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Unsettling Post-war Settlement

Remembering Unassimilable Families in the Space of the Migrant Camp



Alexandra Dellios

Abstract Migrant camps were unsettling spaces for newly arrived families in post-war Australia. Post-WWII refugees and assisted migrants arriving from 1947 to the early 1970s labelled these temporary accommodation centres run by the Department of Immigration “camps”. Their ambiguity as spaces of refuge and containment persists in memory. Hundreds of thousands of assisted migrants and refugees passed through these camps, which were established from 1947 and progressively shut down from the late 1960s. This chapter will analyse memories of migrant camps by mothers, sons and daughters. They have grappled with their own contentious and contradictory family histories in the migrant camp and the ongoing legacies of being “received” and temporarily housed in a place of containment and control. As temporary and transient places, migrant camps were never intended to be long-term “homes” for migrant families. However, many families, particularly those with single mothers or with heads of households unable to secure ongoing and full-time work, found themselves living in camps for years. A substantial cohort of post-war migrant children grew up in centres like Benalla in Victoria or Greta in New South Wales. Family life was structured around the restrictions of communal and bureaucratized living—which had many implications for how each family member related to each other and to their new country of settlement. Constraints were also placed on their employment and movements by the Department of Immigration. This paper will tie together competing theories around migrant home-building, family memory and generational memory to argue that the place of the migrant centre has come to feature prominently in the meaning-making practice of family history, particularly for child migrants grappling with unsettled and unsettling family histories. The migrant camp is a difficult heritage place from which to build family memories, especially given the spectre of the camp-as-detention-centre. Nonetheless, many who arrived as children have seen it as their task to rescue these unsettling places of settlement from obscurity and to assert their dark heritage, their place in a more intimate and diverse history of Australian migration, which shines a light on discrimination and complicates public histories of the post-war immigration scheme and settlement.

A. Dellios (✉)

Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
e-mail: alexandra.dellios@anu.edu.au

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Introduction

Migrant camps were unsettling places of family settlement, particularly for families that experienced war and then entered settler societies constituted through an uneasy and suppressed past of colonial violence. It was an unsettling past of colonial violence that posed parallels with the migrant family's own unsettling past and future prospects. Migrant camps also unsettled normative ideas of "family life" as it was imagined and constructed in personal, social and cultural expectations, particularly in the Western tradition and model of the nuclear family. In the Australian post-war context, migrant camps were intended as transitory places of government containment and control for post-war refugees and assisted migrants arriving from 1947 to the early 1970s. The earliest cohort to pass through Australia's Department of Immigration camps, spread across the country in mostly rural towns, experienced the ravages of World War Two and the trials of displacement, mostly at the hands of Soviet invasion. The migrant camps in which they found themselves, the cost of which were subsidised as part of their two-year work contract with the Australian government, have been variously described by academics and journalists as places of "no hope" (Sluga 1988), places of "pain and shame" (Wills 2009) and even akin to "detention or concentration camps" (Zangalis 2013). And yet, they could also offer sanctuary, reprieve and seclusion for families who witnessed or experienced traumatic events.

"Dystopian approach[es]" (Pennay 2012a) to the migrant camp are not universal, but they cast a substantial shadow over collective memories of the migrant camp. Alternatively, official and popular commemorations surrounding Bonegilla, the largest and longest running camp, have remodelled its past as a successful "birth-place of multiculturalism" (Ashton 2009). Such tropes align with a conservative and revisionist history of the immigration scheme, which casts Australia as a welcoming place of settlement. This chapter interrogates how child migrants who arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s have grappled with their own contentious and contradictory family histories in the place of the migrant camp and the ongoing legacies of their parents' un-settlement. I problematise the construction of collective memory as it interplays with personal memory in the creation of family histories. This approach raises questions about the cultural and social spaces available for remembering migrant childhoods and families, specifically unconventional childhoods and families in uneasy places like the migrant camp. How does the migrant camp figure in personal constructions of unconventional family histories?

I employ the term "family" as a key framework—this includes a consideration of how society and its institutions define family, the political function of family, and how my interviewees approach the family in the light of wider definitions. These factors are especially important in a migrant context, in which the need to assimilate places unique pressures on family life. For many displaced persons fleeing Soviet rule after the conclusion of the war in 1945, the fostering of transnational family networks was not possible (Edele and Fitzpatrick 2015). The sometimes haphazard and desperate need to construct makeshift families, whether in refugee camps or

upon migration, meant that subsequent generations were often separated from those that came before—grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins or godparents left behind.

