

# WACOL REMEMBERED



**1949 – 1987**

A tribute to the migrants and refugees who commenced new lives in Australia at Wacol Migrant Centre in Queensland and the enormous contributions they have made to the community they embraced.



# Introduction

*Australia: enriched through the entry and settlement of people; valuing its heritage, citizenship and cultural diversity; and recognising the special place of Indigenous people as its original inhabitants. Australia is a land of immigrants, a place where people can prosper and futures can be made.*

## ***Australia's Migration Program***

Post World War II marked a change in pace of Australia's immigration history. It was decided that Australia's security, economic stability and destiny as a great nation depended in large measure upon a successful immigration program.

Australia's immigration program was aimed at providing an annual net population increase from migration of one per cent. This translated to a need for an annual movement of about one hundred thousand persons to Australia. Migrants from the traditional source, the United Kingdom, were targeted in the first instance. The transportation of British migrants was to be achieved through free and assisted passage schemes funded by the Commonwealth Government and the UK Government on a cost sharing basis and the commissioning of overseas passenger liners.

From January 1947 to June 1948 only 10,209 persons arrived in Australia as a result of the UK selection effort. When it became apparent that population increase targets would not be achieved during the first year of effort, other options had to be considered. The Empire and Allied Ex servicemen Scheme together with the Poles from the United Kingdom Scheme were introduced.

Despite these new schemes numbers again did not reach expectations and the program was extended to people in displaced persons camps in Germany. These people had been displaced as a result of World War II. Some had been former prisoners of war, others had been forcibly moved to Germany from German occupied East European countries for the purpose of labour. A significant number had also fled the advance of Russian forces during 1945. Camps were located in the British, French and American sectors of Germany and consisted of men, women and children from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Czechoslovakia. There were also small numbers from

Hungary and the former Yugoslavia. The camps existed under frequently appalling conditions.

The first transport of persons under the Displaced Persons Scheme arrived in Australia in November 1947. Many chose Australia ahead of other countries such as Canada and the USA because Australia was the first to accept family groups. From commencement in 1947 until discontinuation in January 1954 (due to lack of available people) 170,700 persons were moved to Australia under the Scheme.

Other schemes that operated concurrently with those mentioned above included the Irish Assisted Passage Scheme from 1948, the Maltese Assisted Passage Scheme from 1948, the Netherlands Scheme from 1948, the Italian Scheme from 1949, the German Scheme from 1952 and the Greek Scheme from 1953.

The movement and resettlement of persons during this immediate post war period offered a significant challenge to Australia, a challenge met through hard work and general acceptance of the "new" by "old" Australians.

Australia had much to offer in the post war period given the commitment to reconstruction and development particularly during the Menzies period. Development of projects such as the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electricity Scheme boosted construction to a new level. Many of these migrants contributed significantly to the building of this nation.

Australia's millionth post-war immigrant arrived in 1955, the same year that 'Operation Reunion' was launched. It was a scheme negotiated with the USSR and other East European countries designed to reunite settlers in Australia with relatives. The operation resulted in around 30,000 arrivals from the countries and regions of former Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, USSR, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

To encourage more British migration, the 'Bring out a Briton' campaign was launched in 1957. The Australian community was encouraged to take responsibility for sponsoring British families and assist them to settle. Then in 1959, the first migrants arrived under the 'Nest Egg' scheme. This scheme offered assisted passage to Britons



who had more than 500 pounds sterling and were prepared to make their own accommodation arrangements.

The introduction in 1966 of a 'Special Passage Assistance Program' (SPAP) facilitated migration for guest workers who had finished their European work contracts. It included migrants from Scandinavia, Switzerland, France and the Americas. It became the largest single program outside the British-Australia scheme with 11,000 settlers in its first year. The British assisted passage agreement was renewed in 1967 for another five years.

There were significant intakes:

- of Czech refugees following unrest in their country in 1968;
- from Chile following the overthrow of the Allende Government in 1973;
- from Indochina after the end of the Vietnam war in 1975; and
- from Poland after martial law was declared in December 1981.

### ***Migrant Hostels***

Migrant hostels, also known as immigration dependants' holding centres, migrant accommodation, migrant reception and training centres or migrant workers' hostels, were established after World War II to accommodate displaced persons and assisted migrants.

Much of the early accommodation consisted of disused army huts and other converted buildings. These were gradually replaced with purpose-built structures with improved facilities.

The Department of Labour and National Service administered migrant hostels until 1948 when the Migrant Workers' Accommodation Division was established within the Department of Immigration. The Division was organised into three regional offices – located in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide – from which hostels throughout Australia were run.

