The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5416

Rohrmann, Emma Maria Laura Paula (Ellen)

(1888 - 1918)

Born	18880101, Munich Germany
Died	19181130, CanberraCanberra Australian Capital Territory Australia

Summary

Ellen Rohrmann was living with family in Singapore when World War I broke out. Declared an enemy alien by the ruling British, she and other relatives were transported to Australia and initially interned at Bourke, New South Wales before being moved to the Molonglo Concentration Camp in the Federal Capital Territory where Ellen died in 1918.

Details

Emma Maria Laura Paula Mueller was born circa 1888 in Munich, Germany to Luisa Herbold and Emil Mueller, merchant. ‘Ellen’ became the name people knew her by. She married Johann Rohrmann in Munich in 1913 and shortly afterwards her husband left to establish a business in Sarawak; Ellen was to join him there three months later. Tragically, Johann died of bacillic dysentery just days before Ellen arrived in Singapore. It seems she remained in Singapore with her husband’s step-brother – merchant August R.A.K. Rohrmann and his family.

On the outbreak of war, the British authorities in Singapore interned nationals of enemy countries, even if they had been naturalised as British. A later agreement between Britain and Australia saw those internees sent to Australian camps in three groups – in April and May 1915, and early in 1916. The Rohrmanns were initially sent to the camp in Bourke, New South Wales. Ellen was allocated the number W49; her brother-in-law was allocated number 38. Two other women prisoners with the name Rohrmann were interned with them – W48 M. Rohrmann and W140 R. H. Rohrmann – possibly August’s wife and daughter, or wife and mother. Because most records of internees were destroyed after World War I, there is currently no way of obtaining further detail about these people.

The Bourke camp closed in 1918 because poor conditions and intense heat created health problems. The death from heatstroke and apoplexy of one internee – 57-year-old Karl George Krafft, a timber merchant and former German Consul in Fiji – prompted the German government to demand, via the Swiss Consul in Sydney, better conditions for German nationals interned in Australia. The Australian government responded in May 1918 by moving family groups of internees to the newly built Molonglo Concentration Camp in the nation’s recently established capital at Canberra. The Molonglo camp been built for 5,000 Austrian and German nationals from China and German East Africa, but under international pressure Britain abandoned transporting them to Australia and took advantage of the empty camp to accede to the German government’s and Swiss consul’s requests. The families travelled the 1000 kilometres by steam train from Bourke to Molonglo.

While conditions at the Molonglo Camp were reportedly better than in Bourke, they were not ideal and certainly not comfortable. Sunstroke struck Ellen, followed by the related complication of pneumonia which caused the lining of her lungs to suppurate. Ellen’s heart failed and she died in Canberra Hospital, Acton on 30 November 1918, aged 30, three weeks after hostilities ended in Europe. She was buried at Queanbeyan Cemetery in nearby New South Wales (Section 1, Row O, Grave 5.) A photograph in the Australian War Memorial collection shows a line of grim-faced people, including a clergyman, at her funeral on 5 December 1918 beside the simple grave marker – a concrete cross inset with a small brass plaque inscribed ‘E.L.P. ROHRMANN / 30/11/18’.
At the end of the war 6150 of the nearly 7000 people interned as enemy aliens by the Australian government were deported to Germany. Of these, 5414 were internees and the rest were family members. August Rohrmann, and the other two female internees M. Rohrmann and R. H. Rohrmann were among those forcibly repatriated to Germany, leaving on 29 May 1919 on board the SS Kursk. During the voyage crowded conditions on board contributed to an influenza outbreak affecting 535 of the internees of whom 16 died as a result (‘Cases on the Kursk’, 1919, p. 17).
In April 1961 the Commonwealth War Graves Commission removed Ellen Rohrmann’s remains and reinterred them in the German War Cemetery, Tatura, Victoria where a total of 250 Germans who died in Australia during the two World Wars are buried: 239 civilian internees and 11 Prisoners of War.

The rectangular bronze plaque from Ellen’s original grave in Queanbeyan, with its simple inscription in raised script, is now in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Published resources

Book
Enemy aliens: internment and the homefront experience in Australia, 1914-1920, Fischer, Gerhard, 1989

The Molonglo mystery: a unique part of Canberra's history, Foskett, Alan, 2006

More about Molonglo: the mystery deepens, Foskett, Alan, 2008

Newspaper Article
Cases on the Kursk, 1919,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15848908

Site Exhibition
Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details
Niki Francis

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