The first group of European refugees displaced after the war were victims of concentration camps; they were voluntary or forced labourers. Most of this group were repatriated and did not remain in refugee camps beyond 1947. The remainder was old and new Soviet citizens who refused repatriation to their communist-ruled homelands. They became known as displaced persons (DPs). They feared forced repatriation and many attempted to conceal their Soviet ties, at least until the Allies ceased forcible repatriations to Russia in late 1945 (Persian 2015). In the evolving Cold War context, the anti-communist credentials of prospective DPs were scrutinised far more than their trials at the hands of Nazism. DPs came to include Russians, Ukrainians, others from Soviet republics, as well as Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians fleeing Soviet incorporation and Polish and Yugoslavian refugees.

Those hoping to emigrate came up against unyielding definitions of family, as enforced by the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) and Australian government immigration officials: a male breadwinner was considered the head of a family (Balint 2015). While Australia was not at first on the lookout for “families”—it initially preferred single, able-bodied men to work as labourers—from June 1948 the government increasingly turned to families as a means to boost its population. Women with young children, unable to work, were classified as a male breadwinner’s “dependant”. If a single mother had no breadwinner, she was disparaged as a “problem case” and denied resettlement (NAA, MP690/1, 1957/1039, Harris 1957). Single mothers were not accepted under the government’s migration programme until February 1949, when sources for new migrants were rapidly dwindling and a “hard core” (Jordens 1997) of unsettled refugees remained. According to official definitions employed by migration officers posted in refugee camps, a male breadwinner was considered the head of the family, and his citizenship also determined that of the rest of his family. The need to secure an appropriate and politically acceptable (that is, without communist affiliation) male breadwinner as the head of a family encouraged many rushed marriages and divorces in refugee camps across this post-war period. Long periods of separation, during the war and after, when housed in nationally specific refugee camps across Germany and Italy, also caused the breakdown of many relationships.

Children were born in refugee camps and, after emigration, in migrant camps. Their families were sometimes formed by necessity. They were malleable, dynamic and came to be rooted in their country of migration, with familial ties to homelands often muted—particularly for those from Soviet-occupied territories who were fearful of repatriation or reprisals for the family left behind. Their first weeks, months and sometimes years in Australia were spent in migrant camps, where they encountered the systems and practices that would define and constrain their migrant trajectories in Australia. This chapter will look more closely at the intimate experiences of families in migrant camps.

Method

I draw on five oral history interviews conducted in 2016 with six former residents of various post-war migrant camps: Jim, Tamara and Velta (sisters interviewed together), Bernadette, Rick and Helen. A common experience for many new arrivals from 1949 to 1953 was to pass through a number of camps, starting with a reception and processing centre (like Northam in WA or Bonegilla in VIC), and then, depending on work placements and the status of dependants, to be moved to other camps across the country. Families were repeatedly displaced. Most post-war refugees and assisted migrants passed through the camp system within months; however, a substantial proportion of the initial 170,000 displaced persons stayed for much longer, living within departmental camps for the duration of their two-year work contracts and sometimes well beyond that. For example, approximately 60,000 people passed through Benalla from 1949 to 1967, with nearly 500 living in the camp for up to and beyond ten years. When it was finally closed, remaining families were moved to housing commission homes in Benalla. All of my interviewees spent their childhoods—from birth or the age of two to their teenage years—in migrant camps.

Personal narratives are central to the qualitative approach adopted here and to my attempt to not only reveal the unsettling settlement stories of displaced persons in Australia, but to unsettle the trope of progressive migrant settlement and the successful, homogenous transformation of post-war migrants into assimilated members of the nation. Oral history methodology is concerned with how individuals narrate their lives and the context-ed and provisional performance of this retelling (Portelli 2006; Hamilton 1994). In heeding the call of public historians Hamilton and Shopes (2008) (and earlier calls by Frisch 1990 and Glassberg 1996), I consider these oral histories in relation to wider public history practices and changes in collective memory. That is, the memories of these former child migrants are mediated or shaped through social institutions, cultural practices and attitudes—their shared and shifting memories were in turn altered by the telling, and by their expectation that their stories of childhood in the migrant camp would be made public. In telling their stories, they contribute to an unsettling of established narratives around migration. Oral history can also illuminate the long-term and processual nature of settlement and forming family histories. Richards (2002, 2) considers this one of the advantages of oral history: its ability to capture the “lifelong trajectories of personal migration”. The parents of these former child migrants—who came from Poland, Germany, Latvia and (Italian) Istria (now Croatia) between 1949 and 1953—are now deceased, and until recently their stories have never been publicly expressed as part of any wider migrant heritage in Australia.

