



**ETHNIC GROUPS IN
CANBERRA'S HISTORY:
TALK GIVEN AT ETHNIC COMMUNITIES
COUNCIL "HERITAGE WEEK" FORUM,
Canberra, 29 April 1993**

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Several years ago, when I was helping the Italo-Australian Club produce a commemorative book on the Italians in Canberra, I decided to look through the existing books on Canberra for any references to Italians. I already knew, from oral traditions and from second and third generation Italo-Canberrans that the first Italians to live and work - and indeed to play bocci - here went back to the late 1920s. However, I searched in vain because the main reference works on Canberra, at that time, either emphasized Canberra's function as a centre for federal parliament or emphasized the natural environmental features of the region to the exclusion of the everyday people who lived and worked here.

As far as migrants were concerned, it is difficult indeed to find any reference to Canberrans originating from places beyond New South Wales, Victoria and the other states in the books about Canberra's history. The Canberrans whose backgrounds were not Anglo-Saxon or Celtic were excluded from the major publications.

With the approach of the Bicentenary in 1988, celebrating 200 years of European settlement in Australia, I was excited to learn that a two-volumed official history of Canberra was in preparation. I expected that with the rise of official multiculturalism, and the promotion of multicultural identity during the Bicentenary, the official history of Canberra would enable immigrants from overseas, including those who had come from non-English-speaking places, to finally take a bow on our local historical stage.

The two volumes that were eventually published proved disappointing in that regard. One volume covered the period from 1913 to 1953; the other dealt with the post-war years. It staggered me to find that the volume dealing with the years since 1953 hardly acknowledged immigrants at all, let alone those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Yet, I feel I can say without being controversial, that in the decade after the second world war Canberra relied on immigrant workers in the construction industry, especially those from England, Malta, Italy, Yugoslavia,

Germany, not to forget the so-called DPs, the displaced persons who came here from war-damaged Europe in the late 40s. These and other peoples were more or less left out of the most extensively researched, most expensive, glossiest, official history of Canberra ever published.

Thus, as an Australian historian specialising in ethnic history, I received my first lesson in the difference between official rhetoric and reality. There is a lot of tokenism around when it comes to ventures which seek to research the histories of particular communities. It is usually suggested that the communities themselves should fund such projects, which indeed one or two - such as the Italians and the "Jennings Germans" - have done. But I always find myself wondering, if all the diverse peoples who have made a commitment to Australia, or in this case, to Canberra, are part of our nation's story, and given that all or most are or were tax-payers, why shouldn't government funds be available for the uncovering of our ethnic history as indeed they are sometimes available for other historical ventures?

It is by now well known, and often repeated by politicians, that Australia is one of the most multicultural societies on the planet, with 140 different ethnic groups, dozens of different religions and one in every five Australians having been born overseas. What is really interesting about that last figure is that the settlers from the United Kingdom are a minority of the overseas born; most of the one in five Australians born overseas came from a non-English-speaking background.

This broad picture is reflected in Canberra, where - according to the 1986 census - 21% of us were born overseas. Thanks to bodies such as the Ethnic Communities' Council there is an increasing awareness of the national capital's polyethnic composition - despite the many years of interstate misrepresentation of Canberra as a homogenous middle class Anglo community - and thanks to bodies like the Canberra Historical Society there is an increasing but still very inadequate understanding of our city's multicultural heritage.

For Canberrans, and most other Australians, the multicultural society we experience today has its origins in the post-1947 immigration programme that brought more than three million new settlers to Australia. However, 'multiculturalism' in the descriptive sense has been a feature of Australian society at least since the last half of the nineteenth century. It comes as a big surprise to those who think of our colonial and early C20th

history as exclusively British to discover that big and small communities from outside Great Britain have been busily organising themselves, producing newspapers and establishing places of worship and schools, libraries and choirs, in Australia since the 1850s.

Perhaps the best known example concerns the Irish in the Australia. Their maintenance of an identity is well-known and has been well documented. Far less known is the position of the smaller communities. Ethnic organisations and publications existed in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia with a view to protecting their members' welfare, or to give advice and assistance to prospective migrants, or simply to keep their culture alive.

