

Viva il Duce: The Influence of Fascism on Italians in South Australia in the 1920s and 1930s

Desmond O'Connor*

The first big increase in the size of the Italian community in Australia occurred after World War I, due mainly to the tightening up by the USA of its immigration laws, including the application of a quota system, and also to the introduction by the Italian shipping line Lloyd Sabaudo of a direct link between Italy and Australia. As a result, the number of Italians in Australia more than tripled in the 1920s and 1930s, growing from 8 000 in 1921 to 30 000 in the period before the Second World War. In South Australia the increase was six-fold: from an official census figure of just 344 in 1921 to about 2 000 by 1940.

With the rise to power of Mussolini in 1922 the Fascist government started organising Fascist Party branches abroad with the aim of 'fascistising' throughout the world Italian migrants and their activities.' In November 1924 a Commissioner for Emigration, Virgilio Lancellotti, was sent to the Melbourne consulate to set up an information office and to prepare a report for Rome on the Italian community in Australia. While in Melbourne Lancellotti met, and hired as his secretary, Giuseppe Ameno, who had arrived there in August 1924.³ Amerio, an accountant by profession, was devoted to the Fascist cause, having been deputy mayor in early 1923 in the first Fascist local government administration in his home town of San Marzano Oliveto (prov. Asti) in Piedmont and in 1923 and 1924 administrative secretary of

Desmond O'Connor is Senior Lecturer in the Italian Discipline at the Flinders University of South Australia.

1 From 1923 the establishment of Party branches world-wide was co-ordinated and assisted by a Secretariat-General of Fasci Abroad. In the latter part of the decade diplomatic representation was expanded and all positions filled by politically-active, Italian-born officials who were mainly war veterans. Between 1928 and 1929 as many as 70 new consulates were opened abroad and 120 new consular appointments made. In Australia Fascist Vice-Consuls were appointed to Perth, Sydney, Brisbane and Townsville. In 1928 a new Statute for Fascist Branches Abroad was issued by Rome, ordering the local branches to defend the *italianità* of the migrant community (against pressures of absorption into the host society) and to cooperate with and obey the directions of the consular representative. For more details see D Fabiano, 'I fasci italiani all'estero', in B Bezza (ed.), *Gli italiani fuori d'Italia*, Milan, 1983, pp 223-232.

2 G Cresciani, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945*, Canberra, 1980, p 11.

3 Australian Archives (hereafter AA): D1919, SS378, Ameno to the Secretariat-General of Italian Fasci Abroad, 17 October 1939.

Editorial Committee:

RM Gibbs, RPJ Nicol, JD Playford, JT Stock

The Historical Society of South Australia gratefully acknowledges the support of the History Trust of South Australia in the production of this Journal.

ISSN 0312-9640

the local Fascio.⁴ In May 1925, on the recommendation of Lancellotti, Amerio was appointed secretary to the Honorary Consular Agent for Italy in South Australia, Australian-born Eric S Paterson, a licensed land-broker and principal in the firm of Maelor, Jones and Paterson, Land and Estate Agents in Currie Street. When Lancellotti that same month was made Fascist Party delegate for Australasia with the task of setting up local Fasci, he immediately nominated Amerio the Party trustee for South Australia with the responsibility for setting up a Branch in this State.⁵ Paterson was appreciative of the administrative assistance that Amerio was able to give him at a time when the number of Italians arriving in Adelaide was increasing markedly, especially since Paterson, although he had been Consular Agent since 1910, had a knowledge of Italian that was, by his own admission, limited to being able to read and understand the language 'fairly well' and being able to write and speak it 'a little'.⁶ The two seem to have got on reasonably well together. When in July 1926 Paterson relinquished his position as Consular Agent for Italy (although he continued to assist Amerio in a subordinate role for several years), he informed the Governor of South Australia that the Italian was 'a very worthy and capable gentleman'.⁷ Amerio, for his part, ignored Paterson's advice to keep out of politics and to treat all Italians alike, whether they be Fascist or anti-Fascist. Instead, he felt it his duty to convert the local community to the Fascist cause. In his first months in Adelaide he spent his evenings and weekends contacting the local Italians and making the acquaintance of those in the community who had already belonged to the Fascist Party before leaving Italy or who were sympathetic to Fascism.⁸

Amerio's initial attempts at proselytising met with little success, for which he blamed the antagonism of a small number of Italian 'subversives' who lived in Adelaide boarding houses and associated with anti-Fascist Italian miners from Broken Hill.⁹ When on 15 November 1925 at his home in Torrensville he setup the first South Australian Fascist Section, there were just two members, himself and Giovanni Battista Carollo, a toolmaker employed at Holden's, Woodville, who had been a Fascist in Italy from 1921 and had participated in the March on Rome and in punitive expeditions against anti-Fascists in the Trentino in 1922.¹⁰ At a second meeting at Amerio's home on 22 March 1926 the members had become six in number, although Amerio reported that only two actually turned up, the excuse

4 *ibid.*

5 AA: AP501/2. Amerio. *Libro doro*, p 2, and D1919. SS378. Amerio to Secretariat-General, 18 June 1934.

6 AA: AP 501/2, Folder 73. Paterson to Consul-General Grossardi, 20 March 1926. and Paterson to Governor Bridges, 29 July 1926.

7 *ibid.* 29 July 1926.

8 AA: D 1919. SS378, Amerio to Secretariat-General, 17 October 1939.

9 *ibid.*, and Amerio to Lancellotti. 29 October 1928.

