Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5417

Schoeffel, Daisy Mildred

(1885 - 1969)

Born	18850922, North Fremantle Western Australia Australia
Died	19690114, EchucaEchuca Victoria Australia

Summary

Australian-born Daisy Schoeffel, with her German-born but naturalised British husband and their two British born children, were deported from Fiji to Australia in November 1917 and interned in harsh conditions as enemy aliens first in the Bourke Concentration Camp, New South Wales and then moved to the Molonglo Concentration Camp at Fyshwick in the then Federal Capital Territory (now the Australian Capital Territory). Finally released in May 1919, Daisy wrote to a Western Australian Member of Parliament – Hon. Henry Gregory – expressing her anger and humiliation at the injustice of their treatment, the shame of their status and the depth and breadth of the suffering they experienced in the camps and pleaded against the forced deportation to Germany of her family. This letter provides the basis of this entry with relation to her imprisonment during World War One.

Details

Fourth generation Australian, Daisy Mildred Pearse was the fifth of ten children born to Jessie Alice (nee Armstrong) and James Pearse in North Fremantle, Western Australia on 22 September 1885. James Pearse was a tanner whose shoe manufacturing business, later known as Pearse and Swan, evolved to be a major company in Western Australia. He served as a councillor for Fremantle 1883-1895, for North Fremantle 1895-1917 and as Mayor of North Fremantle from 1898-1901. None of this, however, protected his daughters Daisy and Hally, married to German cousins, from what lay ahead after the outbreak of World War One.

On a visit to New Zealand, Daisy met German-born businessman Alfred Emil Schoeffel who had worked for a German company in Fiji since 1908. They married at Johnston Memorial Congregational Church, Fremantle, on 19 November 1913. According to Robyn Kienzle in her book about Daisy's nephew Bert, 'The Architect of Kokoda', Daisy and Alfred married 'against furious opposition from her family' (p. 12), however the report of the large society wedding in the West Australian in November 1913, suggests the family may have come around to the marriage ('Social Notes', 1913, p. 10).

The couple initially lived in Levuka, Fiji where Daisy gave birth to three children – Kenton in 1914, Max in 1916. She later gave birth to Rex in Australia in 1924.

Alfred Schoeffel was naturalised a British subject in May 1914 and nothing immediately changed for the family after the outbreak of war in August the same year. The Schoeffels continued to live their lives as before. Back in Australia, Daisy's brother Kenton Pearse enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and saw action in France. Several of her cousins also served with the AIF. Daisy's father, James Pearse had a significant contract producing leather boots for the Australian forces, and her brother Alfred George Pearse (b. 1881) represented the Master Tanners' Association on the Western Australian advisory committee appointed by Prime Minister Billy Hughes under the war precautions leather industries regulations that ensured Commonwealth control over the manufacture of leather goods including boots. Daisy's family was thoroughly Australian but this made no difference when in 1917 the notorious German naval commander and sea raider Count Felix von Luckner evaded the British Royal Navy and ended up in Fiji, where the local community responded with xenophobic hysteria. Von Luckner and his small crew surrendered to British authorities and were shipped to New Zealand where they were interned for the duration of the war, but in the meantime the politics of fear had taken hold in Fiji and all German nationals in Fiji were deported, whether naturalised British or not.

Recovering at home from surgery to remove gallstones and her appendix, Daisy was rounded up by Fijian authorities with her family and her sister Hally and her stepchildren. All their property was seized, including their homes, and the two families forced onto the SS Atua, sailing from Suva on 1 November 1917. After travelling in abominable conditions under armed guard with little food and no washing facilities for the eight-day voyage, they were put on a train for Bourke, New South

Wales from Sydney and not permitted to make contact with their family in Western Australia. In a letter Daisy wrote to Western Australian Member of Parliament Henry Gregory in 1919, and endorsed by her sister Hally, she described their arrival at Bourke where they were paraded to the empty former Empire Hotel:

Once I was able to get some candles from a store nearby and we were able to see the state of the rooms we had to live in, we women just broke down – I wished to God I could die and my babies with me! (NAA: CRS 457, Item 406/1; Fischer 1989).

