

from our archives

antonio agostini: newspaper man

ANTONIO AGOSTINI GAINED NOTORIETY FOR WHAT WAS FOR DECADES AUSTRALIA'S GREAT UNSOLVED CRIME: THE MURDER OF HIS WIFE, LINDA PLATT, COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE 'PYJAMA GIRL'. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THIS CASE BY THE MEDIA AND BY VARIOUS AUTHORS. AGOSTINI WAS FOUND GUILTY OF MANSLAUGHTER AND GIVEN A SIX-YEAR PRISON SENTENCE, OF WHICH HE SERVED THREE YEARS AND NINE MONTHS IN PENTRIDGE PRISON, MELBOURNE.

WRITERS DESCRIBE AGOSTINI AS A HUMBLE WAITER, A MIGRANT WITHOUT AMBITION. HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE NEWSPAPER *IL GIORNALE ITALIANO*, AND HIS VISION OF ACHIEVING THE COMPLETE ASSIMILATION OF ITALIAN MIGRANTS INTO AUSTRALIAN CULTURE, HAVE NEVER BEEN ACKNOWLEDGED. EVEN LESS IS KNOWN ABOUT HIS AGRICULTURAL REFORM WORK IN ITALY.

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED VERSION OF AN 81-PAGE ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE, HANDWRITTEN IN ENGLISH BY AGOSTINI ON 25 DECEMBER 1947 TO ONE MR WHITWORTH IN SUPPORT OF HIS PLEA AGAINST THE ORDER OF DEPORTATION TO ITALY.

AGOSTINI'S ATTEMPT TO REMAIN IN AUSTRALIA WAS UNSUCCESSFUL BECAUSE HE WAS NOT NATURALIZED. HE WAS DEPORTED TO ITALY ON THE SHIP *S.S. STRATHNAVER* ON 21 AUGUST 1948. HE DIED ON THE ISLAND OF SARDINIA IN 1969.

THIS DOCUMENT IS PART OF THE SANTOSPIRITO COLLECTION HELD BY THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY. THE TEXT HAS BEEN ABRIDGED, WITH MINOR CORRECTIONS TO AID READABILITY. SECTIONS CONCERNING AGOSTINI'S MARITAL LIFE AND THE ACCIDENTAL KILLING OF HIS WIFE HAVE NOT BEEN INCLUDED. FOR DETAILED COVERAGE OF THE MURDER READERS CAN REFER TO, AMONG OTHERS, EVANS, R., *THE PYJAMA GIRL MYSTERY*, SCRIBE PUBLICATIONS, MELBOURNE, 2004.

Dear Mr Whitworth,

It would not be right nor fair neither to you nor to any one to whom you might speak on my behalf to do so, without at least a brief summary of my life. Therefore, following up our conversation of today, Xmas 1947, I shall endeavour to recall and convey to you the events and aims of the last thirty years.

I was born in Altivole, Treviso, Veneto Region on the 20th of May 1903, from Mario and Maddalena Bernardi Agostini, the last of four children (two sisters and one brother). My father was the Secretary of that town Municipal Council for 28 years.

Up to the age of nine I frequented the local elementary school, then I spent 3 years at the Castelfranco Veneto College, followed by 4 years at Polytechnic School of Venice. Then when 17 years old, my parents and brother-in-law suggested that if I felt so inclined I should take the diploma of wool-textile expert from the Industrial Textile School of Milan, to prepare myself to enter in partnership with my brother-in-law's firm, the Giulio Eger Spinning and Textile Mill of Noale, Venice (where my parents moved when evacuated during World War I from Altivole. Mother still live there with my eldest sister, my father and brother-in-law died since).

I did go to Milan but at the end of the 3 years course the country was in the throes of revolution and it was not the time to enlarge any industry— so at least thought my relations.

I was twenty then, I had already joined the Fascist Movement and was fired with its programme. I inspired in my father my own enthusiasm in what I thought should be our contribution for the moral and economic reconstruction for our country. I induced him to give me one quarter of the amount of capital he had been prepared to invest for my sake in the brother-in-law industry. In our district, like in hundreds of others, the conditions of agriculture in comparison with those of Lombardy that I had visited and studied, were primitive. Several were the factors, the main one that the agriculture was still left abandoned in the peasant's hands, who unaware of the march of progress and often hostile to it, still carried on as his forefathers had done. Our country peasants had not, up to then, any education, but for those 3 years, from the age of six to nine, when they were supposed to frequent the elementary school.