10 AA: D1915, SA13249, and AP501/2. *Libro d'oro*, p3.

being that the others were temporarily absent from Adelaide because of work commitments." Seven months later (20 October 1926) the number had increased to thirteen, still too few to turn a Section into a recognised Fascio, for which Fascist regulations required a membership of 25. This number he finally managed to muster on 4 June 1927 when, by now fully installed as the South Australian Consular Agent for Italy, he called a meeting at the Consulate office at 17 Currie Street and declared the Fascist Branch formed.¹¹ A president, secretary and assistant-secretary were elected by secret ballot, with Amerio remaining Party trustee. But since an election was too democratic a procedure that risked loosening the required close-knit bond between Fascio, Consulate and Rome, Amerio was immediately ordered by Lancellotti to take on, as the official government representative, the presidency of the Fascio and to nominate his committee himself. The following year Amerio received further advice that Rome had abolished trusteeships and traditional committee positions in favour of a subordinate management committee that was to be appointed by the local Party Political Secretary who in turn would be appointed by, and responsible directly to, the Secretariat-General of Fascists Abroad in Rome.

¹¹ *Libro d oro*, p 4.

¹² *ibid.* p5.

Amerio now formally became the Political Secretary of the Adelaide Fascio, a position he occupied continuously until 1940.¹³

An early decision that the newly-formed Fascio made in June 1927 was to set about organising a Club. Several members, including Mario Auricchio, were instructed to publicise the plan and collect fees, but the idea found little favour amongst the local Italians, even after the then-president of the Fascio, Gustavo Ocner, who had become critical of the lack of progress in setting up the Club, assigned to himself alone the task of seeking membership subscriptions from the Italian community. When Ocner angrily reported in September that only three Fascists had agreed to pay a subscription, the idea was promptly dropped.¹⁴ In the meantime, however, much to the annoyance of the Fascists, Auricchio, who had an estate agency in King William Street, had decided to found his own Club, independent of the Fascio. This he managed to do with the help of Italians in small business and with the promise that the Club would be non-political and non-religious.¹⁵ Such a move was quite unacceptable to Amerio, who had clear instructions from Rome that all clubs and associations had to be under the control of the local Fascist Party. Despite great pressure from Ocner, Auricchio would not change his mind, insisting that in his Club, to be called the Vittorio Veneto Club (after the town and the battle that had become the symbol of Italy's victory in World War I), Fascist members would not be allowed to wear their black shirts nor organise Fascist celebrations. In December the Fascists decided to sack the Club meeting, with the result that they succeeded in putting Fascists on the committee. But since Auricchio remained manager of the Club and had backed it financially, he called new elections in January and at the January meeting introduced 49 of his own new members, made up, in Ocner's words, of 'Communist hotheads and individuals of questionable class living in Hindley Street boarding houses'.¹⁶ A pro-Auricchio, anti-Fascist committee was duly elected, which induced Ocner and other Fascists to resign from the Club. The Vittorio Veneto Club, however, survived only to April 1929, owing to financial difficulties and the Depression, which forced some of its main supporters, including Auricchio himself, to leave Adelaide."

Failure to penetrate and absorb the Vittorio Veneto Club in 1928 proved of no great moment to the Adelaide Fascio, for these years 1928 and 1929 were marked by a large increase in its membership, with enrolments jumping from 33 at the

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ AA: AP501/2, Italian Club, Ocner to Amerio, 16 November 1927.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, Ocner to Amerio, 7 January 1928.

¹⁷ AA: D1915, SA1618, Melano to Amerio, 22 February 1932; D 1915, SA 19054, Ocner to Secretariat-General, 5 May 1929.

beginning of 1928 to 77 at the beginning of 1929 to 169 in 1930 and 173 in 1931. Amongst the reasons for this increase were: the very active involvement now of influential businessmen Umberto (Alberto) Del Fabbro and Felice Maggi who, on joining the Management Committee, became the Fascio's most ardent propagandists; the creation under the Fascist umbrella of a Women's Group, a Youth Group and (from 1932) a Saturday Italian school; the support and recognition given to the Fascio by the Catholic Church and, occasionally, in localities outside Adelaide, by the local mayor;¹⁸ last, but not least, the propaganda and persuasion of Amerio, who in his ongoing attempt to have his official appointment upgraded from Consular Agent to Vice-Consul boasted to Lancellotti that he had managed to 'create a colony and make it Fascist', a success he claimed to be due in part to his method of summoning his adversaries to his office 'to caution them or lecture them or rebuke them'.¹⁹ Amerio did not add that he could also threaten them by reminding them that, if they were not sympathetic to the Fascist cause, he could obstruct their application to bring out family members from Italy or could make more difficult for them any plan they might have of repatriating to Italy.²⁰ As for his claim that the Italian community in SA was by the end of the 1920s totally Fascist, this was a gross exaggeration. While there was no organised anti-Fascist movement amongst the local Italians, the majority were not interested in getting involved in politics, as evidenced by the small number of Fascist members compared to the total Italian population. Indeed, in the early 1930s the number of members of the Adelaide Fascio actually began to decrease, and during the latter part of the decade remained stagnant at around 100.²¹ Amerio was always at great pains to explain away this failure to expand further. His excuses were invariably that the Italian community in SA was not a stable population, since Italians were always travelling in search of work, that it was a community spread so widely throughout the State that it could never be brought together for any function, and that it was so impoverished that it could not afford to contribute financially to the

¹⁸ The mayor of Port Wakefield was present at the constitution of the Port Wakefield Section of the Adelaide Fascio in November 1932, and the mayor of Port Pine was frequently in attendance at Port Pine Fascist functions (AA: AP501/2, *Cronistoria del Fascio di Port Pifie*).

¹⁹ AA: D1919, SS378, Amerio to Lancellotti, 8 October 1929.

