

**Transcript of oral history interview with Erika Vitali (nee Pfitz), accompanied by her son Peter Vitali, at her home in Innisfail. Recorded on 10 August 2018.**

**Debbie:** This is Erika Vitali from Innisfail. Erika, thank you for speaking with me today. We'll just start off with some general questions. Can you tell me where you were born?

**Erika:** Innisfail.

**Debbie:** Innisfail. Local girl. And whereabouts were your parents born?

**Erika:** Germany.

**Debbie:** Do you know whereabouts in Germany?

**Erika:** My mother in Dresden. My father near Stuttgart. I don't know the name of the little town.

**Debbie:** And what were their names?

**Erika:** My father's name was Wilhelm Pfitz. And my mother, before she was married, she was Martha Rättsch.

**Debbie:** And when did they come to Australia?

**Peter:** 1913, I think.

**Debbie:** Before WWI.

**Peter:** Yeah, my grandfather was here, came in 1913.

**Erika:** And my mother came in 1927.

**Debbie:** So they were not married when they came to Australia.

**Erika:** No.

**Debbie:** So they met here?

**Erika:** Well they got married in Brisbane. That's all I know.

**Debbie:** Okay. After they were married, around the time you can remember, what sort of work did they do?

**Erika:** My father was a baker.

**Debbie:** Okay. Did he work in his own bakery?

**Erika:** I believe he worked at Egan first. Then later on - when I don't know - for Mr Con Perry, Innisfail.

**Debbie:** And that's when you were around obviously.

**Erika:** Well I was born in 1928.

**Debbie:** So with your parents, did they become Australian citizens?

**Erika:** Yes.

**Debbie:** And when WWII broke out, how old would you have been then?

**Erika:** Twelve.

**Debbie:** Do you remember much about it?

**Erika:** No, not really.

**Debbie:** So you were at school?

**Erika:** Yes.

**Debbie:** Whereabouts were you living then?

**Erika:** East Innisfail.

**Debbie:** Do you remember the very early days of the war, like when you first found out that Australia was at war?

**Erika:** Well we didn't sort of hear much ... until when our house got raided.

**Debbie:** What happened there?

**Erika:** Well the ... detectives, I suppose - I don't know - came and searched our house. Looking for a radio. They thought we were transmitting overseas. And they even went through my sister and my toys and ... well they found nothing. But they took all the library books. My mother had a German library in the house, and the Germans used to come and get their library from them. The books. And they took all that too. And her fashion books, German fashion books. There were only fashion books and cooking in it. And they took all them too.

**Debbie:** So this is the police raid.

**Erika:** Yes. Whoever they were. I don't know. We were too young.

**Debbie:** You had a sister, you said. Was she younger or older?

**Erika:** Nearly two years younger.

**Debbie:** Did you have any brothers?

**Erika:** I've still got a brother. My sister died but I've still got a brother, twelve years younger than me. He lives in Melbourne.

**Debbie:** And when you were at home, did you speak German at home or did you speak English?

**Erika:** A bit of both. Because my mother insisted on learning ... she and my father could speak very good English.

**Debbie:** But she still kept her German.

**Erika:** She'd talk to you ... then run into German and then English again.

**Debbie:** And she was obviously a reader.

**Erika:** Oh yes. She was very good at reading and writing and arithmetic and everything. Smarter than me. (Laughs.)

**Debbie:** Ah, selling yourself short. So where you lived, were there a lot of German families around?

**Erika:** Not at East Innisfail but out at Mena Creek I believe there was a German town. And we knew most all of them. There's quite a few.

**Peter:** There's a piece of road there called Germantown Road.

**Erika:** Yes.

**Debbie:** So were there any relatives there or were they just friends?

**Erika:** We haven't got any relatives. None at all. Only my mother and father and us children. That's all of the Pfitz family that was here.

**Debbie:** Were there any left behind in Germany when they left, or the entire family came out?

**Erika:** Well on my mother's side the first world war, her father and brother and sister died so she was on her own. And on my father's side I don't really know much about it because he never spoke anything. And my mother wouldn't talk because she'd start to cry. So my sister and I asked her nothing anymore.

**Debbie:** I can understand that. So during the war then, what happened after the house was raided. What happened as a result?

**Erika:** My father got interned.

**Debbie:** He was!

**Erika:** Oh yes. Taken into town to the jail. And they marched all the prisoners - well they were prisoners - out to the railway station and took them south. And my mother and us children - well my brother was only a baby, three months old - and we all had to move out of town. We weren't allowed to live in town so we went to live in Sundown. Some Australian friends were good to us out there. Well most people were. And we lived there for a couple of years and then went to Stanthorpe. We had to go either to the Tablelands or else south to Stanthorpe. We had no choice.

