

Article 3

The A.P.I.A. Association and the A.P.I.A. Club in Leichhardt, Sydney: A Brief History of Their Origins

The creation in 1954 of the A.P.I.A. (*Associazione Polisportiva Italo-Australiana*, or *Italian-Australian All Sports Association*) proved wrong those who claimed that Italians were not capable of transcending regional loyalties and uniting in order to work towards a collective goal. An editorial in *La Fiamma* (19 March 1962) around the time of the official opening of Stage 1 of the new Club premises at 38 Frazer Street, Lilyfield/ Leichhardt noted that the A.P.I.A. reflected 'a transition from the amorphous community to social life, from agglomeration to organisation, from the indistinct and voiceless group to a society representing traditions and legitimate rights and interests' (Di Nicola 166). The 26 September 1967 special issue of *La Fiamma* which commemorated the visit to Australia of the President of the Italian Republic, Giuseppe Saragat, recorded the significance of A.P.I.A. in the following terms (p. 87):

Per la prima volta nella storia di Sydney... gli italiani emigrati erano riusciti a darsi una comunità, cioè un ordine, una sede. Per la prima volta nella storia di Sydney gli italiani avevano dato generosamente senza interesse, senza sospetto, senza timore. Per la prima volta nella storia di Sydney gli italiani erano diventati maggiorenni, avevano dato prova di virtù civiche e democratiche.

For the first time in the history of Sydney... Italian emigrants have succeeded in creating a community for themselves, an order, an association. For the first time in the history of Sydney... Italians have given generously, without self-interest, suspicion or fear. For the first time in the history of Sydney... Italians have come of age, and provided proof of civic and democratic virtues.

What were the origins of this long-lived Sydney institution? In 1954, Tullio Bearzotti, Fernando Spessot and Ivo Clagnan met informally to discuss the question of soccer in Sydney. Their discussion was in part prompted by problems that the Julia soccer team was experiencing in the Canterbury District, when it was suspended from the Soccer Association because of over-enthusiastic fans invading the field. At that time, there were other Italian soccer teams, including the Pro Patria

and the San Francesco soccer teams. A group of interested parties, including those mentioned, as well as Giuliano Hreglich, son of the manager of Lloyd Triestino, the two Celoria brothers, Aldo and Angelo (who looked after publicity and administration in the office of *La Fiamma*), Mr Laginestra of EPT, the Capuchin friar Fr Anastasio Paoletti, Evasio Costanzo, Jim (Giacomo) Bayutti, and Mr Arquilla met at Cusa House in the city on 4 November 1954 and formed a committee to spearhead the establishment of an Italian sporting club.

Besides their interest in soccer and other sports, many of the group were concerned to provide a point of reference for the large numbers of single Italian immigrants. As the first A.P.I.A. constitution of 1957 stated: 'The prime object is to promote and encourage the sporting activities of Italian migrants, thus assisting their assimilation into the Australian society'. Ivo Clagnan and Ignazio Stillone wrote the first constitution for the Association. Evasio Costanzo promoted A.P.I.A. through the pages of *La Fiamma*. And in 1954 Jim Bayutti held a meeting at the Caltex refinery at Kurnell on Botany Bay, where 185 members joined, swelling the initial membership of thirty-five.

The name A.P.I.A. was decided upon and a committee was formed, consisting of Bayutti (President), Arquilla and Laginestra (Vice-Presidents), Bearzotti (Treasurer), and Clagnan (Secretary), together with ten committee members. As the 1957 Constitution stated: 'The activities of the Association are of a purely sporting and social nature and are strictly non-political and non-sectarian. The Association is open to all who seek to advance themselves in the amateur sporting fields'. The first sport promoted was basketball which, however, did not prosper. In 1955, A.P.I.A. promoted a boxing match at Redfern Oval. Boxing was much followed at that time, with visits from many famous Italian boxers, including Coluzzi, Visintin and Falcinelli. The frustrations of newly arrived immigrants were occasionally vented at boxing matches where tensions were often high and scuffles broke out among spectators.