²⁰ Ameno opposed, for example, the application by Adelaide tailor Ugo Pozza to bring out to Australia his two sisters because Pozza had 'never given any indication that he still possessed good Italian sentiments' (AA: D1915, 3569, Amerio to Melbourne Consul Anzilotti, 17 May 1933). Because of this, the application was held up for four years, until Pozza with an apparent change of heart began to behave 'reasonably correctly' and 'participated in the life of the [Italian] community and in patriotic celebrations' (*ibid.*, Ameno to Secretariat, 26 February 1935, to Anzilotti, 18 December 1935, and to Melbourne Acting Consul Borsi,

18 October 1939). However, in 1939, when it was discovered that Pozza had reportedly given Adelaide police a list of names of local Fascists, Ameno once again wrote to the Melbourne consulate recommending that requests or applications of any kind lodged by Pozza through the consulate be refused (*ibid.*, Amerio to Borsi, 18 October and 30 October 1939).

²¹ AA: AP501/2, *Libro d'ora*, pp 13-17.

various Fascist activities. Even the formation in Adelaide of a soccer team was out of the question, he reported in 1935, because the South Australian colony was 'too poor and too scattered'.²² He did make a token gesture towards proselytising one small country group when in 1932 he brought together 25 Italian fishermen at Port Wakefield and formed there a sub-branch of the Adelaide Fascio. But since most of these fishermen had moved to the Port Adelaide area by 1938, the Port Wakefield sub-branch was dissolved and transferred to suburban Glanville where the Adelaide Fascio had already (from 1934) initiated a Saturday Italian class for the fifteen to twenty children of the fishermen in the area.²³ As far as the Port Adelaide Italians were concerned, there is no evidence to suggest that Amerio was interested in approaching and converting to his cause the fifty or so Italian wharf labourers employed, mainly as volunteers, at the Port Adelaide docks.

22 *ibid.* Dopolavoro, p 6.

23 *ibid.* Amerio to Secretariat-General, 27 September 1938.

One country group he did successfully fascistise were the fisher folk in Port Pirie. In 1928 several members of the Adelaide Fascio, Port Adelaide fishermen from the village of Molfetta in Southern Italy, urged Amerio to consider forming a Fascio at Port Pirie where their relatives were part of a large Italian community (c. 400), consisting mainly of other fishermen and their families from Molfetta.²⁴ The possibilities of success were obvious: the community was localised; it was close-knit, not only because most of the Italians were engaged in the fishing industry, but also because they came from the same Italian town and many were inter-related; although they spent weeks at a time on their boats fishing away from Port Pirie, they always returned to port whenever there was a reason to celebrate, such as a religious festival. Furthermore, in the Port Pirie community were other Italians who were employed at the Broken Hill Associated Smelters and, although these were mainly Northern Italians from Venetia and Tuscany, they too might be fascistised.

Unlike the slow start of the Adelaide Fascio, the Port Pirie Fascio was well supported at the outset: on the 1929 Easter weekend Amerio, Del Fabric, Ochner and Michele Cappel from Port Adelaide went to Port Pirie and were greeted by an organising committee that had already publicised the meeting to be held that evening, 1 April, in the Parish Hall of St Mark's Catholic Church. No fewer than 170 Italians attended, 107 membership subscriptions of 5/- were paid, and a Committee was appointed with Vito Capurso as Secretary. His position was subsequently confirmed in Rome by Piero Parini, the Secretary General of Fascist Branches Abroad, who several months later reminded Capurso of his duties in a long letter couched in typical Fascist rhetoric:²⁵ full documentation must be forwarded to Rome of each new member's 'political, moral, and military-service history'; members of the Fascio abroad, 'dear to the heart of the National Government', were expected to be 'advance sentinels of Italian-ness'; the Fascio's Women's Group was expected to be readily available to work in the area of welfare where opportunities were 'limitless'; the young Fascist children, 'the most treasured of the whole Fascist organization', and destined to be the 'perfect Fascists of tomorrow', needed to be especially nurtured because they were 'pure and free of unsavoury contact' and their hearts could 'receive the good seed for which they themselves [would] one day be grateful to us'. Such verbose directives probably made little sense to the average, semi-literate fisherman of Port Pirie, whose main task was survival of himself and his family in a period of severe economic hardship. The Fascio was not seen by them as the tangible presence of a grand political ideal, but rather as a useful direct link with Italy and specifically with Molfetta, whose local Fascio could and did

24 *ibid.* Cronistoria del Fascio di Port Pirie.

25 *ibid.* Piero Parini to Vito Capurso, 23 September 1929.

willingly and promptly help its citizens in Port Pirie at the practical level of, for example, tracing relatives, bringing out family members, and attending to required certificates and other documentation. The Port Pirie Fascio also had a social function that gave members the opportunity to come together to celebrate, not only the standard Fascist commemorations such as the Birth of Rome or the March on Rome, but also religious festivities, including the most precious feast-day for the *molfettesi*, the Feast each September of Our Lady of Martyrs. Even the inaugural Fascist meeting of 1 April was organised as a social gathering which went on until 2 am, with dancing and musical entertainment provided by an orchestra and singers! The Catholic Church and local government quickly involved themselves in the activities of the Port Pirie Fascio: the 1929 Feast of Our Lady of Martyrs also became the occasion for the inauguration of the Fascio's new banner, a celebration attended by the local priest, Father Michael Clune, and the Port Pirie Lord Mayor, Mr C A Degenhardt. Father Clune blessed the banner and spoke in Italian to the 300 gathered of the close bond between the Fascist regime and the Church of Rome. Mr Degenhardt apologised for not being able to speak their language, expressed his pleasure at being at the gathering, and acknowledged that the Italians in the Port Pirie community were 'good patriots and good citizens' of both Australia and Italy." By 1932 this participation of Fascism, Church, and State in the September festivities was even more marked: 400 people turned up at the Ball organised by the Fascio and held in the Catholic Church hall, which was adorned with the Italian and Australian flags and the portraits of the Duce and King George. The proceedings began with the grand entry of Acting Vice Consul Amerio accompanied by the Mayor of Port Pirie, Mr M M B Middleton, and the new Port Pirie Fascio Secretary, Francesco Camporeale, while the orchestra played the Italian Fascist song 'Giovinezza' and 'God Save the King'. Also present were the Chief of Police, local councillors, representatives of Customs and other dignitaries.²⁸ Such public support for the Italian community was a reflection of the respect that Italy enjoyed abroad at the time (as a peace-loving friend of Britain, as a country of order and stability, as an anti-bolshevik bulwark, and for its Church-State relations after the signing of the Lateran Pacts),²⁹ and certainly the existence in 1932 of a Fascio in Port Pirie gave little cause for concern. Earlier that year when Fascist Secretary Campore-

