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Annette Wagner

*A report evaluating the espionage
activity of Annette Wagner*

Written **by Jake Carpenter**



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1. Introduction

The Second World War is commemorated by Australians as one of the defining moments in the history of our nation. From the North Africa campaign to the jungle warfare of Papua New Guinea, Australian soldiers, sailors and pilots served alongside the commonwealth forces raised from the dominions and colonies to defend the British empire. However, Australia's remembrance of the Second World War focuses upon the experience of the frontline servicemen and the campaigns that they participated in, rarely is the focus shifted towards the espionage that occurred in Australia during the war. One such example is Annette Wagner, a Nazi spy of Swiss ethnicity operating in the Newcastle area from 1938 to 1940. Whilst she was only in Australia for approximately two years she is arguably one of, if not the most prominent spies to operate in Australia during the Second World War. Nonetheless information on Annette Wagner was scarce as initial research yielded only a few websites that provided relatively vague information. Thankfully our fortunes changed, and several documents were discovered on the Australian National Archives website including a 68 page dossier that documented Annette Wagner's activities in detail. Regardless, the lack of information on Annette Wagner is a testimony to the insufficient awareness of the espionage activities that occurred in Australia during the Second World War.

2. Early Life

Annette Fanny Catherine Wagner was the daughter of Ernest and Sophie Schneider



whom were Swiss German and Swiss French respectively. She was born at number 72 Chemin du Haut in the Swiss town of Bienne on the 3rd of June 1912. Annette Wagner would spend her early years growing up in Switzerland before migrating to England in 1919 following the death of her mother in the same year. She was adopted by her English second cousin, Gertrude Ridgley, and continued her education in London. Upon completing her secondary level of schooling at the age of 16, Annette Wagner returned to Switzerland and then pursued a diploma in secretarial training in Geneva. Annette Wagner became employed as a secretary for the cotton firm, Choremi Benachie and company in Alexandria where she supposedly had family. After approximately a year in Alexandria, Annette Wagner once again returned to Switzerland as a secretary for a Swiss bank. She then travelled to South Africa on a medical mission to the Transvaal province that was funded by the inheritance she received after Gertrude Ridgely passed

away when she was 19. Whilst in South Africa for nearly a year and a half, Annette Wagner decided that professional nursing would be her ideal choice for a career. Thus, upon her return from Transvaal, Annette Wagner travelled to the French town of Colmar, a few kilometres west of the Rhine in the Alsace region to study nursing and pharmaceuticals. During her time in France Annette Wagner married Robert Wagner (prior to their marriage Annette Wagner's surname was Schneider), a member of the French civil service whom was born in the Sarre-Union, Alsace (whilst it was German). Annette Wagner then migrated to the French colony of Madagascar with her husband in 1936 as he worked in the capital, Antananarivo, for the civil service. However, whilst she resided in Madagascar, Annette Wagner contracted typhoid and was forced to evacuate the humid tropical climate in order to recover. She decided to convalesce in Australia as she had relatives in Newcastle, New South Wales, deciding against evacuation to France as it was currently winter. Annette Wagner departed from Madagascar in January 1938 to Colombo, the capital of British Ceylon. From Colombo she then boarded the *Orcades*, which sailed for Sydney, arriving on the 1st of March.

3. Arrival in Australia



Upon arrival in Australia, Annette Wagner initially lived with her uncle, Frank Mairet at his residence in Cockle Creek, Newcastle. Frank Mairet was an engineer employed by Caledonian Collieries Ltd at the Cockle Creek power station which was constructed to provide power for nearby coal mines owned by the same company. On either the 19th or 20th of October 1938, Annette Wagner was accompanied by her uncle to observe the Broken Hill Proprietary steelworks in Newcastle. It was noted that she took an unusual degree of interest and inquired upon specific details regarding the operation and organisation of the plant on several occasions. Furthermore, at some time during the same month Annette Wagner attended training exercises of the 8th infantry brigade at Port Stephens, north of Newcastle. In May of 1939, most likely on the 7th, Annette Wagner was flown over the port of Newcastle by Jack Clancy. Annette Wagner met Jack Clancy in 1938, soon after her arrival in Australia and evidently they became friends. The purpose and exact destination of Annette Wagner's flight is unknown; however, Jack Clancy had inadvertently allowed her to take aerial photographs of the port of Newcastle. It is very

