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Comments At Opening of Exhibition

WHERE WATERS MEET

**Commemorating 50th Anniversary of the
Migrant Reception Centre at Bonegilla**

Melbourne, 8th April, 1997.

By

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It is a nostalgic experience for me to have been invited by the Erasmus Foundation to open this exhibition commemorating Dutch migrant experience in the 1950's and 1960's, with particular focus on the Bonegilla migrant reception centre at Albury/Wodonga in Victoria, on the New South Wales border. I am not of Dutch origin, but I passed through the camp at Bonegilla in my first few days in Australia, just two years after it was opened in November, 1947. I am therefore amongst the early alumni.

Immigration has been the story of Australia ever since the beginning of time. The Australian Aborigines are thought to have migrated here from the islands to the north some 40,000 years ago. The history of the European settlement, starting with the arrival of the first convict ships in 1788, has been one of virtually continuous immigration. Free settlers soon followed. The gold discoveries in the 1850s attracted many people from all over the world including many Chinese. Enterprising and adventurous people continued to flock to these shores in the search for opportunity and a better life for themselves and their children after the gold rush faded. The migration after World War II was, however, unique.

When World War II ended in the Pacific in August, 1945, Australians were very conscious that their vast country - a continent - was populated by only just over 7 million people. In addition to the feeling of vulnerability because of this - which gave rise to the slogan "populate or perish" - there was also an acute shortage of people to do all the work which needed to be done. A major immigration drive was supported by the political parties, industry, trade unions, and the community generally.

A Federal Ministry of Immigration was established in 1945. Arthur Calwell, the first Minister of Immigration, announced the intention that the natural population increase of about one percent per year should be supplemented by an increase of another one percent per year from immigration.

The obvious source of immigrants was Europe. In addition to the traditional immigration from the United Kingdom there were after the War many refugees from Eastern Europe in so-called displaced persons or DP camps in western Germany who did not want to return to their homelands which were then under Soviet rule. These people were seeking to emigrate. There were also people in various western European countries, including Holland, who were attracted by the thought of leaving war-ravaged Europe and establishing themselves in Australia.

Initially Australia's efforts were concentrated on attracting British and Polish ex-servicemen from Britain, and other British migrants. The first party of post-war British immigrants arrived in January, 1947, but the numbers were small.

Australian immigration policy was revised prior to a visit to Europe by Arthur Calwell in June and July, 1947. Australia was looking for able bodied people for occupations and in locations where there was a shortage of Australians to do the work. The general age limits were set at 45 for single men, 35 for single women, and 50 for married persons with children. Fiancees were to be treated similarly to wives, provided that they put up a bond of £100 that marriage would take place within three months from the date of arrival in Australia.

Calwell visited the refugee camps in Germany and was impressed with the people. He was also conscious that a number of other countries were actively recruiting in the camps, and advised Prime Minister Chifley that Australia had to act quickly.

Australia did, indeed, act quickly. On 21st July, 1947 Calwell signed an agreement with the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), a United Nations agency which had taken over the welfare of the displaced persons' camps from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Authority. Medical and immigration screening facilities were set up. Australia paid to IRO £10 per adult towards the cost of the fares, IRO carrying the remaining cost. The immigrants did not have to pay anything, but were under contract to work for two years in any job allocated to them by the Australian government.

One of the problems was the post-war shortage of shipping. The Australian government had some damaged ships repaired and a number of ships were chartered by IRO and fitted out for transporting the migrants to Australia and other destinations. On 28th November, 1947, the former US Army transport "General Stuart Heintzelmann", arrived in Fremantle with 843 Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian refugees aboard, who were transferred to HMAS Kanimbla and reached Melbourne on 5th December, 1947. They became the first customers of the first and largest migrant reception centre at Bonegilla, which had been an Australian Army camp during the war and converted for migrant use in November, 1947. The purpose of Bonegilla was to enable documentation to be completed and for the arrivals to be allocated to various jobs and despatched to their destinations.

Many more shiploads of displaced persons followed quickly, arriving mostly in either Melbourne or Sydney. Those landing in Melbourne virtually all passed through Bonegilla. By 1950 almost 200,000 people had arrived, most of these from the refugee camps in Europe.

Immigration from Holland to Australia was small in numbers in the early years. The great flow of Dutch migrants began after an agreement between the Australian and Netherlands Governments on an Assisted Passage Scheme in 1951. A subsequent series of agreements with other countries saw large numbers of arrivals from virtually every country in Europe during the 1950's and 1960s.

In all, in the fifty years between 1945 and 1995 nearly 5.5 million people came to Australia as new settlers, a major boost to the population. Today nearly one in four of Australia's just over 18 million people was born overseas, in over 140 countries.

To comment on my own experience, I arrived at Station Pier in Melbourne from Naples on 13th November, 1949 in the converted Liberty ship M/S "Nelly", which had at one time seen service as an auxiliary aircraft carrier at Guadalcanal. We slept in three-tiered iron bunks welded

in the cargo holds. Australian immigration and customs officials on board during the voyage had completed virtually all the paperwork and formalities, and next day we were transferred by train to Bonegilla. The gently rolling dry countryside with eucalypts, an occasional glimpse of strange birds and animals, and the fruit stands at the stations were the first impressions of Australia.

The accommodation at Bonegilla was in Nissen army huts, with wooden floors and perhaps twenty iron bedsteads with army style mattresses and blankets in each. There were separate toilet blocks and dining halls, all of corrugated galvanised iron construction on timber framework and mostly without lining. It was not luxurious accommodation, but not all that different from what I had experienced in the refugee camps. In the dining hall we were introduced for the first time to cold mutton, which was not exactly wildly popular with any of us.

I do not have any particular recollections of Bonegilla, because my stay there was short: I started on my allocated job in a quarry near Adelaide in South Australia, on 21st November - a week after arriving in Bonegilla. I was looking forward to my new life and anxious to move on as soon as possible; Bonegilla was just a step on the way.

Others stayed longer, and we are particularly indebted to the book "Where Waters Meet" by Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse which is also being launched here today for an in-depth record of the experiences of many of the Dutch people who left Holland in the 1950s and 1960s, including the experiences of many of them in Bonegilla. It is interesting to read that some were happy to be on the road to something better while others were critical of the conditions and facilities. I never had the latter problem - the refugee camps in Europe had been a good training ground! According to the book, some 320,000 immigrants of many nationalities passed through Bonegilla until it was closed in December, 1971, of which the Dutch were one of the largest groups.

I must admit I did not know until I read it in the book that there were schools and even churches in Bonegilla. I just did not come across them in my few days there.

We are also greatly indebted to the Erasmus Foundation, and through them to Dirk and Marijke, the convenors, for organising this memorable exhibition. While directed particularly towards the history of Dutch immigrants, there are of course many common experiences and recollections which all those who passed through Bonegilla and, indeed, all immigrants to Australia in the post-war period, share.

May I congratulate the Erasmus Foundation and all those who have organised, contributed to, and supported the exhibition and the book "Where Waters Meet".

It is important to understand the past, and understanding of the story of post-war immigration is a vital part of Australia's past. You have rendered an important service to Australia by recording and reminding us of a part of this story.

I have much pleasure in launching the book "Where Waters Meet", and declaring the exhibition "Where Waters Meet" open.