²⁶ *ibid.* *Cronistoria del Fascio di Port Pirie.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.* Camporeale to Secretariat-General, 12 September 1932.

²⁹ Cresciani, *Fascism. Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945*. pp 16-17, 23-24. 31. 41-42. More locally, the *Advertiser*, in an editorial in defence of Italian migrants, called Italy 'a Great Power, which fought side by side with the British Empire and the other Allies for the liberties of the world' (31 March 1928. p 13).

ale was sent Party membership cards from Rome, a zealous Customs officer at Port Pirie temporarily confiscated two of the cards and sent them off to the Adelaide CIB for information and an opinion, adding however that 'the [Fascist] society and the membership thereof of naturalised British subjects is probably harmless'.³⁰ Even as late as Easter 1938 (when Italy's new Empire and her intervention in Spain had isolated her from the democracies), the Port Pirie Fascio was able to organise a Ball in the Port Pirie Town Hall on the occasion of a visit by Melbourne Consul Ernesto Arrighi, with the support and participation of the Mayor Mr Threadgold.³¹ Although financial membership of the Port Pirie Fascio dropped to between 60 and 80 in the 1930s, this was due more to the poverty of the community than to any disillusionment with the organisation. The Fascio set up a Women's Section, a Youth Group, an Italian School for the children, a Library (mainly of Fascist literature sent from Rome), and a *Dopolavoro* (Sports and Recreation Association). It also made plans and collected

³⁰ AA:D1915, SA1783, J B Richards, Sub-Collector of Customs. Port Pirie, to Investigation Branch. Adelaide, 1 March 1932.

³¹ *ibid.* Francesco Camporeale, report, 19 April 1938.

donations for a never-to-be-built Casa d'Italia, and took charge of the Port Pirie Fishermen's Association (initially non-Fascist when created in 1929 but rapidly fascistised by its c.100 Italian members). To the end, the Fascio remained almost entirely an organisation of Molfettese fishermen and their families. Little support came from the Northern Italians, some of whom worked at the Smelters, and who were labelled 'subversive' in the reports sent by the Port Pirie Fascist Secretaries Capurso and Camporeale to Amerio and to Rome.³²

The Adelaide Fascio too, like its counterpart in Port Pirie, enjoyed the favour of the Catholic Church. At the blessing of the new banner in April 1928, the local Italian priest, Father Minetti, made a much appreciated speech on loyalty and love of the Fatherland, and urged those present to persevere in the ideals personified in the Duce.³³ Throughout the 1930s the Church supplied the St Francis Xavier Cathedral Hall free of charge for the children's Saturday Italian , classes and for the fund-raising dances organised by the Fascio, which were frequently attended by members of the Adelaide clergy.³⁴ St Patrick's Church, Grote Street, was the venue for the inauguration and blessing, in 1938, of the Youth Group's banner. The anniversary of the March on Rome was celebrated with High Mass at St Francis Xavier's Cathedral and Fascists were instructed to wear their black shirts.³⁵ Yet, when in 1936 the xenophobic *Smith's Weekly* ran a story on the Adelaide Italian School where young Fascists 'give the salute to the Duce in correct style' and where 'the Fascists' doctrines are fostered, and where children are allowed only to speak in Italian during school hours', the newspaper went out of its way to discount any connection between Fascism and the Church whose hall was being used. 'The only reason why a hall was loaned to conduct the Italian school', said the paper emphatically, 'was because all the scholars were Catholics'.³⁶

By now, 1936, hostility to Fascism had increased. Italy had defied the British by invading and conquering Ethiopia. This was not only Mussolini's finest hour, on the local scene it was the moment of glory for Amerio and the Adelaide Fascio. As soon as news reached Australia of Italy's capture of Addis Ababa, Amerio began organising a huge celebration for the following Sunday. But public opinion was such that permission to use Australia Hall, Angas Street, was turned down, and the Trades and Labor Council objected to the second choice

32 'Besides the people of Molfetta, there are also Italians from other parts of Italy - about 30 of them who are Venetians and some Tuscans. They do not belong to the Fascio, nor to other institutions because there are no other in this colony. I am sure that some are anti-Fascist' (AA: D1915, SA 1783, Camporeale to Amerio, 10 May 1933).

33 AA: AP501/2, Gagliardetto, p 2.

34 *Ibid*, Libro d'oro, p 14, and D1915, SA2367, report by Umberto Del Fabbro, 11 July 1934.