The question of where A.P.I.A. meetings could be held in the early days was solved when Callagher's real estate agency in Annandale offered use of an office and telephone in their Parramatta Road premises. For bigger gatherings in the early years, the first floor of the Chianti restaurant in Elizabeth Street was used. Funds

were raised through social events such as gala dances. There were three such events in 1955, at the Maccabean Hall in Darlinghurst, the Dungowan Restaurant in Martin Place (where guests paid ten shillings per head for a 'cena fredda all'italiana' and heard the Orchestra Arquilla), and on the Showboat, *Kalang*, where 400 people paid 1 pound to attend. In 1956 the A.P.I.A. ball at the Trocadero in George Street had 700 guests. These events brought the older-established Italians who had arrived in the 1920s and 1930s to mix with newer arrivals. Raffles were held to raise money, and established Italian businesses such as Cantarella, Lucchitti, Fiorelli and others donated prizes.

True to its name, the A.P.I.A. Association sponsored a number of sports, including swimming, tennis (first played at the Italian Legation in Ocean Street, Woollahra), Italian *bocce*, boxing, indoor bowls, and cycling. Mr Val Gasparini of De Martin and Gasparini, an early benefactor and later President of A.P.I.A. from 1961-1971, offered transportation for the soccer team. The A.P.I.A. soccer team played its first matches in early 1956. The team colours, maroon shirts, white shorts and maroon and blue socks, were chosen to commemorate the untimely death of the Italian national team in May 1954 in a plane crash in Torino. The A.P.I.A. team played in the Canterbury District, against teams such as Hurlstone Park, and its home ground was Blick Park in Canterbury and, later, Lambert Park in Leichhardt. As *Soccer World*, the weekly publication of the N.S.W. Federation of Soccer Clubs, reported on 11 May 1957: 'It is the policy of the A.P.I.A. club to create better understanding with their fellow men through sport' (p. 11). In May 1956 the monthly accounts of the Association read as follows: 'Debit 31 pounds, Credit 41 pounds'. As surviving petty cash records reveal, the monthly laundry bill for the soccer team was a constant and ongoing expense. In September 1956 a new soccer ball was purchased for 7 pounds and six shillings. In April 1957 the A.P.I.A. team had six Italian names and five non-Italian names in its line-up. In 1971 not one Italian name was represented.

A.P.I.A. mushroomed from these modest beginnings, based on a collective male effort. In June 1957, rented premises for A.P.I.A. were opened above Mr Cesare Lucchitti's grocery store and the original Zuliani photographic studio, at 276 Norton Street,



A.P.I.A. Soccer team, 1955.

where Villa Rosa now stands. Mr Lucchitti had started in business in Parramatta Road, Stanmore and he opened a second shop at the Norton Street premises in 1956. In 1957, the A.P.I.A. Club was registered. It was incorporated in the early 1960s. 1957 was a turbulent year for soccer in Sydney. New post-war immigrants were major soccer supporters and players, and new 'ethnic' teams were scattered all over Sydney. Penalties and suspensions meted out to 'New Australian' players were a trigger to a revolt which led in 1957 to the formation of a new Soccer Federation in which Jim Bayutti played a leading role.

Meetings of the Association at 276 Norton Street investigated the possibilities for a permanent location. Leichhardt Council offered a 49-year lease on wasteland at the end of Frazer Street, Lilyfield. With donations from members to purchase adjoining land, permission from the N.S.W. Government to resume a metre of parkland and payment to Council for the lease, a design for a clubhouse by the architect Arena was chosen. Work began on the site, under Keith Bates, an Australian builder from Sutherland who offered a loan without interest, on condition that he built the club. Bayutti provided heavy drilling machinery, Sergio Asquini, together with Antonio Fantuz, was involved with the project, and others such as Carlo Zaccariotto, Peter De Martin and Val Gasparini agreed to payment for their work when the financial position of the club improved. A loan of 25,000 pounds was secured from the Commonwealth Trading Bank. Foundation members were also asked to provide financial support, to the suggested amount of 25 pounds per head. As the Annual Report of 15 November 1960 noted, 'it has been decided that the

[Management] Committee itself will undertake the building of the club, drawing on the resources of all those members at its disposal'.