**Debbie:** Is Sundown on the Tablelands?

**Peter:** No, it's out this way.

**Debbie:** So it's not that far from the town.

**Erika:** We used to walk to school but it's a fair way to walk when you have to go to school here.

**Debbie:** But you had to leave your house.

**Erika:** Yes.

**Debbie:** So you stayed with friends?

**Erika:** Yes, friends had a house that we could rent. I don't know if we rented or anything like that. We lived in this house out there.

**Debbie:** So how did your mum deal with this?

**Erika:** I don't know. She never said anything. See we sort of didn't even think about the war really. We knew nothing about the war really.

**Debbie:** I suppose when you're kids you don't really notice much about your mum. You just go 'Oh that's just Mum'.

**Erika:** Yeah.

**Debbie:** So she wasn't visibly different to you.

**Erika:** Yes. If she thought anything, she never said.

**Peter:** I suppose you didn't have a radio.

**Erika:** We had no wireless at all.

**Peter:** No TV in those days.

**Erika:** No.

**Peter:** You could buy a newspaper, I suppose.

**Erika:** Well I don't think they did. Well we must have bought newspapers because you needed it for the toilets those days, didn't you? (Laughs.) Out the back. Tear them up into little pieces. You don't have to put that in.

**Debbie:** Those were the days. (Laughs.) So do you know where your father went to when he was taken?

**Erika:** Well I believe they stopped at different places on the way down but he ended up in Tatura.

**Debbie:** Tatura, okay. And how long was he there for?

**Erika:** The rest of the war.

**Debbie:** The rest of the war. Was he able to write to you? Did you ever get any letters?

**Erika:** I imagine he wrote to Mum and he sent up a toy to my brother for his birthday. A little wooden toy, but that's about all. Otherwise, no.

**Debbie:** Not much. So how was life without your father in it for a number of years?

**Erika:** Well after we lived at Sundown we had to leave here so we went to Stanthorpe and to friends down there. And from there we went out to The Summit, that's out of town and we lived for a while out there, then we went to Applethorpe and my mother used to work for a woman, an Australian woman. She took in boarders. And my brother was a baby of course. So she had to take him, and my sister and I had to go to school. And on the weekends, my

sister and I, we worked. I don't know where the money came from. I don't know what we lived on. For money, do you know what I mean?

**Peter:** But your mother worked for this woman.

**Erika:** Yes. She got paid. And my sister and I, we picked beans, put them in a bag. Bending down all day. And we'd eat them too. (Laughs.) And we picked fruit, had to climb ladders with a bag in the front. I think they still do something like that. And grapes. We picked grapes. It was a good experience.

**Debbie:** Sounds like food wasn't a problem.

**Erika:** Well, as for coupons. If you ran out of butter you had no more coupons for butter. That's the only thing. Otherwise, all fruit and vegies we could get where we were working. One farmer near The Summit, they had tomatoes. We picked tomatoes. Come home all green from the pollen, from the leaves. But they let us take some stuff home.

**Debbie:** It sounds like people were generous with what they had.

**Erika:** Yeah. We worked for an Italian family, my sister and I. Pina. I still remember the name. They were good to my sister and I, when we were picking beans. They used to give us lunch. 'No, no you have lunch here.'

**Debbie:** Was their father, was he taken as well?

**Erika:** No. I think he was there. We saw the family. They had a daughter, I know that. And I thought I saw her in town one day - it looked like her - but I wasn't game to ... I'm a bit backward in going forwards as to ask people 'are you so and so?'

**Debbie:** That would have been a coincidence to see her after all those years.

**Erika:** And then we worked for a Sofia, picking tomatoes. They lived in The Summit too.

**Debbie:** So as the war went on you would have gone from being a young girl to more of a teenager, I suppose. What was life like living in Stanthorpe in those days?

**Erika:** Very cold. Freezing! It was 3000 feet above sea level, I remember that. It was all right, people were nice to us. Only there was one schoolteacher. His name was Binnington, but you better not put that there I suppose. One day - you know how in school, you put your hand up when you answer a question? And he told me not to Hail Hitler. I never put my hand up any more. I knew nothing.

**Peter:** Didn't some of the teachers call you 'square heads'?

**Erika:** No. People around town and that. Kids, could have been. But that never worried me. Square head. I even say it myself sometimes.