Background

In a wider strategic sense, migrant camps embodied the assimilationist policy and ideology of the entire mass immigration scheme (Haebich 2008). The camps and their staff were responsible for migrants' physical dispersal across Australia through the allocation of employment and camp accommodation. According to the conditions of the two-year work contract, individual signatories over the age of 16 were allocated and moved to employment anywhere across the country. The contract secured new arrivals subsidised (but still financially onerous) accommodation in camps, many of which were former military training bases near rural centres. Accommodation at a Department of Immigration centre could cost up to £3 a week, at a time when unemployment benefits were £2.50 a week (Agutter 2013).

Only pregnant women and married women with young children were exempt from the indentured contract, although departmental memos indicate that these women were encouraged to work and indeed found it necessary to cover the costs of camp accommodation. Migrant men, classified as "breadwinners" for their "dependants", could be separated from spouses or family when relocated to work on remote projects. Men were accommodated in men's only workers' hostels, deemed unsuitable for dependants; women and children would, therefore, find themselves transferred to a holding centre. In this way, families could live out their two-year work contracts in camps across Australia, separated despite the government rhetoric around the ideal migrant family. In theory, the centre system was intended to avoid the congregation of migrants in cities near dense population centres. Staff within the Department of Immigration camps were also responsible for categorising migrants as either labourers (men) or domestic workers (women) and consequently the nature of their economic and social status in Australia. Lastly, the camps encouraged, through official assimilationist discourse, the denial of their pre-migration qualifications and lives.

Some migrant camps, such as Benalla in Victoria, a former RAAF base, went against the grain of assimilation: a high proportion of so-called problem cases (NAA, A445, 140/5/6 1951), meaning "unsupported" mothers, were shunted to Benalla, expected to work at either of two nearby factories—Latoof and Calill clothing or Renolds Chains. Although Benalla did not exclusively house single mothers, social workers made note of the departmental tendency to "send all unsupported women and other problem cases to Benalla Holding Centre from camps all over Australia". They noted the impracticalities of this move, and the secondary if not invisible status these "problem cases" had in the wider immigration scheme:

This would seem a more practical move if there was some special opportunities for these women at Benalla or some special organisation in the Centre for dealing with these so-called "hard-core" cases. Instead of being absorbed by a community in more or less normal circumstances these unfortunate women are herded together in surroundings which are doing very little to alleviate their situation (NAA, A437 1950/6/173, Dean 1954).

Benalla and a few other camps (including parts of Greta camp in NSW), came to house blended or separated families for years on end. Agutter reflects that refugee women found it particularly difficult to move out of the camp system: "many had

already spent years in camps in Europe and, as one social worker report states, they had lost all hope and initiative, and were fearful of moving into the wider community” (Agutter 2016, 1).

Most of a single woman’s wage was spent on the cost of camp accommodation, making it difficult to save enough to leave the camp, let alone feed and clothe children. They were “staying indefinitely in centres in poverty” (NAA, A437 1950/6/173, Dobson 1951a, b). The fate of these families received little policy attention, and they remained politically and physically isolated until the camp’s closure in 1967 when they experienced a “broadly unhappy dispersal” (Pennay 2015, 13) from their spartan but familiar Benalla camp home.

The reality of blended, separated and isolated migrant families in post-war Australia was particularly ironic given that the government and the mainstream press maintained that marriage, as one expression of family, was essential to Australian-style assimilation (Simic 2014). From the 1950s, the use of heterosexual romance and the representation of the migrant nuclear family adhering to an Australian way of life became increasingly present in the national imagination; it was also a means to sell immigration to the Australian public. The prevalence of images of happy assimilated migrant families was also tied to anxieties expressed by the Department of Immigration social workers about the divorce rates of DP marriages (NAA, A2567, Martek 1969). This was indicative of a general moral panic surrounding a rise in divorce rates in post-war Australia (Featherstone 2013). There was little space for single motherhood or blended and remade migrant families in this context.

