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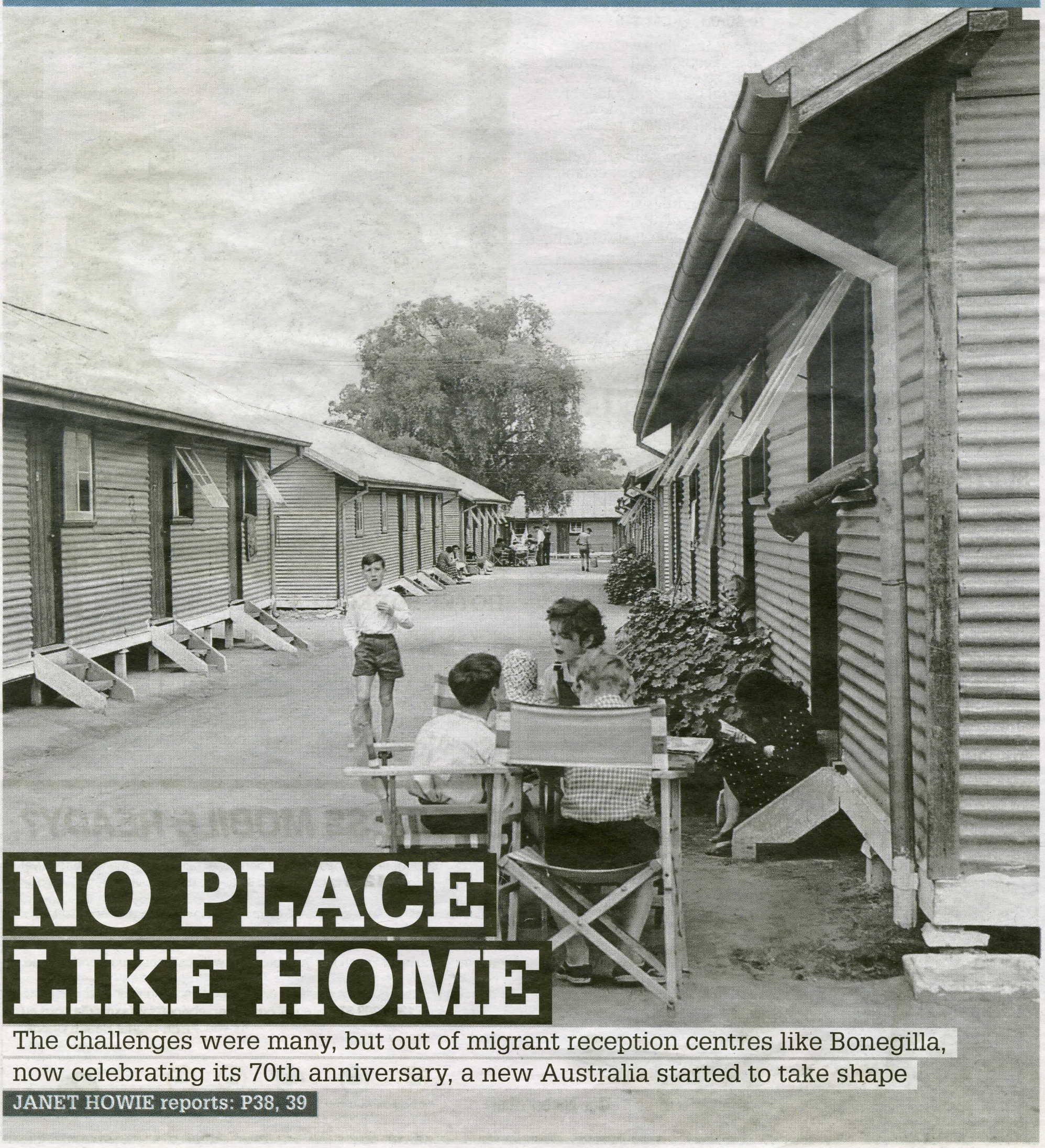

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The challenges were many, but out of migrant reception centres like Bonegilla, now celebrating its 70th anniversary, a new Australia started to take shape

JANET HOWIE reports: P38, 39

COVER STORY

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PILGRIMAGE: Edelgard (Ella) Rixon, her daughter Teena Faltermeier and sister Hildegard Lee. Picture: MARK JESSER

REMEMBERING HOW IT BEGAN

With more than 300,000 residents, who then raised families in Australia, the influence of the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre still resonates 70 years after it opened, as JANET HOWIE reports

PAUL Christiansen still recalls his first night at Bonegilla, 61 years ago, very clearly.

"It was freezing, bloody cold during the night, I tell you," he said.

"They lost our suitcases, so we didn't have anything to put on us except the thin blanket that was supplied out there."

But this chilly opening in 1956 did not last as Mr Christiansen and his wife Lorna ("newly married and on our honeymoon"), retrieved their luggage the following day and settled into nine months' residence at the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre.

As did more than 300,000 just-arrived migrants who called Bonegilla their home between 1947 and 1971.

Their number included future high achievers like business executive Sir Arvi Parbo, chef Stefano Manfredi, science author Dr Karl Kruszelnicki and the parents of actor Eric Bana.

