

## HELEN LAYTON FERBER

15/2/1919-2013



Founding members of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research. Helen Ferber is fifth from the left amongst those standing. Source: [Voice vol. 8, no. 10, November 2012](#)

Helen Ferber was born in Adelaide on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1919. She was the eldest daughter of Richard Francis Hockey and Kathleen Butler. Her grandfather Sir [Richard Butler](#) was premier of South Australia, as was her [uncle of the same name](#).

Ferber completed a BA at Melbourne University in 1939, majoring in French and German. During her university years she completed a teaching diploma at Munich University, a course in Italian at Perugia University, and summer schools at Dijon and Poitiers Universities in France. She described her time in Munich in a memoir published in *Meanjin* in 2006.

During World War II she worked as an interpreter for the Department of the Army, and also as a monitor for the Australian Department of Information Shortwave Listening Post, monitoring enemy broadcasts in German, French and Italian.

After the war she worked with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, firstly in the UNRRA Yugoslav Mission, later with refugees in the UNRRA Displaced Persons Headquarters in Paris and Berlin. She also worked with the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organisation in Geneva.

Ferber married an American diplomat, David Ferber. In 1948 her husband was appointed American Vice-Consul to Melbourne, and Ferber undertook a series of lectures across Victoria seeking support for a United Nations appeal to help displaced children in Europe. Further postings took David and Helen Ferber and their two small children to America and to the Phillipines.

Returning to Melbourne, Helen Ferber joined the Australian Federation of University Women-Victoria, becoming national Convenor of International Relations for AFUW in the late 1950s, and President of AFUW-Vic in 1962. Her exceptional experience of international affairs made her particularly suited to be the international representative in an organisation devoted to the education of women and the furtherance of peaceful international relations.

In 1965 Ferber took up a position with the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Reserch at the University of Melbourne. She worked there until 1981, variously filling the positions of research fellow, business manager and editor of the Institute's publications, including its journal, the *Australian Economic Review*. Working with Ronald Henderson she made a major contribution to his ground-breaking study of Australian poverty, the Henderson Report. For the Victorian Council of Social Services she wrote another seminal engagement with public policy, *Citizens Advice and Aid Bureaux in Victoria*.

The breadth and the unusual nature of Helen Ferber's engagement with public life can probably be best gauged from [the lengthy biographical interview](#) recorded with her by the National Library in 2006.

The summary of this interview in the NLA catalogue states:

- Helen Ferber, born in Adelaide, speaks about her family background; her father's career at BHP; life in Whyalla, Newcastle and Melbourne; her education; father's views on career options for girls; family's educational background; recollections of her uncle, Sir Richard Butler; her university education, travels to Italy and Germany, language studies; WWII preparations; her impressions of pre-war Italy and Germany; her studies in Munich; Germany under Hitler; Nazi propaganda; summer schools, anti-Nazi friends, anti-Jewish action; the war build-up; studying in Perugia, Italy; being caught up in war preparations for the invasion of Czechoslovakia; her return to Australia; completion of her university education; interpreting work for the Army, monitoring foreign broadcasts; her employment as monitor at Listening post, responding to crucial world news; censorship; writing wartime reports; her work for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) Mission in Yugoslavia: the growth of Communism; her letters, excerpts, uses and responses. Ferber discusses American security; the American threat to the Mission in Yugoslavia and later impact on staff; the build-up of the Cold War; her sisters' lives and careers; her work with UNRRA's Public Information office in Paris; Arthur Calwell; working with postwar migrants, her involvement in Jewish migration and refugees; her

return to Australia; her marriage to David Ferber and his career; Foreign Service life in USA and Philippines; returning to employment in Melbourne; working on the Henderson Report, a study on poverty, research team members; Ronald Henderson; her contribution as Australian Economic Review's business manager; David Ferber's later work, their children and their daughters' careers; her publications; her role in the Federation of University Women; return visits to Europe, compares visits to Germany in 1938, 1947 and 1968 and Yugoslavia in 1945 and 1968; influences of her work on social policy in Australia; perspective on her own history and family history.

In 2010 Helen Ferber was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM). The award was "for service to the community, particularly as a social policy researcher and historian, and through contributions to the advancement of women".

Helen Ferber contributed generously to the Graduate Women Victoria scholarship program, and a scholarship was named for her in 2008. She died in 2013, after a busy life well-spent. Whether working internationally or locally, her concern was always with making life better for ordinary people.

*Felicity Lorains of Monash University won the Helen Ferber Bursary in 2008.*

#### **Publications of Helen Ferber**

*Citizens Advice and Aid Bureaux in Victoria* I.A.E.S.R. Melb.Uni, 1975.

R.B.Scotton & Helen Ferber (eds) *Public Expenditures and Social Policy in Australia, Vols 1 and 2*, Longman Cheshire, 1978 and 1980.

*Stagecoach to Birdsville*, Kangaroo Press, 1995.

'Missives from Munich', *Meanjin*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2006: 16-24.

Other periodicals: *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria*, *Australian Outlook*, *University of Melbourne Gazette*, *Journal of the Huguenot Society of Australia*.