The papers of ‘enemy aliens’ who were interned in Australia during the First World War have been added to UNESCO Australian Memory of the World register in recognition of their national significance.

During the First World War nearly 7000 ‘enemy aliens’, mainly men of German and Austro-Hungarian origins, were interned in camps in Australia.

On October 29, 1914 the Commonwealth government assented to the War Precautions Act, conferring upon the government and military authorities wide-ranging powers. By the end 1914, commandants of the military districts had been given the authority to intern enemy subjects whose conduct they believed was ‘disaffected or disloyal’. This legislation evolved from initially interning people who were foreign nationals and those of military age or reservists of the armed forces of enemy countries, to include naturalized people and even Australians born in Australia who were removed by one or two generations from ‘enemy origin’.

Most of those interned were civilians. Many had been well respected members of the German-Australian community, possessing a wide variety of qualifications and professions. The remainder were either sailors of enemy nations who had been taken off ships whilst in Australian ports, or they were residents of other British dominions in Asia or the Pacific region who were transported to Australia. The Commonwealth government officially designated them, ‘prisoners of war’.

Camps, referred to at the time as ‘concentration camps', were established at Torrens Island, South Australia, Rottnest Island in Western Australia, Enoggera in Queensland, Langwarrin in Victoria, Bruny Island in Tasmania and in NSW; Trial Bay, Berrima and Holsworthy. The ‘concentration camp’ at Holsworthy, near Liverpool, New South Wales, was the largest.

The collection produced by internees at Holsworthy between 1914 and 1919 comprises personal papers and diaries written by internees (some written in English, German and other European languages, such as Croatian), along with playbills, concert programs and ephemera of camp life and drawings. There are also periodicals or newspapers which were written and published at the various internment camps. These periodicals contain news articles and editorials, poetry, drawings and a multitude of advertisements for the various businesses that were established at the camps. The variety of periodicals (mostly published in German), neatly illustrate the popular German expression used at the time, ‘Rast’ ich – so rost’ ich’ (If I rest, I rust). This attitude seems to have been
widely held by many internees; the belief that if they stayed busy, they would stay sane.

167 extraordinary glass photonegatives of camp life, taken by a camp guard, depict the daily life and living conditions of internees.

gcc_holdsworthy_-_a_lonely_internee_a9573007h.jpg
The authors of the diaries and personal papers were men interned in various camps in Australia and from markedly different backgrounds. Some of these men were crew from German ships which happened to be in port when war was declared, including survivors from the S.S. Emden. The crews were detained and then interned in a variety of camps, (such as Friedrich Meier). Some men had been transported from British colonies in Southeast Asia; Wilhelm Woelber, a German merchant arrested in Singapore and subsequently interned at Trial Bay and Holsworthy. Phillip Wittmann was an employee of a German company in the Philippines. He was arrested in Hong Kong and sent to Trial Bay initially, then Holsworthy.

Other prisoners had been living in Australia for many decades, some had become naturalized Australians, or had married Australians. Frank Bungardy, a German-born man who was living in South Australia, had married an Australian woman and had two children. He had worked as a miner for a decade in Broken Hill, yet was arrested and taken to Torrens Island internment camp and then transferred to Holsworthy. He attempted to escape from Holsworthy, but was recaptured. Bungardy wrote a number of accounts of living conditions in the camps, as well as contributing information for government inquiries into the living conditions at Torrens Island camp and Holsworthy. He also wrote petitions and protest letters to individuals and organisations such as the American consulate and the Trade and Labor Council, appealing for assistance from the harsh living and labour conditions and unjust treatment by camp authorities. All of Bungardy’s papers are written in English, his second language.

The collections began to be acquired by the Library after the war, mostly from staff who had worked at the Holsworthy camp. Some of the papers were allegedly compulsorily acquired by camp guards before prisoners were deported. According to contemporary newspaper reports published after the First World War, internees, when released, were forced to surrender any personal papers or diaries prior to their deportation to Germany:

‘Every effort was made to prevent them carrying out from the camps any records likely to be of use in the compilation of a true history of what they had gone through. The men were stripped and searched, their correspondence, official diaries, records and photographs were taken from them - in fact, anything likely to incriminate the administration was seized before they were turned loose.’ THE INTERNMENT SCANDALS, Murray Pioneer & Australian River Record, Friday 10 October, 1919, p. 7.

The 167 glass negatives of the German Concentration camp at Holsworthy were sold to the Library by a Corporal Dening, an employee of the Holsworthy internment camp. He worked as a guard at the camp Post Office and documented the life of the internment camp through his photography. He advertised copies of his photographs for sale in the camp newspaper.

making_the_best_of_it_a9573031h.jpg [3]
The collection helps to document one of the less heroic stories of the home front during the First World War, when thousands of men considered ‘enemy aliens’ were detained in concentration camps. Internment had a devastating effect on individuals and families and left a lasting legacy of fear and hurt within the sizeable German community in Australia after the war.

The collection documents aspects of daily life in the camp and highlights the creative ways in which inmates tried to preserve both culture and sanity under confinement. However it also includes evidence of internal prisoner extortion by a group known as the ‘Black Hand’ gang, and of a riot against this gang at Holsworthy in 1916 where twenty gang members were beaten and the bodies thrown over the seven foot high fence to the Commandant and Australian officers who were observing the riot on the other side.

The collection is significant for the evidence it provides of life in the concentration camps and of the emotional impact on individual internees. Along with holdings in the National Archives and National Library of Australia, and important collections held internationally (notably the Paul Dubotzki collection in Germany), it preserves evidence of one of the important, but lesser-known stories of the home front during the First World War.
At the beginning of the war, people of German descent were the largest non-British immigrant group in Australia. However after the war, almost all of those who were interned in Australia were repatriated to Germany. This forced repatriation for most of these internees back to a war devastated Germany was a tragic conclusion to a traumatic wartime experience. Internees wishing to stay in Australia had to apply in writing to the Aliens Board for permission, but very few application were successful. Frank Bungardy wrote to the Board that his desire to stay in Australia was for family reasons, specifying that his wife and children only spoke English. Despite his application and reasoning, his request was rejected and he was deported in October 1919. It is understood that his family remained in South Australia.

References

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Migration Heritage Centre website [6]

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