

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW

Interviewee: Elly Slechter  
Interviewer: Cynthia Barker  
Subject: Immigration of Displaced Persons to  
Australia - Greta Camp  
Date: August, 1988

Day 1

Day 1

Thurs

This summary relates to the taped interview conducted with Elly Slechter, who migrated to Australia with her husband in 1950 as a displaced person from Europe. Her first place of residence in Australia was in a migrant hostel at Greta, commonly known as Greta Camp. She lived here for 6 or 7 months.

Shortly after her arrival at the camp, Elly gave birth to a son at the camp hospital. The birth process was long, but Elly felt comfortable with the nurses in attendance because many of them could interpret for her. At the same time, her husband was also in the hospital suffering from a severe bout of sciatica. Soon, when they were able to both leave the hospital, Mr. Slechter was sent away to work in Queensland to fulfill his obligation of a 2-year work contract for the Government.

At first, he was sent to a sugar cane plantation but when the rains arrived, he was transferred to a banana plantation. The work wreaked havoc with his back and after 6 weeks he left Queensland and returned to the camp at Greta. He was then assigned to a job felling trees in the Hexham area, but this work too, was not suitable for Mr. Slechter's condition. Finally, he was given a job as a railway ganger at Broadmeadow and he worked here until his 2-year contract expired. It was only then that he was able to obtain a position in his own trade, that of glass cutter, at Fred. Ash.

During her first couple of months at Greta Camp, Elly felt abandoned with her new baby when her husband was sent to Queensland. With no money of her own for any "extras" and living on a diet of lamb chops nearly every day, Elly became depressed and wanted to go back "home". When her husband returned from Queensland, it was decided that they would be better off getting out of the camp as quickly as possible. So, with friends, they found rental accommodation in Young Wallsend (now Edgeworth) and in this way they were able to save for a block of land and buy their own furniture, etc. When the block was bought, they lived in a refurbished bus on the land until the house was built.

After their departure from the camp, the Slechter's received a letter stating that they would have to pay for their 6-7 months accommodation at the camp, since Mr. Slechter did not meet the required terms of his work contract. The return from Queensland meant that he was required to pay for his own and his family's accommodation. They considered this very unfair, nevertheless they paid off the amount owing over three years at approximately £1.0.0 per month.

Elly feels that they settled into the Australian way of life very well and she attributes this to the fact that their own homeland in Europe did not exist as they knew it anymore. She considers that, perhaps mentally, they were better prepared to make a go of their new country because there was nothing to go back to anyway. Despite facing many hardships and difficulties initially, she feels that the life that they have made for themselves in Australia is a good one and that they are content and happy living here with their son and grandchildren.

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW

Interviewee: Elly Slechter  
Interviewer: Cynthia Barker  
Subject; Immigration of Displaced Persons to  
Australia - Greta Camp  
Date: August, 1988

The following interview was conducted with Elly Slechter who emigrated to Australia as a displaced person after World War II

The black text represents the interviewee, the red text represents the interviewer.

---

O.K. Elly, I suppose the best place to start is:  
When did you come to Greta?

The 6th of April, '50.

And was that with your husband?

With my husband.

No children at that stage?

No, I was pregnant.

Right, and you came here as a displaced person from where in Europe?

From Germany.

From Germany, right. And did you come by boat?

No, by aeroplane.

By plane, oh, and how was that trip?

It was good, long, 4 days and exhausting. We arrived in Sydney in the morning, we had lunch there, a beautiful lunch, and after, and after we came in the bus, with 3 or 4 buses, came to Greta, and was very disappointed....

Yes?

It was the trees, we have no trees like that at home, and all the dryness here, and anyway at 6 o'clock in the night we arrived at Greta Camp.

What did the camp look like to you?

It was ... what can you say?

Spartan? (laughter)

Not very nice really, at the moment, and afterwards we got each a room, and the mosquitoes bite us in the night like hell, and I was lucky I had not a child, I was pregnant. My friend, her child was bitten all over. Anyway, the next day we got our blankets and our stuff, you know, because our luggage was not here yet - come for dinner - lamb chops, lamb chops (laughter). The first couple of days you enjoyed it, while you were hungry, you know, but after you couldn't stand it any more.

What, lamb chops every day?

Nearly lamb chops every day, yes.

How exciting, what a menu! (laughter)

Yeah, we got fruit too, you know, and things, but still the meat was mostly lamb, you know, and we were not used to lamb anyway. You can eat it once or twice, but every day, you just ...