**Peter:** Square heads. I think it was because of their helmet was a squarish shape, the German helmet.

**Erika:** I even say it sometimes. So that was nothing, that name. But to say about hailing Hitler, that hit me. My parents were against Hitler.

**Debbie:** People say some cruel things, don't they?

**Erika:** Oh well.

**Debbie:** As the war went on then, I guess your brothers and sisters are growing. Are there any changes in how you lived, what life was like day to day?

**Erika:** No. We were happy. Cos my brother was twelve years younger than me so he didn't go to school until we came back here.

**Debbie:** And the house you were in, you said the mum took in boarders. Were they seasonal workers, people who came to pick the crops?

**Erika:** I really don't know. My sister and I were working outside and we never asked our mother who they were or anything. I suppose at that age, you're not interested anyway.

**Debbie:** So they weren't in the house itself. They had their own room sort of thing?

**Erika:** They had their own rooms but I don't know anything about them.

**Debbie:** I know that in far north Queensland there were a lot of soldiers based in the area. Were there any soldiers around in Stanthorpe?

**Erika:** No. There were land army girls working. Australian, I suppose they were.

**Debbie:** Can you tell me a bit about them? Did you have much interaction with them?

**Erika:** No. I never really got to know any of them. Of course I was only young. They were a lot older than me. The land army went to a farm and they picked fruit or whatever. That's about all I know.

**Debbie:** Then they moved on to the next place.

**Erika:** Must have.

**Debbie:** Was anyone that you know conscripted into the Australian army, of the people who came from Innisfail or from Stanthorpe, and taken to fight overseas?

**Erika:** No.

**Debbie:** When the war ended, I guess that's when your father would have come back after a number of years away, can you remember that experience at all?

**Erika:** It split the family up. He sort of couldn't settle. And then he went. He stayed with us until ... well, when I got married he was at home but soon after that he started to live somewhere in town, a flat in town.

**Debbie:** Up here.

**Erika:** Yeah, in Innisfail. He was never with the family much. He wasn't really a family man at any time, even before. He'd get together with the Germans - the square heads - and they'd

congregate in town and talk, talk, talk. And they'd got pulled up at one stage in town. The police told them to speak English. Aww, real cranky, 'Speak English!' Well when there's a group of Italians, even now everybody speaks their own language. You can't blame them. Sometimes I walk past German people talking. These backpackers talking German and I think, 'I know what you're talking about.' Not everything but some of it.

**Debbie:** Yes, it's interesting isn't it, when you are standing eavesdropping, and you know exactly what they're saying. And they think you don't know anything.

**Peter:** Excuse me, Debbie, you were saying before did my mother know any men that were conscripted into the army. (To his mother) You know of a couple. Not German, they were Italian.

**Erika:** Italian ones, yes.

**Debbie:** And they were taken into the Australian army?

**Erika:** Yes. Accatino. Guidio Accatino and Biffi Ghetti.

**Debbie:** So they were sent off to fight.

**Peter:** I think Biffi went to New Guinea.

**Debbie:** At least that's a relief. It would be hard to fight against your own people.

**Erika:** But they came back.

**Peter:** They survived. Yeah.

**Debbie:** Yes, New Guinea was a bit tough from what I can gather.

**Erika:** They told us, my husband when we went to see these people, he told us how the Japs with the enemy, they used to put the gun under here (puts her forefinger beneath her chin)

**Peter:** With the bayonet.

**Erika:** With the bayonet and tie them to the tree. And they couldn't even touch the ground. And of course when you get tired, you start to sag then don't you? And they died.

**Debbie:** So the bayonet got them because they couldn't keep themselves up.

**Erika:** That's right.

**Peter:** The bayonet was fixed to the rifle.

**Erika:** They were very cruel I believe. They were very cruel.

**Peter:** Wasn't Uncle Albert sent into the army?

**Erika:** I think he was in the army too.

**Peter:** He didn't go overseas. That was my father's sister's husband.

**Erika:** Yeah.

**Debbie:** Yeah, there was a few cases where the father was interned and the son was sent overseas to fight the battle for the Australians.

**Erika:** And yet on my husband's side - Sid's side - they didn't get interned at all.

**Peter:** Yeah, his father didn't. He was here.

**Debbie:** And that was the Italian side. So his father was okay?

**Erika:** Yes.

**Debbie:** Were they from Innisfail too?

**Erika:** They lived out at Moresby, yeah.

**Peter:** They came from Italy.

**Erika:** They were born in Sicily, the two of them.

**Debbie:** Okay. A lot of Sicilians around.

**Erika:** Yeah but she couldn't speak English. And I couldn't speak Italian, could I. (Laughs.)  
Bit hard to communicate.

