of this chapter draws on email correspondence with Maria Zintshenko. I am grateful to her and to the other people who have lodged memory pieces. To avoid embarrassment, I have tried to keep individual contributions anonymous. Sabine Smyth holds the originals. The photographs used in this chapter are from the Benalla Migrant Camp Photographic Exhibition collection or the National Archives of Australia.

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<sup>100</sup> Carrington, *A Real Situation*, op. cit., pp. 111–127.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>103</sup> 'Puppets used as aids in learning English', *Good Neighbour* 1 December 1951.

<sup>104</sup> 'Education of mothers at holding centres', NAA A437, 1949/6/37; Carrington, *A Real Situation*, op. cit., pp. 158–161.

<sup>105</sup> Ferguson reports, 16 and 29 October 1956, IAC Committee part 1 and part 2, NAA A446 1962/65241 and 65242.

<sup>106</sup> Directors reports, NAA A445, 112/1/10.

<sup>107</sup> *Good Neighbour* August 1955, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> NAA A12111, 1/1955/22/32–53; 2/1956/22A/1–8; 2/1962/22A/8–13.

<sup>109</sup> Commonwealth Immigration and Advisory Council, 'First report on the progress and assimilation of migrant children in Australia', Canberra, 1960. IAC, 'Report on migrant youth in the Australian community', Canberra, 1971.

<sup>110</sup> A Thomas, 'New Line in Youth Clubs', *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 November 1960, A2567,1867/137C.

<sup>111</sup> 'Bonegilla Youth Club', NAA A2567, 1964/69A; Youth activities reports, NAA A446, 1964/45683.

<sup>112</sup> B Pennay, 'The Young at Bonegilla', Parklands Albury-Wodonga, Albury, 2010.

#### 5 PLACE

<sup>113</sup> H Leunig, *Mother Country: Reflections on Australian Rural Life*, Australian Photographic Gallery, 2015, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> Specifically, A Hodges and S Watson, 'Community-based Heritage Management', *International Journal of Heritage Studies (IJHS)*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2010, pp. 231–243. More generally, E Stewart and V Kirby, 'Interpretive Evaluation' *IJHS*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 30–44; and E Wateron and S Watson (eds), *Heritage and Community Engagement*, Routledge, London, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> Hoskins, 'A Place to Remember', op. cit; Cresswell and Hoskins, 'Place, Persistence and Practice', op. cit.

<sup>116</sup> Trevor Budge & Associates, *City of Benalla Conservation Study*, 1992, vol. 2.

<sup>117</sup> *BE* 15 January 1997.

<sup>118</sup> National Trust: <http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/67499>. It was listed on the Victorian Heritage Database in 2005 as an item of war heritage: [http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/vhd/heritagevic/?timeout=yes#detail\\_places;125972](http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/vhd/heritagevic/?timeout=yes#detail_places;125972).

<sup>119</sup> Carrington, *A Real Situation*, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>120</sup> *BE* 14 June 1997.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, the list of things to see in Benalla compiled for the *Sydney Morning Herald*: [www.smh.com.au/news/Victoria/Benalla/2005/02/17/1108500206241.html](http://www.smh.com.au/news/Victoria/Benalla/2005/02/17/1108500206241.html).