After the first annual general meeting of the Club on 11 November 1959, a liquor licence was obtained. The Licensing Magistrate, Mr E. J. Forrest S.M., remarked at the hearing: 'The idea of a Club of this kind is excellent for the assimilation of migrants. In its ideals and objectives it is to be commended and encouraged'. There was great enthusiasm for the building of the clubhouse, and construction of Stage 1 took very little time. Mr F. M. Bianchi was chief co-ordinator of the project. Construction companies including Asquini's Modern Cement, Romeo Bros., and De Martin and Gasparini provided services on credit, and others, including Melocco Bros. and G. Bayutti Contractors, took out debentures for materials and services involved in the construction. The new Club premises in Frazer Street began operating on 17 March 1962. Val Gasparini was then President of the Club and Filippo Maria Bianchi was Secretary-Manager.

Soccer was an exotic, 'Continental' sport and the new premises, with marble and other expensive decorative elements, were a fitting venue. Flotta Lauro donated mirrors that created a feature wall at the entrance to the main dining room, Lloyd Triestino provided the mural on the lower floor, and Alitalia was responsible for the painted wall panel in the main foyer, depicting Italian cities. Cantarella and Stock furnished bars. The bronze statue of the discus thrower, emblem of the club, which stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the foyer, was a gift of the Italian Government. Since the demise of the Club, the statue has been located in the Co.As.It. premises in Norton Street, Leichhardt. The Frazer Street clubhouse was by the time of its official opening in 1965 a prestigious symbol of the Italian community in Sydney.

The building's Stage 1 foundation stone, for the original ground floor construction, was laid on 9 July 1960 by the Minister for Immigration, Sir Alexander Downer. The official opening of Stage 2 (including the first floor and a re-modelled ground floor) was performed on 14 April 1965 by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. A loan to part-finance Stage 2 was secured from the Commonwealth Bank which later opened a small branch in the lobby. In 1966, the estimated cost of building and fitting Stage 2 was 230,526



Dame Joan Sutherland with Secretary-Manager Filippo Maria Bianchi [right] at the A.P.I.A. Club, c.1963.

pounds. In the A.P.I.A. Club Annual Report of 1965, President Gasparini reminded members that guarantees of 30,000 pounds for the project loan from the Commonwealth Trading Bank were provided by four members of the management committee, himself, Bianchi, Bates and Asquini.

The A.P.I.A. Club opening was widely reported in the Sydney press of 1965, with an 8-page spread in the *Daily Telegraph*. In a newspaper supplement of 26 September 1967, celebrating the State visit by the Italian President Saragat, the official speech of the Prime Minister at the opening of Stage 2 in 1965 is reported verbatim. In part, Menzies observed:

You know, if I might make a quiet, confidential admission to you, we native-born Australians are occasionally a little narrow-minded about our own ideas and our own way of living. We say, 'Well, who are these fellows to tell us?' This is the best proof that we have a lot to learn... you have shown us new ways in which to walk, new ways to understand, and I venture to say that in one hundred years' time somebody writing what I will call — to use that abominable word — the cultural history of Australia, will be able to trace in it the influence of your people who have come here and settled here and contributed to the country a lot of faculties, a lot of ideas, a lot of standards that come in almost as new things... Don't be exclusive. Don't get off, but get in, get into the community, get mixed up with the community.

Let everyone have the benefit of what you can contribute and you get the benefit of what they can contribute, an integrated Australian society' (as reported in *Il Globo*, 26 September 1967, pp. 34-35).



The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, on the balcony of the A.P.I.A. Club, overlooking Iron Cove bay, on the day of the official opening of the Clubhouse. (Photograph Zuliani Studio)

The A.P.I.A. Club's restaurant soon achieved fame, and its variety shows and dances were among the well-patronised activities. Poker machines were also a feature. In 1966 the Club's members numbered 4,000; by 1968 membership stood at 8,000. In 1970 there were reportedly more than 13,000 members, 49% of whom were of non-Italian background. This was a considerable increase on the 630 members of 1956.