Official Australian definitions of family in migrant recruitment were in many ways extensions of those applied by the IRO in European refugee camps. For example, one of my interviewees, Jim, explained that his mother Emma gave birth to him in 1949 in Luneburg, Germany. In 1944, Emma had fled her native Latvia with her first son, born to her husband Hermann—with whom she had lost contact. As Jim explains:

When I was born my mother wanted to put the name of my father on my birth certificate. Her friends told her not to be silly. If she put my father’s real name on the birth certificate it would mean that I would have been born out of wedlock and Emma had been sleeping around—not the thing done in 1946. So she put Hermann K——, to whom she was still married or had been married to, as the father on my birth certificate. I became legitimate and Emma was the good wife.

Complex relationships evolved in war and displacement. Some women found themselves abandoned by spouses, but others found that war and displacement offered an opportunity to escape an unwanted relationship. Emma never confirmed to her sons whether she officially divorced Hermann, but the circumstances of war enabled their seemingly mutual separation. The circumstances of family formation, however, were not always of interest to Australian migrant officers and later to camp administrators and Commonwealth Employment officers—whose system struggled to understand families outside the normative. In Emma’s immigration application forms, under the heading “Marriage/Divorce”, the scrawl “divorce” is crossed out and replaced with “has not seen husband since 1945—unable to trace him”, which was an answer considered more favourably than divorce. It would have been in Emma’s ultimate economic favour to omit divorce: unmarried mothers (excluding

widowers and deserted wives) were not eligible for the pension in Australia until 1973.

For those housed together in camps for years on end, the space could offer an uneasy and acrimonious sanctuary from mainstream Australia and its pressures to assimilate. One male resident described Benalla migrant camp as “a town within a town” (Gebauer 2015). Former enemy nations could be housed together in close quarters. Understandably, shared experiences of persecution, imprisonment, forced labour and exile were not always welcomed points of commonality. One of my interviewees, Rick, migrated in 1950 as a refugee from Istria with his mother and three older siblings—his father was killed by Yugoslavian partisans after Italian Istria was ceded to Yugoslavia. He insists that as a child he saw many fights at Benalla. There was not a day that went past without a quarrel erupting between women in the queue for food at the mess hall. These fights, while often premised on national or ethnic tensions and war-time grievances, were also prompted by the economic stresses of supporting children on a single mother’s wage and the close quarters in which they were housed.

Motherhood in Space of the Camp

The migrant camp, while a liminal or transitory space for some, was also a world apart from Australian society. Benalla camp was on the edge of Benalla town, just as Bonegilla, a former army training camp, was on the edge of Albury and Wodonga. The child’s development played out in these places; it was isolated cultural geography with understood codes of behaviour formed by a nationally diverse group with shared experiences of war, exile and refuge. People lived in close quarters. The huts themselves were Army-standard corrugated galvanised iron fixed to a timber frame. Initially, the size of one family’s “cubbyhole size cubicle” within a hut was less than 4 m by 3 m (Pennay 2012b). Sophie (Golonski 2015), who was a small child when her family arrived at Benalla in 1951, remembers that “the women made Terylene curtains for a bit of privacy. For a rod we just had some nails with wire”. Longer-term families received a hut to themselves, sometimes with more than one room, but communal dining and shared shower and toilet blocks meant that one was never quite alone.

Parents, carers and other guardians attempted to care for children within a space that was constrained by government regulations that controlled their health, well-being, employability and assimilationist education and their very definition in the workplace as “labourers”, “domestics” or “dependants” (Dellios 2017). Those families without a male breadwinner confused and defied the bureaucratic systems established to control the migrant family. In assimilationist terms, they were considered economic and social failures.

Childcare for their dependants was not readily available or affordable within or outside most migrant camps; but because of the nature of Benalla’s population, it contained a crèche for the younger children of working mothers. However, the

additional and onerous cost of board for working single mothers also adversely affected their ability to exit the migrant camp. This is in contrast to the families with two working adults, in which male breadwinners worked off two-year contracts in remote locations while their female partners also took up work in Benalla; longer-term residents often remember them as the couples who “came and left all the time, to start their new life in Australia” (Agutter 2013, 136). Children grew up in these spaces and today many remember feeling “safe within the camp community” (Smyth 2015, p. v).