- <sup>122</sup> <http://benallamigrantcampexhibition.blogspot.com.au/>.
- <sup>123</sup> [www.benalla.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page\\_Id=1208&p=1](http://www.benalla.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page_Id=1208&p=1).
- <sup>124</sup> D Kemp, *Heritage Assessment: The former Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre*, Report to the Council of Rural City of Benalla, Benalla, 2014.
- <sup>125</sup> [www.benalla.vic.gov.au](http://www.benalla.vic.gov.au). At the time of writing, only the draft of the plan was online.
- <sup>126</sup> [www.benalla.vic.gov.au/Directory/S2\\_Item.asp?Mkey=1840&S3Key=223](http://www.benalla.vic.gov.au/Directory/S2_Item.asp?Mkey=1840&S3Key=223).
- <sup>127</sup> A-M Jordens, *Redefining Australians*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, pp. 77, 43–59; Jordens, *Alien to Citizen*, op. cit., 60–72.
- <sup>128</sup> Wills, 'Between the Hostel and the Detention Centre', op. cit.
- <sup>129</sup> See articles by Karen Agutter on Google Scholar and *The History of the Family*, 2017, particularly the article by Catherine Kevin and Karen Agutter 'The "unwanted" and "non-compliant": "unsupported mothers" as "failures" and agents in Australia's Migrant Holding Centres'.
- <sup>130</sup> See articles by Karen Agutter on Google Scholar and *The History of the Family*, 2017, particularly the article by Catherine Kevin and Karen Agutter 'The "unwanted" and "non-compliant": "unsupported mothers" as "failures" and agents in Australia's Migrant Holding Centres'.
- <sup>131</sup> *Histories of Controversy: Bonegilla Migrant Centre*, MUP Academic, Melbourne, 2017, pp. 23-63.
- <sup>132</sup> *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2017.
- <sup>133</sup> Witcomb, 'Migration, Social Cohesion and Cultural Diversity', op. cit.
- <sup>134</sup> J Bassett, 'The Faithful Massacre at the Broken River, 1838', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 24, 1989, pp. 18–34.
- <sup>135</sup> A Markus, J Jupp and P MacDonald, *Australia's Immigration Revolution*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2009.
- <sup>136</sup> L Smith, 'Affect and Registers of Engagement', in L Smith (ed.), *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 260–303.
- <sup>137</sup> Leunig, *Mother Country*, op. cit., pp.12, 108, 109.
- <sup>138</sup> Helga Leunig exhibited contemporary portraits of former residents at a special display in the former Latoof and Callil knitting factory in Benalla. One image from *Mother Country* was a finalist in the prestigious William and Winifred Bowness Photographic prize 2016. An identity picture of a photograph of a child is similarly a finalist in this year's William and Winifred Bowness prize. Other identity card images were exhibited at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka as part of 'Beyond Borders' exhibition.
- <sup>139</sup> *Outdoor Games for Today's Kids*, Bytes 'n Colours, Canberra, 2017.
- <sup>140</sup> Heritage Victoria's response to the nomination and its 2015 assessment of significances are on the Heritage Victoria website [www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/word\\_doc/0016/280033/NOT-RECBENALLA-Part-1-THE-REPORT.docx](http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/word_doc/0016/280033/NOT-RECBENALLA-Part-1-THE-REPORT.docx).
- <sup>141</sup> Record of the Registration Hearing and the Heritage Council determination are on the Heritage Council website <http://heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/hearingappeals/registration-hearings/recentregistration-decisions/>
- And also at the Australian Legal Information Institute website <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VHerCI/2016/3.tml?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=Former%20Benalla%20Migrant%20Camp>

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Sources are detailed in the notes, but I want to make special mention of my indebtedness in several places. William Logan and Keir Reeves, and more particularly Sara Wills, helped me to understand how heritage practitioners deal with difficult heritage. Cresswell, Hoskins, Hodges and Watson guided my pondering on how heritage is made. Ann-Mari Jordens helped me make sense of official thinking about holding centres and post-war immigration more generally. Jayne Persian, John Petersen and Andrea Witcomb gave me the confidence to pursue local and personal stories as the principal driving forces behind memorialisation. The public service accountants and departmental officers who examined Benalla's books in 1967 helped me understand why it stayed open so long and why it eventually closed. Judith Bassett's history for the Benalla heritage study in 1992 helped me understand the local context. The observations of the sharp-eyed Bunty King and Lois Carrington helped me appreciate the feel of the place while it was operational. The contemporary compilers and the present-day conservers of the Bonegilla Cards at the National Australian Archives have developed and looked after a resource that yielded information about those transferred to Benalla. I am constrained by respect for privacy not to name those pictured or those who supplied memory pieces, as I do not have their written permission to do so.

I am very conscious that much more work is needed, but I hope this study did inform two allied projects, the making of the exhibition and securing a heritage place base for it. Both are still works-in-progress.

I should alert the reader that I slip between the use of terms 'centre' and 'camp', according to context. For immigration officials Benalla was always a centre. For townspeople and residents, it was a camp.

Bruce Pennay, Charles Sturt University

## **Contributing families:**

Arndt; Bialy; Bihun; Bitneris; Braumberger; Brunner; Bruns; Chlebnikowski; Farken; Fergin; Fita; Gebauer; Golonski; Grubissa; Gruzewski; Holodniak; Hummel; Janas; Kaminski; Klopsteins; Kolodziejczyk; Kropkowski; Kulbars; Lemega; Michel; Mohren; Niedzwiedski; Nikolski; Omielczuk; Pandik-Wysocki; Prentki; Radzic; Salwerowicz; Savickas; Schaller; Sidorczyk; Sleinis; Slusarczyk; Swist; Szymanek; Taurins; Tillmanns; Topor; Wojcikowska; Zajac; Zintschenko.

Without their stories, photos and memorabilia there would be no exhibition and no book.