35 AA: D1915, SA3852, circular to Italians, 25 October 1932.

36 *Smith's Weekly*, 13 June 1936.

of Osborne Hall, in Gouger Street.³⁷ At the last moment the Fascio decided to hold the celebration in South Terrace at the residence and ice cream factory of Committee member Felice Maggi. Amerio later called it 'the largest gathering of Italians in the history of the SA Italian community'. Over 800 people turned up, some coming from the country and 'from places 200 kilometres away'.³⁸ According to the *Advertiser*, the number included 'many Australian sympathisers'.³⁹ Maggi's factory was decorated with flags and bunting, photographs of Mussolini and King Victor Emmanuel were displayed, and 40 gallons of beer and 20 gallons of wine were consumed. During the long evening of music, dancing and patriotic songs, Amerio, in full Fascist uniform and adorned with medals, read the speech (which he had reconstructed from the *Advertiser's* reports) given by Mussolini in Rome on the proclamation of the Empire.⁴⁰ Letters of indignation, denouncing Adelaide's Italians and the Vice-Consul, began flowing in to the *Advertiser* even before the party started.⁴¹ The Commonwealth Investigation Branch in South Australia did not, however, report on the celebrations, but simply put on file a small newspaper cutting containing a summary of the evening's festivities. Clearly, it was still unsure of the existence

37 *Advertiser*, 7 May 1936, p 17, 9 May, p 20, and 12 May, p 19.

38 AA: AP501/2, Libro d'oro, p 19.

39 *Advertiser*, 12 May 1936, p 19.

40 AA: AP501/2, Commemorazioni e celebrazioni, p 4.

41 *Advertiser*, 8 May 1936, p 26, 9 May, p 22, 12 May, p 22, and 13 May, p 22.

of an active Fascio in Adelaide and unaware of the presence of its counterpart in Port Pirie, as a report issued from Canberra a few months later shows. The fourteen-page Australian Security Service report on Italian Fascist activities and propaganda in Australia contained just one short paragraph on South Australia, which read:

There does not seem to be much activity in this State, although on the occasion of the official termination of the Italo-Abyssinian War, between 30 to 40 children paraded as members of the Balilla and the Vice-Consul, Signor Amerio, attended in Fascist uniform and addressed the children. [...] It has been learnt, however, that the Vice-Consul at Adelaide, Mr Amerio, was and may still be the Secretary of the Adelaide Fascio and, as such, had signed membership cards in 1928.⁴²

The SA State government, too, failed to recognise the threat and subtlety of Fascist propaganda. Premier Richard Butler, who openly and frequently condemned the influx of Southern Europeans into Australia, favouring instead Northern European migration,⁴³ officially welcomed the captain and crew of the Italian cruiser *Raimondo Montecuccoli* when it arrived at Port Adelaide in February 1938; he claimed, in reply to protests from the Trades and Labor Council and from the ALP, that the visit was 'simply a goodwill call', with 'no political significance'.⁴⁴ The *Advertiser's* leading article was of the same opinion, and urged South Australians to give the visitors a friendly welcome and not to repeat the 'unedifying demonstration' that had occurred ten days before in Melbourne.⁴⁵ The newspaper provided an extensive coverage of the ship's arrival, and even took the extraordinary step of agreeing to Amerio's request to publish in Italian in its columns his detailed programme for the visit, for 'the many residents of Adelaide [who] could not understand printed English'.⁴⁶ Amerio, for his part, summoned all the Fascists and sympathisers he could from Adelaide, Glanville and Port Pirie to attend the official dinner at the South Australian hotel, the Ball at the Myer Apollo restaurant, the picnic in the Adelaide hills for the sailors (for which transport was provided free by the Tourist Office and the State Railways), and for the Mass to be

42 AA: D1915, SA20040, 'A Summary of Italian Fascist Activities and Propaganda in Australia' (December 1936), p 9; also, *Adelaide News*, 5 May 1936.

43 See, for example, *Advertiser*, 19 August 1937, p 17, and 30 June 1938, p 19.

44 *Advertiser*, 21 February 1938, p 20.

45 *Advertiser*, 28 February 1938, p 18. For an account of the demonstrations in Melbourne, see *Advertiser*, 17 & 18 February 1938 and Cresciani, p 109.

46 *Advertiser*, 19 February 1938, p 23.

celebrated on board the ship.⁴⁷ The Trades and Labor Council and the ALP, whose deputation Premier Butler refused to receive, voted to boycott the visit of the cruiser, asserting that it had been on a similar 'goodwill mission' off Abyssinia and Spain where it had been responsible for the sinking of two British merchant ships.⁴⁸ Two demonstrations were arranged, one at Botanic Park, the other in Apollo Place. At the latter, organised by the South Australian Council against War and Fascism, a crowd of about 500 gathered and shouted 'Down with Mussolini', but were forcibly dispersed by 'a strong body of police'.⁴⁹ Whether there were anti-Fascist Italians in the crowd of protesters is not known, but one Adelaide Italian who signed himself 'Bastonatoli Forte' (ungrammatical Italian for 'Take a big stick to them') wrote a letter to the *Advertiser* in support of the protests. He expressed his satisfaction that 'our Australian friends are waking up to the danger of Fascism', and promised to 'support them in keeping Australia free.'⁵⁰

47 AA: AP501/2. *Libro d'oro*, p 22.

48 *Advertiser*, 23 February 1938, p 28, letter by J L Cavanagh Jun., State Secretary of the Council against War and Fascism.

49 *Advertiser*, 25 February 1938, p 8. 1 March, p 20, and 2 March, p 26. Amerio, who kept on his file the letter by Cavanagh published in the *Advertiser*, added a hand-written note in the margin of the newspaper cutting: 'It is well-known that Cavanagh is the leader of the communists in Adelaide. The people present at the march-past of the sailors were not communists and were clapping. Only four or five were communists and hostile demonstrators' (AP501/2).

50 *Advertiser*, 24 February 1938, p 22.

