

The Australian Women's Register

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Austrian girls

Summary

The Austrian Girls were three young women who were imprisoned as enemy aliens in Australia during World War I. They were held at the Molonglo Concentration Camp, Canberra, in the then new Federal Capital Territory from August 1918 to May 1919.

Details

Within a week of Australia's entry into World War I in August 1914 the Government declared all German subjects resident in Australia enemy aliens and required them to report to the police and register their addresses. Some enemy aliens were interned under the War Precautions Act 1914 which enabled government to hold internees without trial.

In February 1915 the Government broadened the definition of an enemy alien to include migrants who had been naturalised as British subjects (Australian citizenship did not yet exist at this time – Australian-born people were British subjects and foreign-born people could apply for naturalisation as British subjects). At this point Australian-born people with German-born fathers or grandfathers were also declared enemy aliens. The Government targeted leading members of the German community in Australia, including Lutheran Church pastors, honorary consuls and business men, but also the destitute and people accused of disloyalty by their neighbours.

Internment camps were established in Rottnest Island in Western Australia, Torrens Island in South Australia, Enoggera in Queensland, Langwarrin in Victoria, Bruny Island in Tasmania, and Trial Bay in New South Wales. Around 5000 to 6000 men were detained at Holsworthy Military Camp near Sydney, while German and Austrian women and children were deported from Asia and the Pacific and interned at Bourke, New South Wales. German mariners and their families captured in Australian ports were detained at Berrima, New South Wales. Families from both the latter camps, including two Australian-born women married to Germans and living in Fiji, were transferred to the Molonglo Concentration Camp near Canberra in May 1918.

There appears to be no information about the three Austrian women pictured waiting to collect their rations at the Molonglo Concentration Camp. Their names and family connections were not recorded. It is likely they were described as Austrian because of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Whether they were German or from Austria-Hungary, whether they were on their own or with families, and even why the photographer captured them this particular day with their cart, remain mysteries. In the background the wooden barracks in which the prisoners lived can be seen on the treeless plain. Daisy Schoeffel, an Australian-born woman detained with her husband and two small children, recorded that while rations were good and plentiful and they were treated better than they had been at the Bourke Camp, life was unpleasant on the open plain in poorly built wooden barracks that let in the rain, wind and noise from the other internees (NAA: CRS 457, Item 406/1 cited in Fischer, 1989).

Internees were not released from the Molonglo Camp until May 1919 when most were deported to Germany, regardless of where they had originally been detained. Of around 7000 people interned in Australia, 5414 were deported from 1919, along with a further 736 family members. Of more than 1000 people who appealed to the Commonwealth Alien Board against deportation only 306 were successful, including 179 naturalised or native-born Australians. From those interned at Molonglo, Daisy Schoeffel and her sister Hally Kienzle, their German-born but British naturalised husbands and their children, all of whom were British subjects were among those who successfully appealed deportation.

The three young Austrian women are likely to have been among the Molonglo internees deported to Germany on the Kursk which sailed on 29 May 1919. Molonglo camp internee Lore Hurtzig, two-years-old when she was captured and interned with her mother, sister and sea captain father in Brisbane harbour in 1914, and nine-years-old when she was released in May 1919, was deported on the Kursk with her family. Eighty years later and an 87-year-old Second World War widow, Lore described the ship as 'a slow, filthy, chartered Russian tub' (Simons, 205). Crowded conditions on board the ship contributed to an influenza outbreak affecting 535 of the internees, of whom 16 died as a result ('Cases on the Kursk', 1919, p. 17).

If they survived the voyage home, the three young women would have returned to a defeated, humiliated, economically devastated Austria or Germany. Within twenty years their country was again at war; they may have had to watch husbands and sons go off to war and their country being again devastated. Again, we know nothing of these women's later lives but we do know that for nine months from August 1918 to May 1919, they lived in Australia's Capital Territory, so they are part of Canberra's story.

Published resources

Book

The enemy at home: German internees in World War I Australia, Helmi, Nadine and Fischer, Gerard, 2011

'Prisoners in Arcady': German mariners at Berrima 1915-1919, Simons, John R., 1999

Enemy aliens: internment and the homefront experience in Australia, 1914-1920, Fischer, Gerhard, 1989

Site Exhibition

Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Newspaper Article

Cases on the Kursk, 1919,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15848908>

Author Details

Niki Francis

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