With my father's support, I rented six acres of land, enlisted the cooperation of the nearest Agriculture College of the region, and used those six acres for experimental plots on selected seeds, scientific fertilization, etc. Organised lecture and practical demonstration to farmers by the College's experts and opened in the town the first store of agricultural implements, machinery, seeds, and fertilizers. Obtained the agency of the Fordson Tractor, and in face to organised opposition, I gave demonstration with it and sold 25 in the first 18 months. Then, I obtained a depot for the Anglo-Persian Petrol Products.

At first, the usual wise old men of any town, shook their heads, made sarcastic remarks at me and thought that my father was a fool to back me. But not long afterwards they were with me.

At the end of the first 3 years, the production of all those hundred of farmers that trusted and joined my campaign went up from 20% to 40% and my business was a paying proposition. The experimental field a continuous source of study, wonder and admiration even by those that had been the worst denigrator.

Antonio Agostini in the uniform of the Fascist Party, Altivole, Italy, c. 1922.



In 1926, I still was a member of the Fascist Party— had been since 17 years old, when for the first 2 or 3 years [of the party's founding] to become a member was the choice of very few. Up to October 1922, three thousand youths had been murdered [in Russia], simply because they had dared to hope and to believe in a Christian democracy, as the Fascist Movement's

programme was then upheld to be, in opposition to Moscow's red ideologies. Before Fascism went to power (October 1922) the Fascists were very few, as it was not healthy to be one. Since 1922 they became millions— and many ideas and ideals changed with the invasion in its ranks of the greedy, opportunistic seekers of booty, power and other evils.

In June 1926 I was called up at the fascist headquarter of Venice and found myself in disagreement with the new policy and method of the Authorities intended to force on the farmers and peasant farm workers through the newly formed Agriculture Syndicate— on the eve of the first campaign to increase the wheat production named the 'Wheat Battle'. Soon afterwards I had reasons to express different views from those of the new set of ideas officially sponsored.

By the middle of 1927 the farmers of my district could no longer come to my store for their supplies because I had not joined the newly formed Fascist Syndicate, although I still was a member of the Party, and even when their tractors were immobilised in the middle of ploughing for want of petrol, which the Syndicate could not supply and I had in plenty, I was barred to give it to them.

Bitterly disappointed to see under my eyes the very example of what in larger scale was beginning to occur throughout the country, pressed on the ever growing octopus of a new army of sycophant Fascist bureaucrats that like locust were creeping on and on beneath those same slogans printed throughout on the streets, offices, factories of Italy to remind the Italians of all those virtues that the leaders themselves were daily destroying in their all grasping concupiscence either for power, money or incompetence.

I was then 24 years old. My parents were the most wonderful that any man could wish to have. The decision to leave them was a hard blow to inflict upon them, in spite that father confessed to me he would do the same I proposed to do, if in my position, because he understood how I felt. Having in 1918, then a boy of fifteen, lived one month with English-Australian soldiers billeted in my home (Altivole was near the battle front) I chose Australia as the country I would go to settle in. On 11 August 1927 I sailed from Genoa for Sydney, on the *Regina d'Italia*. I had 3 letters of introduction and the prospect of acting as wool-buyer for my sister's wool mill. (My brother-in-law had recently died).

I landed in Sydney on the 29 September 1927. The reception from the three persons I had letters of introduction was discouraging. All three seemed to find a lot of faults with the country and advised me to return with the same ship I had come which was due back from Brisbane in a few days.

The glances I had of Australia from the few days in Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne, the few contacts with its people — since the first morning of my landing I was boarding with an Australian family in Double Bay by the name of O'Rourke — had convinced me that my choice had been a happy one contrary to the opinion of my gloomy advisers. To cut myself out of any thought of return, I invested the money I had in a block of four acres of virgin bush land in the Nowra district as a token of faith. I never saw the land, I bought it through an Estate Agency and lost it years later because I could not fence it.

Next, I realised the importance of learning the English language. While doing so at the Sydney Conservatorium at night, I went pea picking on the vegetable growing districts around Sydney. Three months after my arrival I was offered a temporary job as cloakroom attendant at Romano's Café, Sydney. I took it on and was dropped cold by those three naughty acquaintances I had been introduced to by letter from Italy. This fact made me notice the differences between the two worlds: the one I came from looked down on me because I dared to take any job; the other world, the one I came to, showed to the cloak-room boy kindness, helpfulness and treated him as an equal.

Many were the clients of Romano's that in the cloakroom would forget they had a guest waiting for them in the restaurant, while they were either trying to help me along with the language, or describing some part of the country or narrating episodes about the same. Some would even go to the trouble of bringing me books to improve my English.

Romano's of that period was the meeting place not only of Sydney society, but also of all the top figures of the commercial, industrial, political and artistic life of Australia. Many were the interesting anecdotes told me by some of those prominent persons. Of how humbly they had started and how great and generous were the opportunities of this truly democratic nation. Thus, it was natural that in such a friendly atmosphere I should have quickly grown strong fondness of my new environment. Fondness that became much deeper years later, when came the

opportunity to travel extensively through the continent, meeting friends wherever I went. I kept that provisory job for five years and a half!