**Debbie:** Somehow you get by, don't you?

**Erika:** Yeah. I knew a few words. I learnt a few words but not much.

**Debbie:** So after the war, for you personally - you've told me about your father - what changed in your life when you came back to Innisfail?

**Erika:** Well I had to look for a job then too. I had to go out and face people. I've never been one ... my sister's more forward than I was. But I went to work for a dressmaker. I got a job there.

**Debbie:** And that's what you did most of your adult life?

**Erika:** Yeah after we were married. I made Peter's wife her wedding dress, my daughter's wedding dress, my own. I've done a lot of that, but then I worked at ... after the dressmaker closed down - she went somewhere else - I worked at See Poy's.

**Debbie:** That was a department store.

**Peter:** Yeah, hardware ...

**Erika:** I worked up in the sewing room.

**Debbie:** So you were making the clothes rather than selling the clothes?

**Erika:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Debbie:** You must be a pretty whiz-bang dressmaker to have worked all those years.

**Erika:** But I've lost my confidence to cut something out now. I wouldn't be game to cut out a wedding dress any more.

**Debbie:** I would never be game to cut out a wedding dress. What are you on about? How many wedding dresses did you make in your lifetime?

**Erika:** Bridesmaids. Oh wedding dresses, I made quite a few. Maybe at least half a dozen and then some bridesmaid's dresses too.

**Debbie:** A lot of work in that.

**Erika:** But I enjoyed it. And I made Peter's wife's dress. Diane's. I had to hide the dress so nobody would see it. (Laughs.)

**Debbie:** That would have been tricky.

**Erika:** It was no trouble. Nobody lifted the big sheet up to have a look, luckily.

**Debbie:** So how did you learn dressmaking? Was there an apprenticeship or something?

**Erika:** My mother used to sew.

**Peter:** You just picked it up.

**Erika:** Yeah. My mother had the treadle machine and I did sewing on that. And when I went for the job, I had a dress on that I made.

**Debbie:** And they must have liked it.

**Erika:** Oh, she took me on. I did all hand sewing to start with, of course.

**Debbie:** So did you do like tailoring as well or mainly ladies' dresses?

**Erika:** No, not tailoring. I did want to be a tailoress and when I applied for a job - this was before the dressmaker - I applied for a job in ... I forget his name ... the tailor. He wouldn't take me on because my parents were German. Isn't it silly?

**Debbie:** Mm, crazy. So I know there was rationing during and after the war, particularly things like dress fabrics. Did that affect you at all?

**Erika:** When we come back here, I don't know.

**Debbie:** So it wasn't something that affected you.

**Erika:** No.

**Debbie:** What about other sorts of rationing? I think the rationing continued after the war ended too.

**Erika:** There was all sorts. I often wished my mother had of kept those little books.

**Peter:** Tyres. Tyres were hard to get. For your car, you know. I heard the old blokes saying they had to keep patching their tyres.

**Erika:** Yeah, they'd patch them. Even for the tractors, they used to patch the tyres.

**Peter:** This is not the tube inside, this is the outside. The tyre that runs on the road sort of thing.

**Debbie:** The tread.

**Peter:** Yeah.

**Debbie:** Getting back to ... just to finalise it ... are there any other anecdotes, any stories that you haven't mentioned that you'd like to add ... that we haven't covered?

**Erika:** Not really.

**Debbie:** Any special memories that you kind of go 'oh, I should say that'?

**Erika:** Ours was ... we were just ordinary people.

**Debbie:** Most people were just ordinary people.

**Erika:** After the war when we came back we went out to see some German people - well they were from Austria - but German and Austrian are much the same and we used to walk out that way. My mother pushing the pram with my brother in it and my sister and I walking. And we'd walk all the way to Kalbo. Do you know where Kalbo is? It's past South Johnstone, a long way out. We used to walk.

**Debbie:** How many mile?

**Erika:** I don't know but Mum used to sing in German and we'd sing with her and it seemed like it didn't take long to get there.

**Peter:** I'd have to be probably five or six miles you would have walked.

**Erika:** Could have been. I don't know. We walked all that way.

**Peter:** South Johnstone is a fair way.

**Debbie:** And all the way back probably.

**Erika:** No the farmer brought us back on his old big trolley ... truck. Very old one.

**Debbie:** Well that sounds like a really nice memory to finish on. So thank you so much for your time and I'll turn this off.

End of recording.