Other Italian clubs throughout Australia looked to the A.P.I.A. Club for inspiration and advice. There is no readily available record of membership figures over time. However Vartuli reports that of 9,450 members in January 1975, 82% were male and 18% female, and almost 50% were of Italian background. On the basis of a limited survey of members, Vartuli concluded that a majority was from Central or Southern Italy, even though the founding members of the Association were of Northern Italian origin (Vartuli 19). Almost 29%

of members were at that time of Anglo-Celtic background. Vartuli's survey suggested that one of the primary motivations for Italians to join the club was the opportunity that it provided for 'friendship and brotherhood within the Italian community'. (Vartuli 21). Certainly A.P.I.A. was a male-dominated organisation and it responded primarily to male interests. There were even those who felt that by the 1970s the club itself was not 'Italian enough' (Vartuli 21).



ANFE Ladies' luncheon at the APIA Club, Leichhardt, 27 October 1967. Pictured are: Mrs Sini, Enoe Di Stefano, Lena Gustin, Sally Basaglia, Rina Guido and Ester Penna. (Courtesy Mrs Enoe Di Stefano — Photograph Zuliani Studio)

One of the primary motivations of the founding members of A.P.I.A. was a desire to help Italian immigrants. They were themselves immigrants and knew first-hand of the difficulties of settling in a new society. The *Daily Telegraph* reported in 1957 that the constitution of A.P.I.A. mandated a representation of Australian-born athletes in all sports that the Association sponsored: 'This helps Italian migrants to meet Australians and speeds assimilation' (*Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 1957, p. 30). For example, in the eight A.P.I.A. Sporting Committees of 1968 there was a good mix of Italian and non-Italian names among the office-holders.

The glory and the cause of early financial burden for the A.P.I.A. was the soccer team. In 1960 the A.P.I.A. team reportedly had costs of 14,438 pounds. In 1960, over fifty players participated in the three grades, and all three teams reached the semi-finals. Junior soccer was also sponsored. The teams' honorary doctor was Dr Farinelli. In 1970, A.P.I.A. subsidised the team to the amount of \$18,000. As Solling notes: 'in the 1962 and

1963 seasons, peak years for Australian soccer, the Apia Soccer Club... attracted crowds of 30,000 at semi-finals at the Sydney Sports Ground' (Solling 228). In April 1968 a business consortium was formed to help finance the team, including Alitalia, Cinzano, Fiat, Lloyd Triestino and the Australian-Italian companies of Fiorelli, Lucchitti and Transfield, as well as the newspaper *Settegiorni* and Sutton's Motors at Petersham. In October 1987, *La Fiamma* reported a gathering of some of the legendary names from the earliest team line-ups, including Bertoz, Comandini, Cosatto, Molinaroli, De Francesco and Cortese who was the first coach (*La Fiamma*, 29 October 1987).

Di Nicola has observed that the role of A.P.I.A. 'went far beyond that of a social and sporting club. It soon came to be seen as the Italian club both by Italians and Australians: this made it politically relevant' (Di Nicola 167). The size and potential voting preferences of the Italy-born community in Sydney were of great interest to political parties throughout the 1960s and beyond. With visits by the politicians already mentioned, and later many others, A.P.I.A. provided a forum where mutual concerns could be explored. As Solling reports, citing Valente, 'it [A.P.I.A.] became a powerful vehicle for the expression of Italo-Australian opinions and attitudes' (Solling 228). The February 1974 twentieth-anniversary souvenir edition of the A.P.I.A. Club publication, *The Apian*, highlights in its photographic illustrations the presence in the Club premises of a range of State and Federal politicians from the two major political parties, as well as visiting Church and diplomatic dignitaries, together with sporting, cultural and show business notables. Guests of honour at the twentieth-anniversary dinner were the Prime Minister E.G. Whitlam and Mrs Whitlam.