By 1938 Amerio was following instructions from his superiors to collect information useful in the event of hostilities breaking out. In 1937, at Rome's request, he compiled a lengthy summary of South Australia's economic situation that included detailed information on its industries, roads, railways, airways, hospitals, water, electricity and gas supplies.⁵¹ In August 1938 Melbourne Consul Arrighi wrote to Amerio about a 'delicate matter': he wanted Amerio to find out why Australian Ministers and parliamentarians had been repeatedly flying in and out of Alice Springs. Amerio contacted some Italians who worked in the Alice Springs area and reported to Arrighi that the government was 'building roads and blocks of houses and hutments, some of which are large enough to serve as military barracks.'⁵² Three months later Amerio had received further information from an Italian in the area to the effect that 'Alice Springs [...] is to be used as a depot for war material to supply Darwin in case of a Japanese invasion; that wide roads are to be built from Alice Springs to the north; that the air-field is there'⁵³

The South Australian CIB was still not convinced, in March 1938, that Fascists were active locally. According to Inspector Williams 'a Fascist Party was formed at one time' but 'it ceased to exist two years ago', so that now there was 'no active Fascist organization in this State'.⁵⁴ Two months later Canberra CM advised its South Australian Branch that a Fascio did in fact exist in Adelaide and Port Pirie, but it took a whole year for the Adelaide CIB to be finally persuaded: in May 1939 Inspector Williams was able to tell Canberra that he now had proof of the Fascio's existence, because he had actually spoken to the ex-Secretary of the Fascio in Adelaide (unnamed in the memorandum, but in reality Victor Del Fabbro, Secretary of the Adelaide Fascio in 1927, but suspended in December of that year, following a quarrel with his cousin Alberto Del Fabbro).⁵⁵

In late 1939, following the outbreak of war against Germany, Australian Security gave orders to the States to call in for interrogation those Italians who were considered pro-Fascist and to prepare dossiers on them. The CIB in Adelaide now worked in collaboration with Military Intelligence at Keswick, to which an Italian-speaking sergeant, Alastair Sandford, had been assigned. Sandford identified a handful of local Italians as pro-Fascist, these were interviewed and a file opened on them. He also named a few he knew 'intimately' and whom he considered non-Fascist.⁵⁶ In April 1940 Inspector Williams of Adelaide CIB and Military

51 AA: AP501/2, 'Rapporto situazione economica' (18 September 1937), pp 3-8.

52 AA: D 1919, SS378, correspondence between Amerio and Arrighi, 2 & 9 August 1938.

53 *ibid.*, memorandum (undated) by Ameno based on information received 21 November 1938.

54 AA: D1915, SA20040, Inspector R Williams to the Director, Canberra CIB, 18 March 1938.

55 *ibid.*, Williams to Canberra CIB, 11 May, 23 June, and 9 August 1939; also, AP501/2, *Libro d'oro*, p 7.

56 AA: D1915, SA20040, memoranda 19 December 1939, and 7 March 1940.

Intelligence together drew up and sent to Canberra a list of Italians in Adelaide to be immediately restricted if Italy entered the war. The list contained 22 names, of whom fourteen were naturalised British subjects and three were from Port Pirie.⁵⁷

In the meantime Amerio, after fifteen years' residence in Australia, was given approval by the Ministry in Rome to return to Italy on leave. He left Adelaide in January 1940, intending to be absent for six months (but, as it turned out, remaining in Italy owing to the outbreak of hostilities). In his place the Italian government appointed a far more dedicated Fascist, Felice Rando. Rando, who had arrived in Australia in 1922, had been a staff member at the Sydney Consulate, editor of the pro-Fascist newspaper *Corriere degli Italiani in Australia*, and Secretary of the Sydney Fascio.⁵⁸ At the time of his appointment to Adelaide he was Inspector of the Italian Fasci for the whole of Australasia. Shortly after Rando's arrival in Adelaide in early February 1940, Inspector Williams of Adelaide CIB could give no more information to Canberra than that very little was known of the new Vice-Consul, and that 'one reputable Italian businessman [had] known Mr Rando favourably for some time'.⁵⁹ A week later, with more information finally in hand from Military Intelligence, Adelaide police interviewed Rando and told him that as an alien he must register and have his fingerprints taken. Rando immediately complained to the Consul-General in Sydney, who in turn wrote to the Department of External Affairs, with the result that the registration was no longer insisted upon.⁶⁰

Rando wasted little time in making his presence felt in a city whose Fascio, inherited from Amerio, was deemed by the Consular authorities to be rather stagnant and in need of revitalisation.⁶¹ In the first weeks he made house-to-house visits to all the Italian families in the Payneham area, a suburb whose market gardeners, mostly from Southern Italy, had probably been neglected by Amerio. He quickly organised a football team, the Savoia Club (which after the war would become Juventus and then Adelaide City) and, much to the annoyance of an Italian businessman, ordered two of the players to report for soccer practice at a time when they were required at their employer's worksite.⁶² Rando also approached the police and gained approval to hold meetings which he stated would have 'no political significance'.⁶³ On 17 March, to commemorate the XXI

57 *ibid.*, memorandum from Williams to Canberra, 15 April 1940.

58 Cresciani, p 94.

59 AA: D1915, SA6827, Williams to Canberra, 12 February 1940.

60 *ibid.*, Mammarella to Canberra, 27 February 1940, and Keswick to Southern Command, 29 March 1940.

61 AA: D 1915, SA20040, report unsigned and undated but from Sandford, c. July 1940. Sandford considered Rando 'not a Consular representative at all, but a Political officer pure and simple' (*ibid.*).

62 *ibid.*, Williams to MI, Keswick Barracks, 19 March 1940.