Agostini goes on to talk about meeting Linda Platt at the end of 1928, their marriage in April 1931 and the difficulties that soon after emerged in their relationship.

By 1933 I had been approached by two Italians asking me to join them in the publishing of a new Italian newspaper.¹ There were already four, none of them any good and mostly existing on bluff.² As I could not see either the usefulness or the honesty of anyone of those four, I [initially] declined.



UNA DELLE PIU' RECENTI COPIE.

Three editions of *Il Giornale Italiano*, covering the period March 1932 to October 1937.

However, now that my wife wanted me to find work that would take us away from Sydney, I thought to study the newspaper idea. From few meetings with Filippo Maria Bianchi and Franco Battistessa, I was convinced that there would have been plenty of usefulness for a weekly paper aiming to lift-up the prestige of Italians as settlers by at the same time lifting up their own outlook, accelerating the process of Australianization of new arrivals by helping them to learn the language, habits, traditions, conditions of work wages and trade unions.

In few words, to help all those that by the conditions existing in their country of origin came to Australia unprepared to become quickly absorbed in the Australian way of life. Often the local press attacked the Italian settler drifting in community of his own and thus retarding his amalgamation with the

native population. It was then and perhaps still is true that such situation existed. In North Queensland, in New South Wales and in Western Australia there were country centres with such a high percentage of Italian population to constitute real islands of foreign element; that by its compactness maintained language, habit and tradition alive. As these so called islands were formed of people coming from the same Sicilian or Calabrian town, the old feud, pernicious superstitions and other evils born and bred from poverty and ignorance — mostly cunningly fostered by the local politicians and secret societies for better exploitation — were revived here in ... sunny Australia by the old foxes that had followed the flock overseas.

Sample of the cursed evils had from time to time come to the surface in North Queensland and also in Melbourne the seeds were nursed. Seldom, if ever would the local police be called to assist and even when the police had reason to investigate, a closed wall of shut mouths would be met. Why? Because that same fear that for centuries had made those peasants slaves of those parasites living off blackmail and extortion had them in their clutches even here 12 thousand miles from its source.

But there would not have been fear and from fear a rich harvest for the foxes if those peasants would master the language and full awareness and consciousness of their own freedom and protection of the law. Thus there were interested parties in keeping them isolated and dependent on the good offices of those self-appointed interpreters. The Australian authorities paid very little attention and hardly ever knew what was going on. The Italian Consuls were officials, here today and gone tomorrow. Their only concern was to be able to send to Rome glowing reports of national celebrations inspired by great patriotism and ovations to the Duce. Showing on paper that through

their own efforts the Italians here were imbued with very high admiration for the fascist Italy. They usually surrounded themselves with a few sycophants that helped them to believe that they were doing a great job. They would through their poodles pester the Italians in joining the Fascist Party, inducing them to do so with promises or threats of what could happen to their relatives at home [in Italy]. On nineteen different letterheads, representing as many pro-fascist associations, wonderful reports of activities only existing in the privacy of their offices were sent to one or another of the many ministries in Rome — and thus besides justifying their fifty pounds a week, they would be promoted to a higher position.

To the average Italian calling at the Consulate for any transaction, they were too busy to be disturbed. To crown all this sort of make-believe activity, in the year 1928 the then Consul General Comm. Grossardi started a weekly newspaper, *Corriere degli Italiani in Australia: Italian Courier in Australia*, which was the official organ of the Italian Fascists in Australia. This was one of the four papers I referred to earlier. In spite of the long name, this paper was not meant for the Italians in Australia although the Consul had collected a few thousand pounds from them, it meant once more to give further proof in Rome of the constructive activity of the Consul.

Of the other three newspapers, the one in Brisbane, called *L'Italiano* was anti-fascist. The local Consul indirectly sponsored the one in Perth [*La Stampa Italiana*]. The fourth one in Sydney, the oldest of the lot had no policy, was the less harmful of the four [*Italo-Australian*]. But in spite of their flamboyant claims of representing the Italians in Australia, and each one canvassing advertising with rate cards claiming 10,000 and more subscribers, all four did not reach a thousand paid-up subscribers.

CORRIERE DEGLI ITALIANI IN AUSTRALIA

(Italian Courier in Australia)

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Registered at G.P.O. Sydney as newspaper for post in Australia. No. 4448 REDAZIONE ED AMMINISTRAZIONE: 22 CAMPBELL STREET, HAYMARKET, SYDNEY. Tel: 324 6331. Abbonamenti: Annuale £12/6, semestrale £6/6, trimestrale £3/6. Single copies 6d. Val. 4—No. 21. SYDNEY, MERCOLEDÌ MARZO 30, 1932.—A. X. Pagina 24.