From January 1952, the administration of hostels was handed over to Commonwealth Hostels Limited, a

Commonwealth owned company registered in Victoria; the company operated until 1978. Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Services Limited, State Administration, Queensland was established on 10 May 1978, and operated until 1987. In Queensland, on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, the company provided accommodation, catering and property maintenance services at centres for newly arrived migrants to Australia and it also managed migrant flats.

Until the mid-seventies, residents were primarily assisted passage migrants who used the hostels for initial accommodation while they established themselves in Australia. The low cost, subsidised accommodation served as an incentive to migrate at a time when Australia was actively seeking migrants.

The primary role of on-arrival accommodation has changed over time. At first a means of manpower placement for post World War II refugees, it then became an incentive for migration for Assisted Passage migrants. Finally, it provided for the urgent physical needs of new arrivals, particularly refugees and served as a delivery point for crucial settlement services.

Migrant Centres played an important part in assisting migrants and refugees to settle in Australia. Migrant centres prepared new arrivals for settlement by providing centre-based on-arrival orientation and English language programs as well as other settlement support services. Migrant centres also served to help place and disperse new arrivals more widely throughout Australia and provide a stable, reliable and high volume resource for managing surges and unexpected pressures in the migration program.

With the wind down of the assisted passage scheme in 1981, migrant centres focussed on the provision of on-arrival accommodation and settlement services to refugees and humanitarian program entrants.

### ***Wacol***

This region was the home of the Yerongpan clan of Oxley Creek who spoke the Yaggera dialect of the Turrbal language. Escaped convicts Pamphlet, Finnegan and



Parsons were the first white men to make observations of these people in 1823. They found two Aboriginal canoes tied at the mouth of Oxley Creek (which they named Canoe Creek). In 1828 Cunningham and Fraser noted huts in the vicinity of Oxley or Inala. The only evidence of a bora ring is at the end of Kertes Road, Camira, on the banks of Sandy Creek.

Tuberculosis and other diseases rapidly reduced the Aboriginal population of the region and smallpox took its toll from as early as 1831.

Land sales in the area in 1851, saw Stephen Simpson acquire the first property in the area, which was then known as Woogaroo. Simpson's legacy is Wolston House, which is now a National Trust property. The township was surveyed and sold in 1864. An early inn on the roadside was called Wolston Inn. The name was changed to Wacol in 1927 because of the confusion with the Brisbane suburb of Wilston.

The origins of the name Wacol have links with the weighbridge, which weighed all the coal from the West Moreton field from 1914.

In 1942, the United States Army built Camp Columbia at Wacol, sixteen kilometres from Brisbane, to accommodate American troops in Brisbane during the Pacific War, from 1942 to 1945. After the end of World War II, the site was taken over by the Australian Army.

In 1949 the Department of Immigration acquired the site and the buildings were used to house migrants from Europe. The camp was then known as the Wacol East Dependents Holding Camp for Displaced Persons.

From 1950 to 1951 it was used as a Migrant Centre. The original timber army huts consisted of 340 rooms, which were served by communal toilet and ablution facilities. The estimated capacity of the Wacol Camp in May 1950 was 600 persons, but when completed had a capacity of approximately 1600. During 1950 and 1952, the capacity of the camp was exceeded, reaching close to 2000. Under these circumstances tents were used to supplement the huts. Wacol Camp also provided accommodation for some staff. Australian staff were mainly employed in

administration, clerical and supervisory areas, while migrants were mostly employed as cleaners, kitchen and linen store staff, and groundsmen.

Additional brick accommodation blocks of 93 bedrooms were opened in July 1968. The original timber army huts eventually fell into disrepair and were disposed of in March 1985.

In 1987 the Department of Immigration considered redeveloping Wacol Centre. This proposed work was part of a general strategy towards replacing older institutional style accommodation at migrant centres throughout Australia with self-catering style accommodation. Plans for redevelopment did not eventuate and other strategies for on-arrival accommodation and settlement service provision were established. The Wacol Migrant Centre ceased operation in 1987 and the site was cleared in 1990. The Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre now stands on the site.

Since the end of World War II over six million migrants and around 600,000 humanitarian entrants have come to Australia from over 170 countries. Today the migration program is global, using one set of criteria for applicants anywhere in the world.

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### *Acknowledgements*

*The following sources of information were used when compiling this introduction:*

- *Brisbane City Council BrisBites website (www.brisbites.com)*
- *Information from Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works*
- *Donna Kleiss, Dependents and Separation: The Wacol Immigrants Holding Camp (1947 – 1962): A History of Government Policy and Women's Experiences, 1992.*
- *National Archives of Australia Fact Sheet 170*