63 *ibid.*

anniversary of the foundation of the *Fasci di Combattimento* (Fighting Fasci), he organised a gathering at Richards Building, Currie St, attended by about 70 people. In his report Sergeant Sandford, who was present at the meeting, described at length the theatrical display that he witnessed:

When the little Consul finally bobbed into the room at 3.15 in true Gilbert and Sullivan style, dressed in black shirt and tie with gold official cuff links and the spade-shaped tricolour badge of a Fascist official on his left breast, the assembly jumped to its feet as a man, saluting and shouting 'A noi' (For us) with the greatest enthusiasm, except for the children at the back of the hall, whose patriotic fervour was upset by the unforeseen entry of a small and dejected black dog immediately before the Consul.⁶⁴

Using what Sandford called 'the Hitlerian ranting method', Rando embarked upon 'the most virulent and inflammatory speech, quite openly anti-British and anti-Ally'.⁶⁵ It was not what the Adelaide Italian community was used to. Their patriotism and admiration for Fascism, while Amerio had been their representative, had never extended to condemnation of their new country and its politics. Rando's faith in the regime was too blind to realise that such a speech would cause him to lose followers rather than gain them, especially since it was common knowledge that the police were now observing the Italian community's every move. Nevertheless, Rando went to Port Pirie a week later for the Easter celebrations where, in a similar speech, he announced that Italy would soon be at war on the side of Germany and was ready to protect its rights and interests.⁶⁶ When the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs complained to the Italian Consulate in Sydney about the tone of the two speeches, Consul-General Mammalella cabled a coded message to Rando informing him that he had given the Australian Government an assurance that no similar incident would occur in future and requesting Rando to forward him the text of both speeches.⁶⁷ Rando replied that he had actually given three speeches, the third to the Fascist Section at Glanville on the afternoon of his departure for Port Pirie, and that no written text had been prepared by him in advance. The reconstructed text that he sent to Mammalella, full of praise for the glorious achievements of Fascist Italy and

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 18 March 1940.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, Detective Slinger to Inspector Williams, undated.

⁶⁷ AA: D1915, SA6827, Mammalella to Rando, 2 May 1940. Mammalella also told the Australian Government that he was prepared to close the Italian Consulate in Adelaide and dispense with the services of Rando (*ibid.*, Whittington, Southern Command, to Intelligence Service, 21 June 1940).

his role as peacemaker, had little in common with statements reported by the police who had been present at the meetings.

In April Rando returned briefly to Sydney for his marriage. While he was away the only gathering of Italians reported by police was a picnic held at Hahndorf attended by 300, at which a soccer match and various games were played. The police took note of the numberplates of all vehicles at the recreation grounds and subsequently identified the owners. When Rando returned with his bride to Adelaide, he organised, for 19 May, another gathering in Richards Building, Currie Street, to celebrate the Empire and the Birth of Rome, and to welcome to Adelaide the Melbourne Consul, Mario Lucioli (who failed to appear, at the last moment, on account of illness). The atmosphere was now quite different. Sandford this time reported that 'few of the local Fascist bigwigs' were present amongst the 100 people who attended, most of whom were 'market gardeners and their families from Payneham and Campbelltown'.⁶⁸ Enthusiasm was markedly less, Rando was not in Fascist uniform, and the audience, which seemed 'both dull and serious', reluctantly joined in the singing of Italian patriotic songs. It was almost as though everyone present already knew that this would be the last gathering of the Italian community before the outbreak of war against Italy.

On the morning of 11 June, immediately news was received that Italy had declared war, the premises of persons in South Australia known to have Fascist sympathies were searched, and the Fascists on whom dossiers had been prepared were arrested by officers accompanied by soldiers with fixed bayonets.⁶⁹ Rando, when contacted at his home by the *Advertiser*, stated that the authorities had treated him with 'the utmost courtesy' as he waited for instructions from the Consulate-General.⁷⁰ These arrived promptly, and on 15 June he departed for Sydney, from where with other consular staff he left Australia by ship for Japan.⁷¹ On 21 June Inspector Williams reported to Canberra and Sydney CIB that it is alleged that Rando left here with the proceeds from certain Italian dances held in Adelaide just prior to the outbreak of war with Italy. Certain members of the Italian community sought to obtain the money from Rando, but he refused to hand it over. The amount in-question is stated to be £65'.⁷² On 12 June Rando had locked the Vice-Consulate door of his office in the Eringa Building, 62 Currie Street (which also served as the headquarters of the Adelaide

⁶⁸ AA: D 1915, SA20040, Report by Sandford, 20 May 1940.

⁶⁹ *Advertiser*, 12 June 1940, p 18.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 13 June 1940, p 16.

⁷¹ AA: D1915, SA6827, Whittington to Intelligence Service, 17 June 1940; Cresciani, p 87.

⁷² AA: D 1915, SA6827, Williams, CIB Adelaide, to CIB Canberra, 21 June 1940. The last dance was held on 18 May 1940 at St Patrick's Hall, Grote Street. About 200 Italians attended (D 1915, SA20040, police report, 20 May 1940).

Fascio), and had put a sign on the door that the *Advertiser* reporter quoted verbatim in the paper the next day: *Da oggi in poi Consolato chiuso* (From today Consulate closed).⁷³ What the reporter probably did not know was that on that very day, even before Rando had left the State, Sergeant Sandford raided the office and seized 'numerous documents'.⁷⁴ There is no record of Sandford's reaction to what he found: not only were all the consular records of Amerio and Rando there, but so too were all the files and records of the Fascio from its inception, including full lists of its paid-up members. It was now a relatively simple task for Security to round up the Fascists on the books and produce indisputable evidence at subsequent hearings. Was Rando so naive to think that Security would not raid his office, or did he purposely not destroy files that could prove so damaging to a number of Italians in South Australia? Two more days went by before he took some action to safeguard consular property: on 14 June he signed over to the Auditor General's Office in Adelaide the furniture in the Vice-Consulate, together with 'records and library books', 'flags and photos', and other sundry items.⁷⁵ Although Rando was led to believe that the property would remain locked in the basement of the Audit Office, as early as 18 June the Auditor General, J W Wainwright, advised the Defence Department at Keswick that the records in his possession would 'be made available immediately on request'. As it turned out, several times during the next two years, Military Intelligence asked for and was given access to the remaining records, the most important of which were taken away for translating and cataloguing.⁷⁶

For South Australia's Italian community the discovery of intact files (both in Adelaide and at the house of Secretary Pasquale Catanzaro in Port Pirie) was to some extent a blessing in disguise: unlike, in particular, Western Australia and Queensland, where all Italians were seen as potential enemies, and little attempt was made to differentiate between Fascists, anti-Fascists and non-Fascists, Italians in South Australia were left alone if there was no suggestion of their involvement in the Fascio. Furthermore, some sympathy was shown by Military Intelligence towards those Italians who appeared only on early Fascist records,

⁷³ *Advertiser*, 13 June 1940. p 16.