likely that these photographs would have included naval vessels and other assets to the Australian military. On either the 10th or 11th of June during the same year it was reported that Annette Wagner again visited the Broken Hill Proprietary steelworks in Newcastle, however, on this occasion she was accompanied by two photographers whom were said to be German. Whilst the aforementioned events were occurring, Annette Wagner was employed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. She initially broadcasted on the 2NC, 2BL and 2FC ABC radio stations, discussing travel and fashion. Annette Wagner was then employed by the commercial 2GB radio station to broadcast for the Australian Women's Weekly as the previous presenter, Dorothy Vautier, had migrated to the United States of America (Annette Wagner would broadcast using the pseudonym Renee Level as it was deemed easier to pronounce and thus remember). Annette Wagner was then employed by Trans-Radio and broadcasted a segment on French fashion that involved reading telegrams from Paris in French. Following Australia's declaration of war upon Germany on the 3rd of September 1939, the department of information was established by the Australian government on the 12th of September for the purpose of disseminating propaganda and instituting censorship. Australia's censorship policy extended to prohibiting foreigners from broadcasting on radio stations. This resulted in Annette Wagner's forced cessation of broadcasting activity in Australia. During her time in Australia, Annette Wagner's relationship with her husband whom remained in Antananarivo deteriorated such that she intended to divorce him. However, complications arose from attempting a divorce in Australia as she had assumed French citizenship upon marriage. Therefore, she was required to return to Madagascar as her divorce must be made within French jurisdiction. Annette Wagner departed for Madagascar from the Western Australian port of Fremantle on the 9th of February 1940.



4. Return to France

Details regarding Annette Wagner following her departure from Australia are scarce, however, a Smith's Weekly newspaper article published on 6th of July 1946 states that she returned to Madagascar via Colombo. She then travelled to Vichy France supposedly after she had divorced her husband, Robert Wagner. Whilst in France, the newspaper article suggests that she was remarried to the Gauleiter (Nazi official whom ruled over an administrative division referred to as a Gau) of Alsace, Robert Heinrich Wagner. Annette Wagner would be detained by the French police some time in 1946 following the conclusion of the Second World War. She was most likely interrogated on the basis that she had intimate relations with Nazi officials. Whilst being interrogated by the French police Annette Wagner committed suicide by jumping from the third floor of the Paris police headquarters where she was detained. No recording exists of the interrogation conducted by the French police that is digitally accessible and there is no evidence to suggest that the interrogation was recorded at all.



5. Annette Wagner: A Spy?

Annette Wagner's activities in Australia from her arrival on the 1st of March 1938 to her departure on the 9th of February 1940 provoked suspicion from Australian government authorities. The telegrams that were supposedly from Paris regarding French fashion that Annette Wager would read during her broadcasts whilst employed by Trans-Radio were the primary source of suspicion. The vast majority of Annette Wagner's audience were unable to speak French and she would have been well aware of this fact. This raises the question as to why she would dedicate a substantial portion of her segment to reading telegrams from Paris in French. Furthermore, Annette Wagner was well acquainted with several Germans, however, she denied the existence of such connections upon inquiry. On one particular occasion, it was reported that Annette Wagner was visited by three German sailors that had arrived on board the *Alster*, a German cargo liner, late in the evening on the 20th of February 1939, leaving promptly the following morning. Annette Wagner's French pronunciation was also described as containing a harsh German throat.

The aforementioned information suggests that Annette Wagner was possibly a German spy conducting espionage operations in the Newcastle area due to her connections with numerous Germans. Furthermore, the portion of Annette Wagner's radio broadcasts that were read in French as supposed telegrams from Paris were likely false, containing embedded messages that would be received by other German spies and transmitted to Germany. This is supported by Annette Wagner's suspicious interest in military assets such as the Broken Hill Proprietary steelworks in Newcastle and the city's respective port, both of which she photographed. The Australian government authorities decided that Annette Wagner's suspicious activities were sufficient to warrant an investigation. Annette Wagner, concerned that her espionage efforts may be compromised, requested an interview with the New South Wales police. The record of the interview is indicative of Annette Wagner's effort to pronounce her innocence and demonstrate to the police that her activities were not suspicious in nature despite evidence suggesting the contrary. Nonetheless, Australian government authorities continued their investigation until she left Australia in 1940 supposedly for the purpose of divorcing her husband in Madagascar. Whilst this reason was legitimate, Annette Wagner was prohibited from broadcasting following Australia's entry into the Second World War due to her foreign decent. This would have impeded her ability to conduct espionage activity in Australia. Thus, assuming that Annette Wagner was a German spy, she was no longer able to serve her purpose in Australia, furthermore, the longer she remained the greater the chance that her espionage activities were discovered by Australian government authorities. This was most likely the true reason for Annette Wagner's departure. Following Annette Wagner's divorce in Madagascar, she travelled to Vichy France and married a prominent Nazi official, this serves to reinforce the likelihood that she was a German spy. Finally, Annette Wagner committed suicide during interrogation by French authorities following the conclusion of the Second World War. If she was truly innocent then she had no reason to commit suicide, thus suggesting that Annette Wagner had information to conceal and the importance of its confidentiality was such that she was willing to die to avoid its discovery. The aforementioned evidence is sufficient to prove that Annette Wagner was a German spy conducting espionage activity in the Newcastle area during her residence in Australia from 1938 to her departure in 1940.