Interview participant Helen passed through Bathurst, Cowra, and Parkes migrant camps before finally arriving at Benalla, where she spent most of her childhood and teenage years. She told me about playing with her little brother and other young children around and beyond the camp site without adult supervision. She also discussed her teenage years and the lack of privacy afforded to her and other young women. Helen is now actively involved in the preservation of the remnants of her former home. In this endeavour, she tries to make sense of the experiences of her mother Maria and other women in the camp.

While child migrants may have been “unaware of what their parents went through as migrants” (Smyth 2015, p. v), they were conscious of the aspersions cast on their mothers. Many now make it a point to recall their mother’s resilience, and how they dealt with a stalled settlement into mainstream Australia. According to Helen:

Our mothers put all their energies into raising their families, working, dealing with camp authorities and deriving mutual support from within the camp community. When the camp closed, they tried to assimilate into the wider community. They got new jobs and dealt with their anxieties about life outside the camp with the help of their children. The focus of the women was on survival, adaptation to a new way of life, raising their children and, much much later on transition to the mainstream.

Since her mother passed away, Helen sees it as her task to recall the lives of that generation, particularly as it relates to the migrant camp and their settlement trajectories. This impetus to *publicly* remember this place has shaped her understanding of her family’s adaptation to Australia—and her views on that entire cohort’s experience. The camp and its “long-stayers” come across as “a sad and difficult Catch-22. The lived experiences of these women and their children are a rich source of information on how unrealistic, and indeed sometimes quite harmful, assimilationist expectations were” (Helen 2016). The camp is imagined as both an isolated haven from the discriminatory pressures of Australian society *and* a key bureaucratic space reinforcing assimilationist rhetoric. They were out of sight and out of mind, literally on the edge of town, concealed (but not strictly contained) behind wire fences, because they were “problem cases” for which the government had no easy assimilationist solution.

Helen reflects on the conservative definition of family in post-war Australia, which did not align with her family’s situation. In her father’s absence, her mother became the sole breadwinner, but his permission was always sought in legal and bureaucratic matters. This included gaining citizenship, which Helen’s mother Maria desired to solidify their claims to settlement. Maria had elected to be moved to Benalla, in a different State to her husband and his employment. As Helen explains: “We came to Benalla to get away from my father” (Helen 2016). Attempting to work within

a constricted system, Maria managed to distance herself and her children from her husband and build an alternative family life in Benalla camp. In this instance, the sometimes unfortunate family separation inherent in the government's work contract and holding centre system partially worked in her favour—except when she came up against conservative bureaucratic procedures that deferred authority to her husband, such as procuring citizenship, a situation that stalled their economic and symbolic settlement.

Helen's father eventually found them at Benalla, but was not permitted to stay—he had accommodation at a men's only workers' hostel. However, social workers from the Department of Immigration often favoured marital reunification in these cases. Indeed, rather than ensuring migrants had accommodation, social workers suggested in 1954 that it would be “far better” to “put family out together” if it would result in “unity from a common dilemma or at least emphasising their responsibilities to each other” (NAA, A437 1950/6/173, Rickstins 1954). Otherwise, in cases where reunification was not possible, another marriage was seen as “the only really satisfactory solution” for single women with young children (NAA, A437 1950/6/173, Dobson 1951a, b). The preference for marriage—even in the face of evidence of physical, emotional and economic abuse—was both an economic and a moral imperative for the Department of Immigration, solving the “problem” of single DP mothers while abiding by the governments' promotion of the idealised nuclear family.

For those who experienced family separation under the work contract, the thwarted practical and social needs of their mothers were also salient points in their memories of camp life. Former camp resident Stoeger (1993) comments on her mother's experience: who continued life at Bonegilla camp “virtually as a single parent” while her father was away for up to eight weeks at a time working off his contract on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. Eventually, the pressure of raising four young children within the camp—the lack of appropriate food for young children, poor heating and sanitation and non-existent childcare before the early 1950s—saw her mother's health suffer, and she lost her job. Similarly, Bernadette reflects on her mother's mental health issues, which she attributes to the difficulties of building a new life as a migrant woman with young, dependent children: “she was hemmed in” living in a remote centre, and

lonely... we arrived in 54. By 1960 my Mum had a nervous breakdown. We saw it happening... she went off her rocker. The baker reported her to the local doctor, the doctor had my father come home [from his work allocation at the Koo Wee Rup Swamp], and they packed Mum up and took her to Benalla [and she became] a ward of the state for six months.