⁷⁴ AA: 131915, SA3852. Statutory Declaration at the hearing for Francesco Borgia. 12 March 1941.

⁷⁵ SA State Records, GRS 1428/1, 1940/72 (Box 24). The notice of acceptance by the Audit Office, dated 14 June 1940 and bearing Rando's signature. contains a list of the furniture and other items to be stored in the State Audit Department in Adelaide. On 16 July 1940 the Japanese Consul-General in Australia, who had agreed to look after Italian interests. requested from the Auditor General's Office an inventory of the property belonging to the SA Italian Vice-Consulate (*ibid*, M Akiyama to Auditor General. Adelaide). Following Pearl Harbour Italian interests were handled by the Consul for Switzerland in Melbourne to whom in November 1946 the office furniture, Italian books, and sundry stationery were delivered (*ibid*, notice of receipt by P Mahnig, Acting Consul for Switzerland in Melbourne. 1 November 1946). However. all files and records of the Italian Vice-Consulate and of the Adelaide Fascio were retained by Australian Military authorities.

⁷⁶ *ibid*. receipts and memoranda, 8 July 1940. 20 October 1941. 10 August 1942.

but not later, or about whom very little was recorded. Whereas the number of arrests in Queensland and Western Australia reached several thousand, in South Australia only 173 Italians were detained during or after June 1940, of whom 30 were released by the end of that year; 129 were still in Loveday in May 1943 (of these 61 were from Port Pirie), and the last 10 were released during 1944, although several of these Fascist leaders had restrictions imposed on their movements and their activities until the end of the war.⁷⁷

Who were the Italians in Adelaide who had been sympathetic to Fascism? Unlike the membership of the Port Pirie Fascio which was made up almost entirely of Molfettese fishermen and their families, many of the Adelaide sympathisers were from Northern Italy and hence had developed a good

⁷⁷ AA: D 1920/0, Items 4 & 6. According to G Cresciani. 'Italian Immigrants 1920-1945' in J Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People* (North Ryde. 1988). p 611, by the end of the war 4727 Italians in Australia had experienced internment. In Western Australia over 1000 were interned, and in New South Wales over 800 (Cresciani, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia. op cit*, p 175. and 'The internment of Italians in New South Wales' in G Cresciani (ed.), *Australia. the Australians and Italian Migration. Milan*, 1983, p 85). An estimate of about 3000 has been given for Queensland by D Menghetti in 'The internment of Italians in North Queensland' in G Cresciani (ed.), *Australia, the Australians and Italian Migration. p 92*. In Victoria only the militant Fascists were interned because of the strong appeals made by Archbishop Mannix (Cresciani, *Fascism, op cit*. p 173). Detailed statistical information on the internment of Italians and other aliens is provided by Noel Lamidey. *Aliens Control in Australia 1939-46* (Sydney, 1974, p 52) and, more recently, by Margaret Bevege, *Behind Barbed Wire Internment in Australia during World War II* (UQP, 1993), pp 238-243.

relationship with Amerio; the most important were storekeepers or business people who worked in industries such as terrazzo, mica, and tailoring, or in the manufacture of pasta, margarine or ice cream, and employed other Italians, many of whom they had sponsored; most lived in the west end of the city; some had arrived in Australia before the rise of Fascism or just after; like the fishermen in Port Pirie, nearly all of whom were naturalised because it was a fishing-licence requirement, some business people became naturalised in order to compete for government contracts. At the same time, membership of the Fascio facilitated their commercial dealings with Italy. Although Rome frowned on Italians becoming naturalised British subjects, and refused outright to allow them to remain on Fascio committees, in South Australia Amerio ignored such directives, probably because he would have been hard-pressed to find suitable non-naturalised Italians to replace them. Not only did naturalised Italians belong to the Adelaide committee, but several, including Administrative Secretary Alberto Del Fabbro, had an Australian-born wife (a situation that would have been anathema for a leading political figure in a Nazi Party branch in Australia), spoke only English at home, and raised children whose best chance of learning a smattering of Italian was at the Saturday Italian School.

The internment of long-time South Australian residents such as these - whatever its appropriateness in a climate of war coupled with the Australian Security's irrational conviction that Italians throughout the country were ready to engage in fifth column activities - brought with it considerable emotional and physical suffering for those detained and for their families. Many could never understand how years of social exchange in a Club-like setting, during which they had been given the opportunity to express their affection for their homeland and keep in touch with their compatriots, when there was never any thought of harming the country that they had adopted, would be deserving of such punishment. The pain of these years was felt by second-generation Italians, too, such as the Adelaide-born conscript who, in Australian Army uniform, would travel to Loveday to see his interned father, or the credulous young man, born in Glanville who could not speak Italian, but who was interned because he had been advised that, if he became a member of the Fascist Party, it would be easier for him to travel within Italy when the time came for him to fulfil his dream of seeing the land of his parents. For these people, too, Fascist propaganda and militarism have a lot to answer for.