

World War II displaced people - 1

The end of World War II should have been a time of great hope and excitement for everyone. But for many people in Europe, where cities had been turned into battlefields, the aftermath of war was just a different kind of nightmare.

Thousands had lost their homes in bombing raids. Others who had been liberated from camps were unable to return home. Yet more were fleeing their homes to escape the newly-established communist regimes. Hundreds of thousands of people were on the move without access to food, fresh water, warm clothes, a place to sleep, shower or even go to the toilet. They had nowhere to call home.

The International Refugee Organisation took up their plight and attempted to find countries that would open their doors to these victims of war. Between 1947 and 1951, almost 180 000 people came to Australia under the 'Displaced Persons Program'. The Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, chose to accept the fair-skinned people from the Baltic nations before others because he believed they would be more acceptable to the Australian people.

Australia wanted foreign migrants to 'assimilate' into Australian society. 'New' Australians were expected to abandon their native languages and cultural practices. The hope was that, in time, there would be no differences between 'old' and 'new' Australians. This made life very hard for the migrants who had already lost family and personal possessions. They did not want to lose their identities as well. They lived in camps where they were taught English and how to blend into the Australian way of life.

To pay for their passage and settlement in Australia, the refugee migrants had to agree to work for two years on a government project. The government was committed to developing facilities in towns and cities and to major engineering projects, such as the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme. Displaced men were employed as labourers on these projects. Women were employed in domestic service or in



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light industry such as clothes-making and food production.

The attempts to assimilate 'new Australians' into the Australian culture were not very successful. They were determined to hold on to their culture. Grocery stores and restaurants selling European foods sprang up and before long 'old' Australians were experiencing the delights of international cuisine.

Although initially sympathetic to their plight, 'old' Australians were not always welcoming to the new migrants and racism was common. Migrants preferred to live in national groups so they could enjoy the familiarity of their own languages and customs. In their communities, they found the support that helped them through the struggles of life in a country thousands of kilometres from home.