Well, that's just like any type of food, you can't eat it every day.

After, my husband he went into the hospital, he got a bad ischias (sciatica) you know, and anyway after he was in the hospital one night, this was the 4th of June, I started (giggle) and I walked to the hospital ... (laughter)

Which hospital was this?

Oh, just in the camp. In the camp they had their own hospital.

Right.

I nearly went from 10 o'clock and the next day half-past eleven ...

You were in labour?

Yes, so long, and was many people came before, after me, you know. They just hopped in and have the baby and come back out. Anyway, after the 4th, half-past eleven, of June.

And how was that experience for you, having a baby in a strange country. Could you speak any of the language?

No, no, but there was a lot of nurses that ...

Interpreted?

Yes, yes, they were really knows everything you know, and, oh, everythings went alright and after I went home. My husband came home from hospital and after I went home with the boy and after we got the luggage, you know, we got everythings we need for the baby really, but we have no money. Lucky, I could breast feed my child, and after they send my husband to Queensland.

Yes, where did he have to work?

(Tries to pronounce Murwillumbah)

Murwillumbah?

Yes.

And what did he do there?

For banana.

Oh, on a banana plantation?

Yes ... no, first he went for the sugar.

On the sugar plantation?

Yes, and after that, they came the heavy rain and they put him for the bananas, you know, but he not feel well and he came back home. After, oh, he tried everywhere and he couldn't get a job. And anyway, he came to Hexham in the bush ...

What did he do in Hexham?

Cutting trees.

Cutting trees, right.

Yes, this was with a gang, cutting trees. Gee, it is so long, you forget nearly. Anyway, and after we get with my friend a house here for rent in Edgeworth ...

Right.

And one time we pack up, I think it was September or October, we pack up. She had 2 children, no she had one child, another one died in the camp. Yes, Thomas, he was only 4 months old, and he died there.

Why do you think he died?

Oh, that was some sickness around, you know, gastric or something, you know. They couldn't revive him anyway. After we left she had another child, she was 3 or 4, Christine, and we went to Edgeworth here, and this was first Young Wallsend. Oh my God, we drove and we drove, the grass was so high in the back. There was a house standing there and each got a room and there was another two fellows there. When you go in, you know, the dust just fly. Anyway we lived there nearly a year and after we bought a block of land here ...

And built?

Yeah, and built. No, before there was a bus on ...

You lived in a bus?

Yes, I was very upset with my husband, while he bought this block of land with a bus, you know. (Laughter). Anyway, he said: "Oh, I not bought it for living." But after, I thought, there was all bush, we fix this bus up, it was beautiful. Yeah, and next door, Mrs. Campbell opposite the street, she was very nice, she let us give us the water before we got the Water Board on, you know.

Mm

Yes, and we lived in the bus a couple of months, you know and we started to build here.

And you built yourselves?

Yes, we have help, you know, bricklayers and carpenters but most we did ourselves. And, life goes on.

Yes, that's right. Now, when you were at Greta, what was the actual camp life like? How long were you there at Greta?

Um - from April, May, June, August ... 6, 7 months.

Only 6 or 7 months?

Yeah.

Right. And who did the work there, like the washing and ...

I did myself.

You did your own washing?

Yes, yes, there was your room and there was a big barrack and there was ...

Washing facilities?

Yes, you could have a shower there and washing, and that's what I say. I keep much to myself and with my friend, you know. It was not ...

What about entertainment, what did you do for entertainment?

Nothing, nothing, nothing. I just had the baby, that was all, you go for a walk, like that. But pictures, or dancing, there was nothing there.

What about privacy, was it a problem?

Oh, no not really, for you have this one room, and another room, you know. This is like that and there was not much privacy, but ...

Did you feel cramped?

That was just the two of us, with the baby. It was only a little room, you could just do it, you know.

Was each family allocated one room only?

Oh, when you have more children, you have got more rooms. You got more rooms yeah. When we come there, we have only the two of us, the baby come after, you know, we got only one room.

Who cooked meals?

That was in the barrack too. There was, you go over at 12 o'clock and have your dish. You pick it up, you know.

Right.



When you come into a strange country, you have to ...

Adapt?

Adapt, yes.

And was that free, or did you have to pay for that?