Over the decades of its existence, A.P.I.A. was run by numbers of Italian-born businessmen, many of whom were highly successful and high-profile. Giacomo (Jim) Bayutti was among those from the business community who had a life-long association with A.P.I.A. Valente's sample survey indicates, however, that among the Italian-born community of Leichhardt there was a view that the A.P.I.A. was an 'elitist organisation', with an over-representation of businessmen. Whatever the truth of this, the soccer team regularly drew crowds of 7,000 to home games at Lambert Park. The sporting aims of A.P.I.A. clearly had wide popular support.

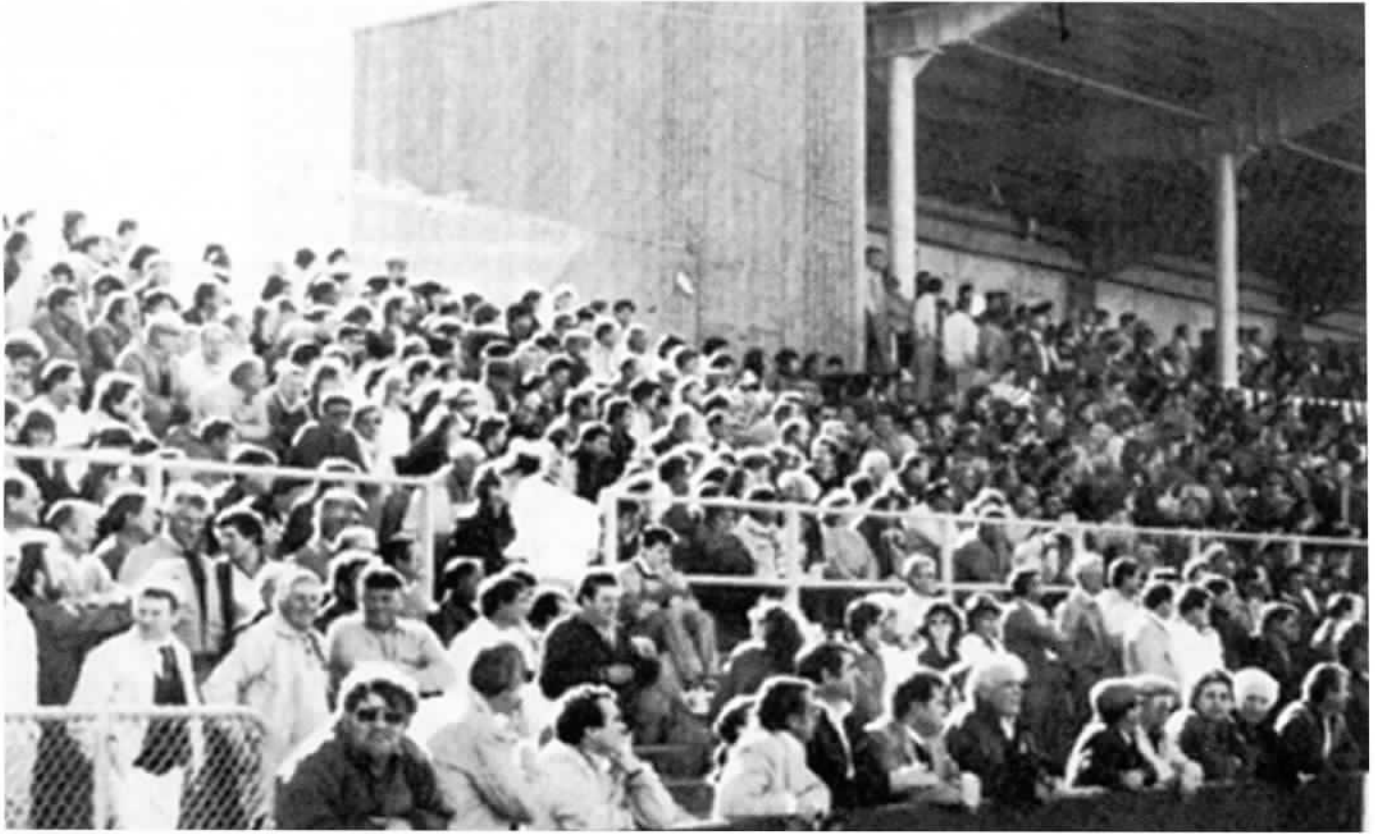
In the late 1970s, a decline in Club membership began. By the 1980s, although it was still a drawcard for both Italy-born and the wider community, there were other outlets that offered the facilities for which A.P.I.A. was initially well known, such as Italian-style eating. A.P.I.A. began to run into financial difficulties. The local newspaper, *The Courier*, of 19 June 1991, reported that the club had debts of \$5 million, membership had dwindled to 3,000, and there were difficulties in raising the money needed to maintain the soccer team (p. 2). When the A.P.I.A. was threatened with closure by liquidators in early 1996 (and did in fact close in May 1996), there was a campaign to rescue it through a public share float, with vigorous support from many prominent members of the Italian community. A *Save the APIA Club* committee was formed, with members including Franca Arena and Louise Bayutti, daughter of Giacomo. Although by July 1996 it seemed that the club would be bought and resurrected by a syndicate of businessmen, this plan did not come to fruition, and the building was re-sold towards the end of 1996.

