



Building a life

THE JENNINGS GERMANS STORY

15 FEBRUARY – 18 JULY 2020

CANBERRA MUSEUM + GALLERY

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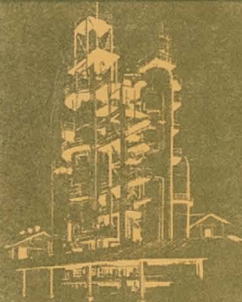
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THE CANBERRA



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The young are often adventurous and daring, and so was the case with the 150 German tradesmen who, in the early 1950s, left the security of their homeland and comfort of their families to travel across the world to Australia, to work in a tiny city called Canberra.

'When I signed up and looked at a map where Australia was, I nearly fainted.'

– Josef Reicheneder

Only a few years earlier the two countries had been at war. Now, the men were here to help. Employed by AV Jennings Construction Company to fill a labour shortage, they were hired on a 2-year contract to build 1,850 homes in Australia's young capital.

High wages, a chance to see the world and the knowledge that it was 'only for 2 years' convinced many of the men – most in their early 20s and with no spoken English – to take the plunge.

Advertisements in German papers and on radio resulted in over 2,000 applications. The criteria for eligibility was tough – men needed to be between 21 and 40 years

old, unmarried and have formal qualifications. They also needed to pass an extremely difficult practical exam which, one of the testers would later admit, 'no Australian would have passed.' Finally, they had to clear a stringent immigration interview and health check.

The successful men sailed for Australia in five groups, arriving in late 1951 and early 1952. They were leaving behind family, friends, girlfriends – everything that was familiar to them. As the shores of Germany disappeared their emotions were rolling like the waves, from the highs of excitement and hope to the lows of fear, doubt and regret.

'I went on deck ... it was getting dark and when it started to rain I thought 'what have I done?'

– Alfons Stuetz

The long journey by ship allowed the men time to form friendships which would, in many cases, last over 70 years. For example Horst Steppke and Fred Senger met on the ship, worked together for AV Jennings, travelled to Papua New Guinea together and

later built houses right next door to each other, raising their families as neighbours for 30 years.

Arriving in Canberra was – to say the least – a shock. The men had left a German winter and arrived in the middle of an Australian summer. It was hot, with a million flies and ... where was the city!?

'It was dusty, empty ... it really seemed like the end of the world.' – Kurt Klemmer

Those who spoke basic English were made crew leaders and the men began to work almost immediately.

There was a lot to learn. Although they were highly skilled joiners, used to making quality cabinets and furniture, here they were knocking huge nails into Australian hardwood beams under a burning sun. They had to learn not only English, but the 'colourful' language of the Aussie building site, to measure in imperial and not metric and to 'reset' their work speed to match their local counterparts. 'We were constantly told to work more slowly and not be so productive each day',

recalled Albert Schneider. And, of course, to 'drink fast', laughs Klaus Scharrer.

Initial reservations from their Australian colleagues were quickly replaced when the quality of the Germans' work became apparent, and 'we became good friends' says Alfons Stuetz. The group became affectionately known as the 'Jennings Germans'.

The time passed quickly. Brick by brick and friendship by friendship the men built not only houses but also a life for themselves. In their spare time they explored the city, went bushwalking and dancing, formed clubs, a successful band, sporting teams and became an important part of the community. They started to feel 'at home'.

'Life settled into a pattern as one day followed another... the town somehow began to look more pleasant and the landscape more inviting.'
– Karl Cloos

At the end of the two years many of the men were not ready to return to Germany. Some wanted to earn more

money, others felt there were exciting opportunities still to be explored.

Several started their own businesses – building houses, furniture or cabinetry. Others went to work on the Snowy Hydro Scheme or tried their luck interstate. Over 75 stayed in Canberra and Queanbeyan and as the years passed, they contributed to prominent projects including Telstra Tower, Australian Parliament House and the Australian National University.

Of course, they did not do it alone. They were loved, supported and encouraged by the women who became their wives – many of whom also made the long journey from Germany to Australia, leaving behind their own families to follow love on the other side of the world. Others were Australian girls who bravely weathered the prejudice (often from their own families) of marrying a 'German foreigner'.

The women worked in the family business, ran the families and were a

constant source of love, friendship and support.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. There was some loneliness and isolation and not all men lasted the two years, but overall, as Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Mr Mackeller said in 1977, 'one would have to look afar to find a better example of migration than that of the 150 German carpenters.'

Their arrival and continual presence altered the built and cultural landscape of the young capital and enriched both immensely. Their legacy continues to live on—in the many buildings that bear their fingerprints, in the migrants who followed them and found the path a bit easier, and in their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who—showing the same initiative and skill—continue to build their own lives here.

The Jennings Germans remind us of the wonderful benefits migration can bring, and how we—as individuals and communities—can learn and be enriched by people from other countries and cultures who arrive at our door. We only need to let them in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the Jennings Germans community, their families and friends for the wonderful assistance I have been given in putting this exhibition together. It would not have been possible without your support, and it has been a pleasure to get to know you all. I would also like to thank AV Jennings and the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Canberra for their generous financial support of the exhibition and their continued recognition of the important role played by the Jennings Germans in Canberra's history. To the many others who helped – thank you.

Sharon Bulkeley

An exhibition developed by Canberra Museum and Gallery.

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