Waiting rooms for a new life

Life in SA's migrant hostels after World War II was a mixed experience, writes Jill Pengelley

POST-WAR migrant life in hostels is explored in an exhibition that opens at Adelaide's Migration Museum on Saturday.

Senior curator Catherine Manning says that after World War II, hundreds of thousands of migrants passed through South Australia's migrant hostels. Those were at Roseneath, Finniss/Pennington, Woodside, Gape Cross, Elder Park, South Para, Gawler, Glenelg, Mallala, Whyalla, Woodville and Semaphore.

"If you were a displaced person or a migrant on an assisted package scheme, you were not likely to go through the hostel," Ms Manning says.

"The hostel would be one night, but we've found records of people who stayed at least five years. That wasn't meant to happen but it did." A boosting shortage and a lack of building materials made it difficult to move new arrivals through the hostels. Ms Manning says the exhibition used photographs and oral and written histories provided by migrants.

"At the Roseneath hostel, previously old woodsheds, former residents told of a baby being brought in at the night. It had come up through the gaps in the woodshed floor."

They were happy to be making a new start in Australia, many complained about the bland food and communal living arrangements. They had to share bathrooms and a dining room and were not allowed to cook for themselves.

"A lot of people have strong memories about the food," Ms Manning says.

"Some of the people from Europe were used to making more interesting food."

A hostel resident's diary of a journey

CHRISTIAN Roth recorded in his diary his family's journey from Germany and their settlement in Adelaide.

While Christian lived at Glenelg, he visited his family, housed at Woodside, at weekends. Eventually his family was able to join him at Glenelg.

Christian was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the Adelaide Railway Station.

"Here, those of us who had been offered work by private companies were picked up by a gentleman from the Employment Office. Four of us were sent to the one company, a man from the Employment Office took us there by car and subsequently to the Glenelg Hotel. As far as we could tell from the car, it seems like a nice city."


did my first 4 hours of overtime today, paid at a rate of 50c per hour. I agreed to work 12 hours per week, to Woodside and back at the weekend, plus the bus from the city to the hostel."

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