While their mothers' expectations of settlement may have been thwarted by the limits of life in a migrant camp, their children recall their family pasts with some degree fondness and childhood nostalgia, perhaps in an effort to justify their mothers' trials. They grapple with what the migrant camp represented to their parents. For example, in the following, sisters Tamara and Velta remember their mother's pre-migration images of Australia, and the reality she faced:

Tamara: she heard these stories about Australia, the streets are paved with gold, you know.

Velta: In the refugee camp, she saw the [promotional video] of Australia, which had people picking oranges... blue skies, sun-tanned people picking oranges. And she thought, “that’s what I want for my children”. She cried when she saw camp conditions, saying “What have I done, what have I done” ... two little kids to look after... she was regretting it... But the migrant camp I most definitely have good memories of... [but] We are children of survivors and we do carry a little bit of that.

Velta insists that “their lives”, referring to her mother and other refugee women like her, were important, and the camp as an unsettling place of settlement is a physical reminder of the importance of their lives. She recalls the sadness of watching the main hall of Benalla be bulldozed, which had become a receptacle of her (short) family history in Australia, her “roots”, which began with her mother:

As the first generation, we don’t have a place to call home. Camp was home. Mum couldn’t go back to Latvia, it was no longer home. So the migrant camp was very significant in that way. To have somewhere to go back to. To say, this where I started from, this where Mum started from, my roots.

To be sure, these child migrants also felt the stigma of a camp past. The camp was always a part of their unspoken family histories—and as their community-funded 2015 history admitted “former residents have rarely spoken publicly about their experiences of the place” (Pennay 2015). A camp connection was never one they would publicly discuss, except among family and former “camp kids”—until recently. In 2007, Bonegilla was listed on the National Heritage List. The efforts to commemorate the site began with ex-resident calls for a museum in the mid 1980s. Bonegilla and a few other camps in South Australia have been the subject of small, community-led and State-funded exhibitions since this time. The exhibitions have been small and rely on personal testimony and official (Department of Immigration publicity) photographs. More recent public commemorations have afforded former residents with new spaces to voice alternative stories of family settlement in post-war Australia. Accordingly, they also afford these narrators the opportunity to upset official narratives around the universal successes of the mass post-war immigration scheme and the eventual attainment of a multicultural society. They are actively unsettling these homogenous and progressive stories of settlement. This was a narrative with which all my interviewees had issues, especially because it excluded the difficulties faced by their mothers, who rested outside the idealised version of a successful migrant. They were not transient residents at these camps; rather than starting points, these camps were their first homes.

Benalla ex-residents successfully petitioned for the remaining huts of the camp to be placed on the Victorian State Heritage Register in February 2016. Before this time, however, Velta recalls that “I guess we felt that it was not that important, we did not matter... We all sort of thought we were not good enough anyway, only camp kids, so why bother”. Her (and many others’) entry point into publicly arguing for Benalla’s significance was her mother and “all unassisted Mums... they need to be honoured”. And in an ironic way, this honour has centred around the space of the migrant camp, which defined them as economic and social failures to assimilate, even as it proffered a safe and secluded community. While the insidious

shadow of these places as “detention centres” and places of no hope also shapes more grassroots memories of the camp among certain migrant cohorts, the emerging voices of former residents themselves further complicate and destabilise these contentious pasts. Former residents both draw on and grapple with the contradictory official and popular representations of migrant camps as sites of migrant success and sites of migrant detention—this is a tension that feeds into their own stories of unsettling settlement. These ironies and the inevitable conflicts they create have played out in their recollections of family life and their mothers’ experiences within the migrant camp.

Community and Extended Family in the Space of the Camp

All interviewees noted the clear contrast between the camp community and the Australian community outside the camp. Its spatial relationship to main towns—camps were located on the edge of towns like Bonegilla (near Albury–Wodonga), Benalla, Cowra and Greta—reflected the economic and social subordination of its migrant inhabitants.