Newspaper extract of Annette Wagner's death

TELEPHONE INTELLIGENCE
MULTIPLY 1/17

SMITH'S WEEKLY
6th JULY 1946

Smith's Page 3

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN SPY WHO WAS SYDNEY BROADCASTER

ANNETTE WAGNER SUICIDES IN PARIS

MESSAGE to Australia stated that Wagner, at the time of her suicide, was being interrogated as to the whereabouts of her husband, Gauleiter (Nazi chief) of Alsace.

That adds to the mystery and complexity of a story Australian investigators would like to have in full.

The Wagner in Australia described by security officers as dark, beautiful, and enigmatic to them. She gave an impression of ingenuousness, but had a certain air of mystery, and her activities at times appeared singular. However, she remained without restriction.

At one stage of her stay in Sydney, where she landed in 1935, she broadcast fashion news on behalf of McDowell's, over a commercial station.

Her frequent use of French phrases at first interested security police, and finally were adjudged harmless.

Wagner in those days said she stayed at Bakewell House, Clifton Gardens, describing it as a Theosophist boardinghouse for women.

Her movements in Sydney, as known to "Smith's," and officially confirmed, were to say the least bewildering.

Her husband was Civil Service administrative of Madagascar, and was said to be a German Swiss. She conveyed the impression that he was of the Nazi type for which she had admiration.

She had left him, she said, because of his association with a native woman, whom she believed to be slowly poisoning her by putting a secret herb in her food.

She related experiences as a medical missionary in South Africa but apparently refrained from divulging that she had been a language translator for the Japanese at the League of Nations, Geneva, and had once worked with the Japanese Embassy in London.

It may have been for the latter reason she was refused a passport to Japan just before the Nippon came into the war.

The self-assured beauty about 30 tried to break into journalism in Sydney and even registered for a governess's job. Her other activities were clouded with mystery. She had an elusive manner which intelligence officers well remember.

On one occasion when her movements were being checked a squad of sleuths remained patiently outside a seaside house she had ordered for 10 a.m. Two hours later she had not appeared, or so the watchers thought.

They had overlooked a radiant beauty, in swimming togs, and with string bag of beach articles, sauntering to the beach. It was Annette, who had doubled around a block or two and joined another car. Whisked to Mascot aerodrome she hopped into a plane and went to Newcastle and back. It is known she sketched interesting points, but again Annette seemed to be just the romantic type and nothing definite against her could be proved.

Anyhow, Australia had had enough of her by 1940, whether so, prevented from going to Japan, they saw that she got to Colombo. Her excuse was a desire to return to Madagascar to divorce her husband.

There was a period of detention in Colombo, and next Annette found herself shipped to Vichy France.

From there she faded from the picture, until news of her tragic death.

It doesn't all link up, but now a Commonwealth dossier can be stored away—sealed, but not solved.

"We're answering your advt. for casual laborers!"

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Typed recording of Annette Wagner's interview with the New South Wales police

INTERVIEW BETWEEN MRS ANNETTE WAGNER AND EX-SUPERINTENDENT MITCHELL
INSPECTOR 1/C KEEFE AND DETECTIVE INSPECTOR WATKINS ON 20.10.39.

Shorthand writer: Cadet F.E. Popplewell.

- Q. In your communication you asked for an interview.
A. I asked for an interview, yes.
- Q. This is the interview. Will you tell me, please, your father's name.
A. Ernest Robert Schneider.
- Q. And your mother.
A. Sophie Schneider.
- Q. And they live at.
A. They are dead.
- Q. They lived where.
A. In Bienne, Switzerland.
- Q. The address exactly at the time please.
A. 72 Chemin du Haut.
- Q. What was your father.
A. My father did not work because my mother had some money from an independent profession. He was independent and depended on my mother.
- Q. What source of income did your mother have.
A. She had some money left her by her aunt.
- Q. What race were they.
A. Swiss, both of them. My mother was French Swiss and my father German Swiss.
- Q. And you were born where.
A. 72 Chemin du Haut.
- Q. Are there any others in your family.
A. I have two brothers.
- Q. What station in life are they.
A. They are both in the same profession - art decorators for new buildings and houses.
- Q. Where were you educated.
A. My education was from seven years onwards. My mother died in December, 1919, and my English cousin, who is a sister of Mr. Mairret, of Newcastle, adopted me. That is how I came to go to England.
- Q. What relation is she to you.
A. She is my second cousin.
- Q. Where did you receive your schooling.
A. When with her I had all my secondary schooling in London. At 16 years of age I went to my Godmothers and returned to Switzerland for my holiday.
- Q. Where did you go to from school.
A. I went on a visit to my Godmother in France and then I went to Switzerland. I was just over sixteen.
- Q. You had finished your schooling.
A. Yes.
- Q. Then what happened. Did you go to business of any kind.
A. Just at 16 when I went to Switzerland I visited my family at Alexandria and my two brothers in Geneva. I was there for a good many months. Then I decided that I would take a course, in view

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