We have to pay. Oh, we paid nearly 3 years after, while when my husband came back from Queensland, you know, they just said that he left the work and this is why he was not entitled to a free camp and nothing. I couldn't say exactly how much it was, but anyway we paid it back, I think every fortnight, a pound. It nearly took us 3 years.

Mm, so that was to pay back the camp?

How long I was in the camp, I have to pay for me and for him, you know. That's why he left Queensland and that was not fair. One time I went in the office there too, and I was very, very upset, and I said: "I want to go back home." First, I had no money, some people have a lot of stuff to sell it, or brought it. We brought nothing here you know. And, I got to have nothing? No soap, no nothing for the baby? She said: "Where did you get the money from to buy milk". I said I have my own milk.

That's right.

Yeah, and that time I was very upset and I said: "We want to go back home. I not feel well here anymore, you know."

What was their reaction to that?

Oh, they say, oh, your husband, he get a job here now and after, that's why they make a job for the trees cutting. But, that was no good, and after (they said) you leave here and get a job in the railway, yeah, with a railway gang. That was in Broadmeadow. After, when the two years was over, he can go in his own profession, for glass cutter.

O, right, he had a profession as a glass cutter?

Yes, yes, and after when you come here and you have the two years what they give you for a job, you have to take that time, you know.

That's right, mm.

And after when the two years was over, he got a job for his profession and this was in Frederick Ash.

Mm. And after this you felt a bit better?

Oh, yes, yes. After, when he got his own profession, you know, glass cutting and everythings, money comes in properly, you know, that was different after.

That's right. And how did he get to and from work? What about transport?

Bus. On the bus. Always on the bus.

We walked to the Crossroad and a bit here when there was the Johnson buses, you know. But mostly, he walked to Crossroad and walked back too, with the bus to Newcastle.

What about the medical services that were available at the camp. Were they adequate, do you think, or ..

I never have nothing. I never really felt that I ....

Feel the need?

No. I never was with the baby for a nurse or for a doctor or anything. And after when we are living here, the fellow have an, um, how do you call it, er ....

Middle ear infection?

Yes, yes and after we went to Newcastle Hospital and he was alright, you know.

So people who got really sick had to go to Newcastle?

Oh, yeah, like my friend's baby. He was so sick in the camp and that came to nothing and they transported him to Newcastle, but still after, they call her and she went to Newcastle, but it was dead already.

Was that the one with the gastric?

Yes.

Was that a particular problem at the camp, a lot of gastric?

There was a few babies, yes there was a few babies what got that.

Mm. Were the conditions of hygiene adequate do you think, or was the food... Were the bottles, sorry, the babies bottle fed?

Mostly it was bottle babies, yes. After, I tried when that baby would have nothing anymore, you know, and after I tried to give it my milk, and still he would not survive.

Probably too far gone by then, poor thing.

Mm.

What did the other women at the camp, in general what did they feel about their new life?

I have not much contact with anybody, I keep by myself with my friend, you know, and ...

Well, what about your friend, what did she think?

Oh, she was very unhappy. She not like it a bit.

What did she not like, do you think?

First, she not want to come here (laughter). You know how it was. Anyway, after was the shock with the baby, you know, and she was not happy at all, but... After, you just have to keep on with your life, you know, make a life for yourself.

So, you felt as though there was not any choice, you just had to?

That's right, that's right. You just have to keep on going and forget home, and start here, and that's it. That's what we did. We started here and lived in the bus and after we built the house. And the boy went to school after, you know, and we were happy.

Right, so after the initial 12 months say, you would say the first 12 months were the hardest?

Yes, yes. Before, you really settled down here, get used to it for the environment, like we have different bushes and everything, you know. But, like now, for so many years I have more out here like at home, you know.

That's right. What did you expect when you arrived in Australia, or on the trip, or before you arrived. What were your expectations. What did you think was here?

I really think, it is maybe the same like at home you know, maybe a bit different, but it was a lot different.

Were you told anything?

Nothing, nothing.

Not a thing?

Just ... you get your check-up there, you know ...

Medical check-up?

Yeah, and you come there, and they say you have 2 years what they tell you, you have to do, you know. And it was bad luck for us he was transported straight away to Queensland, you know, left me with the baby here alone.

Mmm

And he was not well anyway.

With the sciatic nerve condition?

Yes, yes. And when that was the sugar and that was no good and after it was they put him with the bananas, you know, and after 6 weeks he just came home.

Did you feel as though he would be penalised for doing that at all? For coming home?