While the term “New Australian” was introduced by Arthur Calwell to replace the more derogatory labels of “reffo” and “dago” (Neumann 2015), it was patronising and implied that the migrant’s assimilation was never total. Rather, a hierarchy of belonging prevailed—with the newest European migrant near the bottom, followed by other less desirable migrant types, such as the small number of non-European temporary residents, single working mothers and the disabled. The place of the migrant camp encapsulated these social hierarchies—with the Australian-born staff at the helm—but they also provided, in some respects, a sanctuary from the outright prejudices of mainstream Australian society. For example, interview participant Tamara recalls the safety of feeling like “camp kids”. She even refashions the image of a wire fence as reassuring: “we stayed within our fence... wire, you could get through it, walk through it. We just stayed within our vicinity. We just did not really wander off”. Her sister Velta explains that the camp “was our world”.

The differences between their childhood worlds within the camp and the world outside the camp only became apparent upon entering mainstream high schools in the town of Benalla. Velta remembers visiting Australian friends’ homes once she entered the local high school: “it was the first time I’d ever seen carpet”. A clear class divide prevailed in these encounters too. Rick spoke repeatedly about “camp kids” and “town kids”, and the “flak” he received from town kids for his appearance, specifically for using a rope as a belt for his shorts. Jim similarly recalls that his mother needed to borrow money in order to buy him long pants required for school. In his description of class and ethnic violence, Rick recalls the community of “camp kids” he called on to retaliate against prejudice:

Every time the camp guys would go out into the town, the town guys would pick on them: “blood wogs, bloody balts” and all these sort of stuff. But remember I said before that the older brothers and the older groups looked after the young ones. So when we went out first

couple of times and we'd get picked on and get a belting from the town guys, we said, right, we will fix them up. We did: we said to the older guys, we were going to lure these guys into the camp, and then you take over. And so, we went into the town, and they chased us, and chased us, and chased us, and they came into the camp. Big guys come out. Lock the gates. Give them hiding and send them back and they never picked on us again.

In these memories, the camp appears as a sanctuary offering security. This feature appears most prominently in the memories of those who grew up in one camp, like Benalla. Alternatively, Tamara, who was nine years older than her sister Velta, views Benalla as part of a continuum of camps. This period becomes known as her “camp days”, which began with refugee camps in Germany and Italy, at the age of 3, and ended when she left Benalla at the age of sixteen—*after which* her (not uncontested) “settlement” as an Australian began. For her sister Velta, who was born at Benalla, the camp is a true origin place, and “where Mum started from”, as her previous quotation reveals. Both Tamara and Velta approach their “camp days” as a period that offered security and positive seclusion: it was “only on the outside that they made you feel different”.

The offer of security, however, was a moot point. Places like Benalla and Greta were initially offered up as “solutions” to the problems of single mothers with young dependants. When it became clear that their congregation in certain camps was unworkable, many social workers in the Department of Immigration encouraged women to place their children into a church or state institution so that they may be free to work. The pressure to part with their children was immense, and this has shaped the ways in which child migrants recall the camp. Velta mentions, in the vaguest terms, the spectre of a “Mrs Barnes”, who wanted to remove her from her mother. Jim also states that “I am very lucky that I did not become part of the stolen generation or the ‘almost stolen generation’”. His word choice is indicative of the wider commemorative effect of the stolen generations—white Australian acknowledgement from the 1990s of the long history of aboriginal child removal has also afforded others, including the forgotten Australians (care leavers) and former child migrants (mostly British child migrants), a platform from which to publicly remember their unsettling childhoods.

The spectre of child removal across the post-war period shaped the articulations of my interviewees. Child removal was a real possibility in this space; the idea of “security” is, therefore, a complex one in the memories of these former child migrants. Rick, for example, was sent to what he calls a “reformatory school for boys” (St Augustine’s Orphanage in Highton) for a year. His single mother was deemed incapable of controlling him and ensuring he attended school, and he was removed from her care by the State. During this period, it was not uncommon for working-class children to be removed from their parents by the State, especially migrant parents living in the supervised governmental space of the migrant camp.