The Chinese are a case in point. They were not a small group. In the Colony of Victoria, every twenty-second person was Chinese in 1861. They established several joss-houses and clubs in the latter half of the nineteenth century and their clubs were often based on district of origin in China. Perhaps the earliest Chinese organisations were the See Yap Society, and the Kong Chew Society, established in Melbourne in 1854.

Lack of numbers did not dissuade other groups from organising themselves. A Scandinavian Society, for instance, was set up by gold-seeking immigrants at Ballarat in the 1850s and a Swedish newspaper, "Norden", was founded in Melbourne in 1857. A Valhalla Society was established in Sydney in 1877 and, ten years later, Melbourne became home to a Swedish club. A Norwegian club was formed at the turn of the century, influenced by Norway's independence from Sweden in 1905.

The Poles in Australia organised a Committee of the Polish Relief Fund in Melbourne in 1863 to support the Polish uprising against Russian domination. A Polish school, and a library, were part of a settlement at Polish Hill River in South Australia in 1870.

The first Rabbi, Aaron Levy, arrived in the Colony of New South Wales in 1830. By the 1840s, Jewish congregations existed in Hobart, Launceston, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. The first Jewish newspaper here - a local edition of the British "Voice of Jacob" - was published in the early 1840s.

Two Greek Orthodox priests came to Australia in the 1890s at the request of Greek communities in Sydney and Melbourne. The

Holy Trinity Church was consecrated in 1898 at Surry Hills, Sydney, and the Evangelismos Church was consecrated at East Melbourne in 1901. The first Greek newspaper in Australia - "Afstralia" - commenced publication in 1913, in Melbourne. (I recommend to you all the recent book by Canberran Hugh Gilchrist, called *Australians and Greeks*, which details the links that existed between the two peoples prior to 1914).

The Maltese established a Melita Club in Sydney in the early 1920s and a bi-lingual publication, "Maltese and English and Maltese Educational Publications" proved popular with the poultry farmers and market gardeners in Sydney's outer west in 1929.

The first Estonian society was established in Sydney in 1912 and in Melbourne in 1914. The Latvians formed a Lettish Association in Sydney in 1913 and, in the late 1920s, Lithuanians organised themselves into the Australian Lithuanian Society in Sydney.

The Finnish community set up a Finnish Seamen's Mission in 1916 and, ten years later, a Finnish-language newspaper called "Suomi" was published. It was not the first Finnish newspaper, however, as "Orpa" (meaning "orphan") had been established in Queensland in 1902. The French started their Alliances Francaises in Australia in 1890 and the longest-surviving non-English language paper here is "Le Courier Australien".

In 1893, a Croatian priest, Fr Zundolic, was appointed to Broken Hill to cater for the spiritual needs of Croatian miners and, in the early 1920s, a Croatian club and choir were established by cane-cutters in north Queensland. In 1910, the Russians in Australia formed a Union of Russian Emigrants, based in Brisbane, but with branches in Sydney, Melbourne and Broken Hill. A Russian newspaper started up in Brisbane in 1912 with the title "Echo of Australia".

The Germans were a significant non-English presence in nineteenth century colonial Australia, especially in South Australia where they had a newspaper - "Die Deutsche Post fur die Australischen" - as early as 1848 and a club in 1854. The Italian presence was also significant. In the early 1880s, Italian families were setting up farms on waste land near the Richmond River in northern New South Wales. By 1888, their numbers had grown to 250 and their community was called "New Italy". The first Italo-Australian newspaper, "Uniamoci" (meaning: "Let's Unite"), appeared in 1903, by which time there were 6,000

Italians in Australia.

It is seen from these examples, which were gleaned from the landmark publication The Australian People: an encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins, edited by James Jupp and published by Angus & Robertson in 1988, that there were Australian ethnic communities from outside the British Isles a long time before the 1950s and 1960s. It has only been in recent times, the 1980s, that historians and other writers have bothered to do the difficult research required to uncover basic facts about them.

What was the situation in Canberra, a city whose formal existence dates back only 80 years? There is a paucity of published information on Canberra's multicultural heritage. The few publications that do exist, tend to begin with the 1950s period. But what of the decades prior to the second world war?

