

## **Either Lost or Found? A Child's Story from a WWII Australian Internment Camp**

### **Biography of speakers**

Pedram Khosronejad is an Adjunct Professor in the Religion and Society Research Cluster at Western Sydney University and until recently he was the Curator of Persian Arts at Powerhouse Ultimo. He previously worked as the Associate Director of Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies at Oklahoma State University in the United States (2015–19) and as the Goli Rais Larizadeh Chair of the Iran Heritage Foundation for the Anthropology of Iran in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland (2007–15). Since 2019 Professor Khosronejad has been engaged with diverse communities of Western Sydney and Parramatta including ethnic groups and religious communities from Afghanistan, Iran, India, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and the Uyghur people. Since 2020, Professor Pedram Khosronejad has been interviewed by more than twenty Australian and international newspapers, magazines, radio channels and podcasts, including *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Art Guide Australia*, *Australian Arts Review*, *Hali Magazine*, ABC, SBS, and BBC International.

Helga Griffin's major avocation, as a well-educated 'working' mother of a large family, was full-time employment as a Research Editor with the Australian Dictionary of Biography at the Australian National University (1979-98). It also included three years of teaching race relations at the Townsville College of Advanced Education (1976-79) and work in the Federal Office in Canberra of the Honourable Dr Moss Cass, MHR, Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (1979). She was with the ACT branch of the Executive Committee of the Australian Human Rights Council (1979-1980) and served part-time in 1988 as one of the community representatives on the Federal branch of the Commonwealth Immigration Review panels.

### **About the Event**

Until today, the lives and fates of those 512 German civilians of Persia (Iran), the imprisoned inhabitants of Australian World War II confinement centres, and the roles that they and their family members (600 wives and children) played in the development of post-war Australia have been ignored by academia.

It was during August 2019 that Professor Pedram Khosronejad (Social Anthropologist, School of Social Science, Western Sydney University) met some of the "children" of the German expatriate colony of Persia (Iran), Australians who had been detained with their parents in Iran in 1941 after the country's invasion by the British and Soviet Armies during the World War II. 512 of them (single males and six families with their children) were sent to the Australian internment camps, while the rest of the women and children were forced to separate from their husbands and return to Germany during the war. In 1947, after the war, some of these internees were deported or repatriated to Germany while many were able to stay in Australia, although they had to find employment in order to make enough money to pay for the return of their families. It was only in 1949 that most of the women and children were able to rejoin their husbands and continue to live together in Australia.

This research project should be considered the first multidisciplinary academic attempt at the recollection of the socio-cultural history and memories of this special group of civilian German detainees and migrants of Australia through their heritage and the roles that they played in the development of the country after the World War II.

This presentation is the result of four years collaboration between Professor Pedram Khosronejad and Mrs Helga (Girschik) Griffin, the only surviving female among the civilian Germans from Persia (Iran) who were brought to Australia as families and kept in detention allegedly, but actually lived like prisoners in Tatura's Internment Camp No. 3 (1941-46).

The daughter of an Austrian railway engineer working in Iran (1936-41), Helga was aged six when, with her parents and younger brother, she became a captive of the British Army's invasion of that politically neutral country in 1941. Her family was evicted from Iran and sent by sea to a WWII prison camp at a secret destination. Her family's internment in Australia's Camp 3, Tatura, in north-western Victoria, lasted five years.

Helga's story represents a diminishing opportunity to hear a first-hand account of a young female's experiences of arriving in Australia by boat as a stateless refugee and of being placed into detention for an unforeseeable time. She is the only surviving female from 512 civilian Germans detained in Iran who were taken into Australian WWII internment prison camps.

This account investigates whether the concept of internment is a polite euphemism to disguise the political actuality of her family having been treated like prisoners without any political or moral conviction. Helga's so-called internment was associated with life threatening danger during transportation, long-term detention in an antagonistic political environment, and the fracture of a child's normal development. It is questionable whether such violations of Human Rights are excusable in the interest of a foreign neutral country's national security during a time of war.

The presentation also includes an exhibition displaying some of the objects from Mrs Griffin's family collection from their internment periods in Tatura Internment prison camp.