For displaced persons, extended family networks and parental support had been severed, left behind upon emigration. The migrant camp, however, contained alternative structures of support for working parents—not the government-funded social services this cohort so desperately required, but rather an organically formed network of co-parenting and sibling supervision. Some adults and their children turned to each other, within the space of the camp, as a practical solution to things like child-

minding (Deng and Marlowe 2013). While some holding centres (like Benalla) had crèches and even primary schools, they were only open until 3.30 pm. Most working parents did not return from work until after 5 pm. As Rick recalls:

The mother—ah, no father—she had to get up at six o'clock in the morning, and she was gone. Now, we got to find everything ourselves ... They had a crèche, and they had a primary school in the camp. But the thing is, there was so many of us. There was like 500 families or something at one stage. And we had so much time to kill after half past three. And they [crèche staff] are not going to stay with you there... we had this thing, that the older brothers and sisters and the older kids would look after younger ones. All the way down. They would do that. If you were three years old, someone would kind of stay with you... If you'd get dirty, snotty nose, wet your pants and all that sort of stuff, bad luck.... We grew up that way. We just had to virtually fend for ourselves. Until your Mum would come home.

Rick remembers that extended family networks and parental support were replaced by “older kids”. Similarly, Velta remembers “surrogate” family within the camp and explicitly makes the connection between these surrogates and the family her mother had left behind. For Velta, the formation of her idea of “family” is linked to the space of the migrant camp. She bemoans a loss of ancestry and a lack of “deep” family past, which remained lost and inaccessible in a ruined post-war Latvia. But she seeks to locate her family history in the camp, for without it there is “no physical sign of anything. Nothing behind me. No grandparents”:

[The camp offered] Community to the point of family. We didn't have grandparents, we didn't have aunts, uncles, we didn't have cousins. I have no idea what it's like to have a grandparent or an aunt or an uncle. So we were surrogates, you know. The women that were Mum's age would've been surrogate aunts. Anyone older would've been a surrogate grandparent. We did have that sort of surreal family. It's probably the best, the closest we'll ever know. It was more family than just friends.¹

Larger, longer-term and more assertive migrant communities formed through chain migration to Australia were somewhat better equipped to deal with social alienation and social welfare in post-war Australia. The Greek and Italian communities of Melbourne and Sydney, who grew through chain migration and were aided by assisted migration agreements, are good examples. In an assimilationist context in which the existence of separate services and funding, or any acknowledgement of migrants' unique needs, would have been anathema, the migrant camp community turned in on itself. Their children, who grew up in these spaces, now remember this sense of community, and the ways in which their mothers' experiences defied and even frustrated institutional attempts to limit their settlement trajectories in Australia. Their need, to both unsettle ideas around harmonious post-war settlement and publicise the communal strength of their camp lives, has dominated the heritage push surrounding migrant camps like Benalla, Greta and others.

¹Again, this is a child migrant's perception of 'community' in the camp—perhaps among children. Rick's account of fighting hints that not everyone within the camp relied on each other. Aside from ethnic/national (war-time) tensions, there was also the animosity directed to migrant staff, who had a better rate of pay than those working in nearby factories, and received a reduced rent.

Conclusion

The history of migrant camps in Australia is not easily contained by celebratory public narratives on the successes of post-war immigration. Migrant camps were contradictory places, intended as transient homes that contained and controlled new arrivals and their economic and social prospects in Australia—but they also offered a sanctuary and a sense of community, isolated as they were from mainstream Australian society that sought to assimilate them. Bearing these contradictions in mind, how do we approach the memories of former child migrants who lived in these camps? My interviewees developed complex ways of grappling with contradictory memories of the camp. They were first homes, the key to the formation of their family histories in Australia, and their memories of their mothers. The camp was also integral to their current attempts to understand their parents' migration stories and particularly their mothers' traumatic pasts and their financial and social difficulties within post-war Australia. The migrant camp is a difficult heritage place from which to build family memories, especially given the spectre of the camp-as-detention-centre. Nonetheless, many have seen it as their task to rescue these unsettling places of settlement from obscurity, and to assert its dark heritage, its place in a more intimate and diverse history of Australian migration, which shines a light on discrimination and complicates public histories of the post-war immigration scheme. Their negotiations of these public histories have ultimately been framed by a desire to build family histories that are rooted to a place, however unsettling. They temper the injustice they saw befalling their mothers, and their positions as families literally and symbolically on the edge of society, with a desire to correct their invisibility and both publicly and privately remember the camp as a part of their family history.

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