My research into the Maltese in Australia uncovered a Maltese connection with Canberra in the late 1920s. The first Maltese here was almost certainly Paul Borg, who jumped ship at Brisbane in the mid-1920s and worked his way down to Canberra where he found employment with a horse and dray working on the provisional parliament house site. The same major construction project lured other migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, including some Italians.

How does one know that there were various ethnic groups in Canberra in the 1920s and 1930s? The starting-point for any researcher is the Australian Census which included the Federal Capital Territory in the censuses of 1911, 1921 and 1933. I have gone through these censuses in respect of Canberra and (as an aside, might I say in the Minister's presence that it would be a good idea to somehow publish the data in some way) in looking at the census data I found that the following birthplace groups were represented in Canberra in the 1920s and 1930s: Germans, Danes, Americans, Canadians, New Zealanders, Chinese, Syrians, Austrians, Maltese, Belgians, Finns, Greeks, Italians, Norwegians, Russians, Spaniards, Swedes, Turks, Yugoslavs, Indians, Cypriots, Mauritians, South Africans, Egyptians, Jamaicans, Chileans, Mexicans and Fijians.

These figures are for birth-places and they open up a whole previously overlooked field of research. It should be noted by the way that diplomatic staff are not counted in the census, so the above were Canberra residents not foreign officials. But, who

were these people? Why did they come to Canberra? How did they get here? What was the strength of their ethnicity? What employment did they undertake here? How did they influence Canberra?

I hasten to add that in the period from 1911 to 1933, the actual numbers for the abovementioned groups were very small. The biggest non-Anglo community in Canberra in 1933, for example, was Italian, but they only numbered 16 people. But history is not just about numbers; it's about people because it's the people who make history. A small group can have a disproportionately big impact in a given location or in a given industry at a particular point in time. The point can also be made that Canberra's total population was not large - only 8,947 in 1933 - and that 16 people, bound by language and culture and a sense of togetherness can comprise a community. The book I co-authored with Aldo Bongiorno and Salvatore Gambale for the Italo-Australian Club showed that these Italian pioneers in Canberra formed a community and supported other Italian settlers in later years. The same applied to the early Maltese; a Maltese community developed around the Borg family's farm and the family assisted a small chain migration from Malta after the war.

In 1933, 84% of Canberra's population was born in Australia. Sixteen percent was born overseas - compared to 21 percent today. The difference isn't that great, statistically speaking; though the proportion of UK migrants among the overseas-born was much higher. The Scots were probably the first ethnic group in Canberra to organise themselves. In 1924 they established the Burns Society. At the Archives, I've seen a photo of a marching group, taken in the 1920s, resplendent in kilts and bagpipes, parading against the vast barren limestone plain backdrop characteristic of the cleared portions of the region back then.

The task ahead is to write as complete a history of Canberra as possible, one that includes everyone. On that point, it was disgraceful that Aborigines have been either ignored or written about in purely academic ways in histories of Canberra. There is no sense of historical continuity in writings about Aborigines in the region; no sense that the local Aboriginal people have never given up the defence of their land. It should also be noted that there was no legal obligation under the Census Act for Aborigines to be counted in the census. Usually, so-called "half-bloods", to use the Census terminology, were counted but not "full-bloods". It's scandalous, I think, that any writer could claim to extrapolate anything on the basis of such data but it has happened in the not-

too-distant past.

I feel that if researchers and writers in Canberra become more sensitive to ethnic issues, then more factual information will be forthcoming. The Canberra Historical Society deserves credit for some of the articles in its journal. For example, it published an article based on the diary of one of the early Italians, Clemente Forner, which had been lovingly preserved by his nephew Bin Forner, who still lives in Canberra. It also published an article on the early Maltese, which included various old snapshots dating to the 1920s and 1940s. And, many years ago, it published the remarkable story of John Tan Kee, a Chinese who settled in the Canberra/Queanbeyan region in 1863. The article was written by one of his descendants, Monica Tankey, in 1981.

The ethnic history of Canberra is part of the people's history of Canberra. Generally speaking, it will not be a story of the elite, those who held power or great wealth and positions of social status. It will not focus on parliament and the doings of politicians. Rather it will be the history of everyday people, albeit carrying with them the invisible and visible baggage of all immigrants, involved in the day-to-day struggle to make ends meet, to enjoy life, and to build a better future for all of Australia's children regardless of ethnic or racial origin.