They penalised him for that, that's why we had to pay for the time we had in the camp, we had to pay back, you know. I was very upset about that, but it is over and done, you know.

So did you feel that migration to Australia, did you feel it was a success for you and your family?

Oh, I would not say a success. I would say when I stay home we would be further than like here, you know. Still I would say we choose the life like that and we are happy and I could not say it is a bad country. It is good. It's not bad.

Yes, the children...

Yes, we have a life now, we have the boy. He is married and he has two children, you know.

That's right, so it was the second generation - it was probably a lot better than for the people who actually migrated.

Yes...sure. You be not born here and you think a lot of home.

Did you ever suffer from home sickness?

Not really, not really, no. While we are coming from Czechoslovakia and we have to go out to Germany after the war anyway, you know. While we were this part, that was the Sudetenland, that was a part of Germany and after, when the war was finished and the Czech take it over again, and we have to go to Germany anyway, you know. We lost our country before, already, you know. That's why maybe it's not so hard when we come here and we thought, we are young, we start a new life altogether.

That's right.

I would say, when you like a lot of people coming from Germany lost maybe through the war, but still, we already lost our country before, you know, where we were born. And that's why we not settle properly in Germany anyway and that's why when we come here, you maybe get better used to it. Just, they make it a bit hard for us, like things to get the baby, they take the men away, you know, and that was not fair.

No, that certainly wouldn't have been.

When you come into a strange country..... you ...

You need your partner?

Yes, yes, you have nothing you know, just with the room there and a lot of things missing. You have no money or nothing and they just send the men away. With that part I could not agree at all.

What about this money? What if you had needed something, how would you have procured whatever it was that you needed? The women who didn't breast feed, who bought the milk for them?

Oh, you could get that in the camp.

You could get that in the camp, right. What about other things you might have liked, say clothing, or ...

Oh, they give you a parcel before you come here. This was in Italy. You get a parcel for the baby already. But, I had no worry, while I got in my luggage everything there for the baby, you know. But the luggage came a bit late. Still, from Italy you got the blankets and you got a couple of nappies and you got wool, you knit, you know, and ...

Two nappies?

A couple more, more nappies. Yes, and you got wool, you can knit, you know, and things. I have no problem with that because I had everything prepared, while I knew before I come here that it takes not long and the baby arrive. That's why we come to Italy in February and they put us back till April and I really couldn't go on the ship anymore, you know. And that's why it was too late and that's why they put us on the plane.

Right. But everyday expenses while you were living at the camp, if you needed soap, or shampoo, or whatever ...

Ah, there was no shampoo, and there was a bit of soap you got, yes, but that's all. Mm. That was provided. You got nothing there. That's why I say, already there was a lot of people, they went in straight away in for cook, you know, men for cook got money out of. And that's why they sent my husband there, before he came back. No... it was alright ... we fixed it up (laughter)

You fixed it up (laughter)

We fixed it up, we left the camp, yeah, and ...

Probably, it was in your own best interests to get out of the camp as quickly as possible?

Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. You feel safe, and after he work in Broadmeadow and he brought money home and after, we buy a bit of furniture, and we put the money a bit away for the block of land, you know.

Yes, become independent?

Yes, you start ... you do something, you know. After, the letter comes - you have to pay - I couldn't say how much that was, I think ...

You got a letter to say that you owed?

Yes, I owed for how long I was in the camp. I think it was, April, May, June, July, August, September. Could be September or October that we left and that is 6 or 7 months we have to pay the accommodation back for that time. I know we not paid it at once, we just made the arrangement every week, or every fortnight, or every month, I think every month - a pound - we pay back. And this takes us 3 years.

Right. And that was to pay back the debt you owed to the camp.

Yes.

Alright then. I think, well, that was very good. I think that will be enough.

Laughter.

Nothing else you feel you'd like to say?

No, everything went alright after, you know.

Mm. So you felt quite satisfied in the long run?

Oh, yes, I have no complaints now. We are happy here.

Good.

I wouldn't change now, while I got my family here, my son, with the grandchildren here and I be home here now.

But, you wouldn't recommend that method of immigration to anybody?

Laughter,

No, No.

No, o.k. then, thanks.

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

I, Go. Slaughter give my  
permission to Cynthia Barker

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for  
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of  
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in  
the .....

University Archives

for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed Go. Slaughter

Date 1. 9. 88

Interviewer C. Barker