Today the 70th anniversary of the centre's opening will be marked through live music, food, exhibitions and performances.

But neither well-known names nor formal celebrations are essential when the Bonegilla stories begin to flow.

Sisters Edelgard (Ella) Rixon and Hildegard Lee left Melbourne at 6am last week to visit the centre, where they arrived with their family, the Schallers from Germany, in 1960.

"I remember that long train trip and not knowing where you're going or anything like that, we thought it would never end," Mrs Rixon said. "So many people, it was very overwhelming."

The Schallers, three girls under 10 years, their father and mother, who was pregnant with twins, had already endured a trying six-week ship journey to Australia.

NEW HOME: Italian migrants stand at the centre's entrance in 1954. This picture supplied by Italian Historical Society for 2007's 60th anniversary.

Warned to stay close together while out walking during the Suez Canal stop, the girls' mother had fallen behind, just a little, when the others heard her scream.

"They were trying to drag her into a car," Ms Lee recalled.

"The guide ran with Dad and pulled her back," her sister added.

Even before that came painful experiences of escaping soldiers when fleeing East Germany for the west.

"They were shooting at us, we were hiding under the bridge," Ms Lee said, blinking back tears.

She has never returned to Germany, a homeland she left without realising.

"When we came (to Australia) we children assumed we were coming home again because we thought it was a holiday," she said.

Wodonga Council team leader, tourism and development, Bernadette Zanet, said Bonegilla today was where family stories were passed on.

"I think it takes people back to those reasons why all those years ago they needed to leave their country," she said. "It's hard to leave family, hard to leave your culture and stretch out into the unknown."

weekender.

TOP: Paul and Lorna Christiansen, then aged 21 and 20 respectively, chose immigration to Australia as a honeymoon trip.

LEFT: Wodonga couple Lorna and Paul Christiansen say a positive attitude helped them adjust after they arrived at Bonegilla from Denmark in 1956. **Picture: MARK JESSER**

ABOVE: The climate and conditions at Bonegilla proved a culture shock to many migrants.

At Bonegilla the Schaller sisters longed for their own bread instead of salad sandwiches turned soggy by the beetroot, loved the afternoon trucks that brought hot chocolate and made sure not to delay washing up in the communal concrete tubs.

"If you didn't get there quick you had a pea soup," Mrs Rixon said.

Six decades on, Mr and Mrs Christiansen remembered little to complain about in the centre.

"I think we were fed mutton a little bit too often, but other than that it was fantastic," Mr Christiansen said with a laugh.

"We got a few dollars together, bought a car and then we moved into Wodonga."

The Christiansens returned to Wodonga recently after various homes and businesses in places like Gippsland, Melbourne, Albury and Queensland.

"Figuring out that, now being in our 80s, seeing that we saw our first (Australian) sunrise in Bonegilla, we'd come back to Wodonga and see our last sunset," he said.

Originally from Denmark, Mr and Mrs Christiansen coped with the change of climate, language and customs that came with moving halfway across the world, but some of their fellow residents did not.

> Good times, hard times, I think it has got a lot to do with how people's heads have been screwed on. You know, it's a lot easier to laugh than be a grump all day and I think that generally pays off.
>
> **Paul Christiansen**

"They were there at the same time and they lived there under the same conditions," Mr Christiansen said.

"They thought it was shocking and they went back home.

"Good times, hard times, I think it has got a lot to do with how people's heads have been screwed on. You know, it's a lot easier to laugh than be a grump all day and I think that generally pays off."

Border historian Bruce Pennay said the Bonegilla residents represented Australia's first wave of non-British migrants.

"They spoke different languages, they looked different," he said. "And that makes it a kind of forerunner of an Australia of many different cultures."

Ms Zanet said it was a time when Australia's leaders followed a bold vision.

"Bold in the sense of this was something that hadn't been tried before on such a large scale and such an organised scale," she said.

The people of Albury-Wodonga, however, did not always appreciate such boldness.

Mr Christiansen said he and his wife were considered "definitely 'New Australians'".

"In the bus my wife and I would be talking Danish to one another and I got a little tap on the shoulder, 'Hi mate, in this country we speak English'," he laughed.

Lack of English proved a challenge for many migrants – Mrs Rixon's first words in her new language were "Shut up".

"You heard a lot of that," her sister explained wryly.

The adult migrants longed for work but sometimes there were no jobs available.

Dr Pennay said the 1952 and 1961 riots arose largely from having nothing to do in a strange place in the middle of nowhere.

"It was, as residents, warming to the vernacular, said 'boring Boney-bloody-gilla'," he said.

The historian said Bonegilla, above anything else, was a people place.

"I just love the way people have, probably unofficially, come and scattered the ashes of somebody who was a migrant here," he said.

"Or they've asked for some dirt to put in the coffin of the person being buried or they've left their wedding rings as a donation to the museum.

"It's those personal things; that this place was important to my life because this signified my change by coming to Australia."

Ms Zanet invited everyone to join today's anniversary celebrations, from former residents to those without a direct connection.

"We think that there are some really important stories and we welcome the opportunity to share everybody's stories here," she said.