

## Brief History of the Polish Community in Geelong

The first large influx of Polish migrants to Australia and to Geelong began in 1949, four years after the WW2. A very large majority came from Germany. When Hitler's armies opened up several fronts in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Germany's workforce was depleted and they had no one to run their factories and farms. They were forced to use workers from the countries they then occupied, including Poland.

When the war ended in 1945, many of these workers and their families had nowhere to return to. They were called Displaced People or simply DPs or Refugees, as we would call them today.

In the case of the Polish people who were left in Germany, many did not wish to return to post war Poland either because the regions where they once lived were now part of the USSR or they were not prepared to return to Poland which was a system they wished to live under.

Fortunately, many countries like Australia, Canada even South America wanted to increase their populations through migration and these Displaced People were the solution to their population problem.

Migrants to Victoria were first settled in migrant camps, mainly in Bonegilla and some in Mildura. After two year when their agreement with the Commonwealth Government ended, they were free to choose where they wished to settle permanently.

In the early fifties and sixties, the Polish community in Geelong was quite large, over 3,000 people. They soon organised themselves and set up their organisations: Polish Saturday schools, Polish dance groups, choirs and scout groups in an endeavour to maintain their Polish culture and handing it down to their children, while, at the same time, contributing to the development of their newly adopted country.

Very soon, the organisations that were established in Geelong raised enough funds to purchase properties in Geelong. The first two were the Millennium Polish House in Malop St and the other was the Polish Ex-servicemen's Association Hall in Ryrrie St. The latter is still there today.

In the late 70's the Malop St property was sold and a disused ball-bearing factory was purchased in Fellmongers Rd Breakwater. Using the funds from the sale of the Malop St property and funds donated by individuals in the Geelong Polish community, the factory was re-furbished, mainly by voluntary labour, and transformed into the White Eagle House, now administered by the Geelong Community Association in Geelong Inc. (PCAG).

In the earlier years, the new property was maintained through local fundraising. It was quickly realised that such a large facility could not continue to be maintained just by local fundraising. When the opportunity arose for the Association to apply for a Pokies licence, it

was taken up immediately. At the same time the PCAG applied and received its Liquor Licence. The future of the White Eagle Club was assured from this moment on.

Around 2003, a further internal and external refurbishment of the White Eagle House took place. It began to attract people from a broader section of the Geelong community not just Polish members.

Today, the White Eagle House leases its Bistro, kitchen facilities and its spacious dining area to JMH Catering, who provide patrons with lunches and dinners on a daily basis, seven days a week throughout the whole year.

The PCAG is proud that today its membership comes from a broad cross-section of the Geelong community, embracing all nationalities.

Nevertheless, PCAG has not forgotten its roots and therefore continues to promote its proud Polish culture through its Dance Group "Krakowiak", the celebrations of its Polish national days, such as our Constitution Day on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May and Polish Independence Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November - an independence it won from Prussia, Russia and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire back in 1918, after around 123 years of not even appearing on the map of the world.

The PCAG sponsors a number of clubs and organisations in the Geelong community, such as the Breakwater Eagles Soccer Club, which uses the soccer field next to the White Eagle House, the Geelong Men's and Women's Darts Association, they use our facilities each week for local competitions and each year successfully run their three-day annual international competition in October.

We are also proud to sponsor the Geelong Eight-Ball Association and its annual Geelong Pool Championships held each year at the White Eagle House.

For the last 30 years, the White Eagle House has been hosting the very popular Jukebox Rockers. They use the White Eagle House function rooms for their weekly Rock and Roll lessons, their monthly Rock and Roll Dances and Rock n Roll Festival over three days in early January.

We also host teams of Poker players and Cribbage players, who use our facilities once or twice a week.

We have a good working relationship with the Geelong Society for Opera & Dramatic Arts (GSODA), who organise fantastic performances with young people at GPAC. For many years GSODA have been using our back hall for practicing and training future young performers. We welcome them to stay with us for many more years to come.

Our venue function rooms are also used for weddings, birthday celebrations, wakes, charitable functions, end-of-year break-ups and anything else individuals or groups may think of. These are catered by our Bistro contractor. These functions, the Poker Machine area and our Club Bars assist us in maintaining the White Eagle House.

We are always only too happy to share our facilities and good fortune with other groups in the Geelong Community. Everyone will be warmly welcomed.