The demise of the A.P.I.A. club in Frazer Street was seen by many as the end of an era in the history of Italians in Sydney. A reaction from Franca Arena was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 March 1996 (p. 27), in the following words: 'The Apia Club is part of our history. Back in the 1950s when Italians first came here in large numbers, it was the only meeting place where they could enjoy their own food and language and culture. Menzies came here, and Whitlam, and this was symbolic — for the first time we were not just a bunch of wogs, we were part of the community'. The blue-painted clubhouse near the Sydney Harbour foreshore was an important landmark to many Sydneysiders.

Acknowledgments

Thanks for the invaluable assistance and advice are due to Guido Zuliani, Ivo Clagnan, Enoe Di Stefano, Ines Ianitto, Gio and Patricia Fin, Bob Giezekamp, Fr Atanasio Gonelli, Fr Romano Franchini, Francesca Merenda, Armando Tornari and Louise Bayutti.

The research on which these articles are based is still in progress. Feedback and comments are actively sought by the author, Anne Reynolds (Telephone 02 9351 3500 – email anne.reynolds@italian.usyd.edu.au)



A glimpse of the crowd of soccer supporters present at a match between A.P.I.A. and Marconi soccer clubs in 1988. The A.P.I.A. soccer team regularly drew crowds of 7,000 to the home games.

References to Articles 1, 2 and 3 above.

- Bosi, Pino, *On God's Command. Italian Missionaries in Australia. Missionari italiani in Australia. Mandati da Dio*, CIRC, Sydney, 1989.
- Di Nicola, Mauro, 'The political impact of Italian migrants in Leichhardt (1961-73)', in J. Jupp (ed.), *Ethnic Politics in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, pp. 162-178.
- Gilson, Miriam and Jerzy Zubrycki, *The Foreign Language Press in Australia 1848-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1967.
- Melocco, David, *The Melocco Brothers, Marble and Mosaic Workers*. Unpublished thesis, Faculty of Architecture, University of N.S.W., 1987.
- Melocco, John P., *A History of Melocco Bros. Pty. Ltd. and its Founders, and Melocco Bros Pty. Ltd. and Concrete*. Unpublished papers, Sydney, 1993-1994.
- Rando, Gaetano, 'Aspects of the History of the Italian Language Press in Australia 1885-1985', in *Italians in Australia. Historical and Social Perspectives*. Department of Modern Languages, University of Wollongong, 1993.
- Solling, Max and Peter Reynolds, *Leichhardt: On the Margins of the City*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997. esp. Chapter 18, 'A Life Apart: Italian Leichhardt'.
- Vartuli, Dominic, *The Relationship of the A.P.I.A. Club Leichhardt to the Italian Community*. Unpublished thesis in Urban Geography, n.d.
- Vialoux, A. and C.M. Reeves, *The Jubilee History of Leichhardt (December 1871 – December 1921)*, Sydney: Local Government Publishing Company, 1921.