The Schoeffels and Kienzles were given straw sacks to sleep on and 'filthy dirty rusty tin plates' and mugs and a tin bucket to cook in. The authorities gave them no respite and neither did the weather. Having arrived in November, daytime temperatures were 40 degrees in shade and just as it began to cool down at 7 p.m. the prisoners were forced inside where the heat had built up during the day. Conditions were filthy; the women had to wash their children under a tap in the backyard and cook on a stove made from four bricks and an iron bar. Rations of bread and meat were often flyblown so they had to buy fresh food from local stores but as they had not been permitted to bring money from Fiji, they relied on the generosity of the other German prisoners. Many of the prisoners contracted dysentery, including Daisy and her baby son Max; they received little medical attention and Max was eventually admitted to Bourke hospital when his condition worsened. Daisy wrote of this time: 'Those next 3 weeks I can't write about. I went through hell and only thank God that I kept my reason.' The prisoners were only permitted to write two letters a week of 150 words each and these were censored so she was unable to appeal to her family in Western Australia for help.

When the German consul in Fiji, George Krafft died of heatstroke at Bourke in February 1918 and shortly afterwards an interned family's cottage burnt down in the heat, families at Bourke were shipped to the then Federal Capital Territory. After a long train journey they found themselves at the Molonglo Concentration Camp, Fyshwick where Daisy wrote 'Oh, the difference in the treatment here was very marked indeed and we all said if only we had been sent here in the first place! The officers and men were all very kind… and were most sympathetic to my sister and I and could never understand how we could be there.' Under the leadership of the respected former journalist Brigadier-General Reginald Spencer Browne the regime was more gentle. Daisy described that 'everything here was made as easy for us as discipline allowed and compared to Bourke our rations were good and plentiful.' There was, however, one drawback with Molonglo – they were in a camp on a dusty open plain, in poorly built wooden barracks that let in the rain, wind and noise from the other internees. Daisy wrote that there was constant noise all around: 'at my hut I could hear French, German, Chinese and English all day and half the night.' Her husband became seriously ill and was bed-bound for four months while Daisy became so rundown she had three and more fainting fits per day. Her physical and mental health suffered for the rest of her life.

After their release on 22 May 1919, Daisy and her sister Hally were both concerned that they would be deported to Germany as enemy aliens with their families. The British and Fijian governments supported the deportation of enemy aliens and from August 1919 the Fiji Legislative Council prohibited former enemy aliens from landing on the island. The Australian government deported 6,150 people who were deemed enemy aliens. Of these, 5,414 people had been interned, the rest were family members or those ordered by the Defence Department to leave the country. Of the more than one thousand people who appealed to the Commonwealth Alien Board against deportation, only 306 were successful including 179 naturalised or native born Australians. Daisy and her sister and their husbands were relieved when Gregory's intervention on their behalf to the Prime Minister and the Governor General apparently contributed to their deportation orders being rescinded.

Daisy and her family initially lived in Sydney. They were eventually permitted to return to Fiji in 1920 but spent only a brief time there before returning to Sydney where Alfred was again naturalised in May 1926. They lived in Turramurra, Sydney before taking up farming at Horningsea Park, near Liverpool, New South Wales sometime before 1933. Daisy and Alfred were living in Mathoura, in the New South Wales Riverina until she died at her son Max's home Chelsworth Park in nearby Echuca, Victoria on 14 January 1969. She was buried at Mathoura Cemetery on 17 January 1969.

Daisy had written to Gregory in 1919: 'what hurt us more than all the insults and hardships we were forced to endure during our 2 years internment, was the fact that we should have to suffer all this at the hands of our own men and in our country!' She said they were made to feel like criminals and brought shame on their family. Daisy blamed Australia, writing that had Australia refused Fiji's request to intern them, no other country would have done so. 'Fiji approached New Zealand first of all and they refused to intern naturalized men let alone British women!' (NAA: CRS 457, Item 406/1; Fischer 1989). According to later Schoeffel family stories, Daisy did not talk about the experience. As was so often the case, shame inhibited people from telling stories of their internment. Her letter to Gregory, published as Appendix 1 in Gerhard Fischer's Enemy aliens: internment and the home front experience in Australia, 1914-1920 (1989), powerfully relates her experience in her own words. It proved an eye-opener to her grandchildren and other relatives and is a tragic illustration of a lesser known suffering caused by war.

Published resources

Book
The enemy at home: German internees in World War I Australia, Helmi, Nadine and Fischer, Gerard, 2011

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

The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Australia during the war, Scott, Ernest, 1938

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

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

Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918, Proctor, Tammy M., 2010

Book Section
A modern-day concentration camp: using history to make sense of Australian immigration detention centres, Nethery, Amy, 2009

Newspaper Article
Social Notes, 1913,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article26891285

Leather Industries Committee, 1917,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article26891285

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

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Created 26 August 2015
Last modified 21 November 2018