LE RICERCHE SCIENTIFICHE E LA RISOLUZIONE DELLA CRISI IN UN ARTICOLO DEL SENATORE GUGLIELMO MARCONI.

Il senatore Guglielmo Marconi, che ha dato un contributo così prezioso alla scienza e alla tecnica, ha scritto un articolo di grande interesse sul problema della crisi. In questo articolo, che sarà pubblicato nel prossimo numero del Corriere, il senatore Marconi espone le sue idee sulla soluzione della crisi e sulla riforma della nostra economia. Il senatore Marconi sostiene che la causa della crisi è da attribuirsi alla mancanza di un piano nazionale e alla mancanza di un governo forte. Egli propone che il governo italiano应采取 una serie di misure per risolvere la crisi e per riformare la nostra economia. Queste misure includono la creazione di un ministero della produzione, la riforma della nostra legislazione e la creazione di un fondo di riserva per le emergenze. Il senatore Marconi conclude che la soluzione della crisi dipende dalla volontà del governo italiano di prendere queste misure e di riformare la nostra economia.

DALL'ITALIA

Paolo Boselli, Vecchio Uomo di Stato e Venerando Patriota, È Morto. IL COMPIANTO UNANIME DELLA NAZIONE.

Il senatore Paolo Boselli, che ha dato un contributo così prezioso alla politica e alla patria, è morto. La notizia della sua morte ha commosso il cuore di tutti gli italiani. Boselli era un uomo di grande statura e di grande cuore. Egli aveva dedicato tutta la sua vita al servizio della patria e alla difesa dei suoi concittadini. La sua morte è una grande perdita per il nostro paese. La nazione si commuove per la scomparsa di questo grande uomo di Stato e di questo venerando patriota. Il nostro governo e il nostro popolo si commuovono per la scomparsa di Paolo Boselli. La nazione si commuove per la scomparsa di questo grande uomo di Stato e di questo venerando patriota.

An Interesting Exhibition in Italy of all Types of Bread Made Throughout the World.

An interesting exhibition of all types of bread made throughout the world is being held in Italy. The exhibition is held in the city of Rome and is open to the public. It is a very interesting exhibition and is well worth a visit. The exhibition shows a wide variety of breads from all over the world. It is a great opportunity to see and taste some of the best breads in the world. The exhibition is held in the city of Rome and is open to the public. It is a very interesting exhibition and is well worth a visit. The exhibition shows a wide variety of breads from all over the world. It is a great opportunity to see and taste some of the best breads in the world.

There really was the need of a few sheets of reading matter for our countrymen. The great majority, about 95%, could not read or write in English. To understand this you must know that, apart from the few professional or otherwise educated Italians, the bulk of our emigrants were peasant farmers, hard working men, sober, thrifty, enterprising in many cases, but lacking the most elementary foundations from which to learn how to write and read in another language. They all at the most had been to school from the age of six to nine, quite a few could hardly read or write in their own language.

Landing in Australia the main pressing task was to find a job and work, if on the land, from dawn to dusk, and unless employed by Australians, little chance they would have even of learning how to speak English.

Please don't think of those Italians you may have known in the cities. In spite of the fact that every second fruit shop of Sydney and Melbourne are run by Italians. The bulk of them are on the land, far away from populated centres. Whenever there is hard work you will find them. The fruit shops or fruiterers are a class apart. They all come from the Eolian Islands, those tiny islets on the northeast tip of Sicily. So small are those islands you may never have seen them on the maps of the Mediterranean Sea. They hardly play a productive role [in Italy] although as fruiterers [in Australia] they have proved successful.

Just imagine the usefulness, the comfort, the uplifting influence that a weekly journal would have had—the summary of world events, the chronicle of Italian news and of Italian events among the various communities scattered in the

Commonwealth, with information regarding trade, union rules, working conditions of some industries, laws and regulations touching their own activities, sports, etc. presented to them in a plain, easily understandable way. But what was going to be the most useful of all was a weekly English lesson specially compiled, to be easily grasped by any person that through no fault of their own, had the most rudimentary education, much lower than the minimum necessary to get any result from an ordinary English-Italian grammar. These lessons had to be phonetically as well as plainly written.

Another very deeply felt lack, particularly felt by the women, was the want of religious contact. This was only available to those few living in the vicinity of the two Italian priests then in Australia and of those few Australian clergymen speaking Italian.

In those days of 1933, when with Messrs Bianchi and Battistessa we were studying the task, the difficulty of accomplishing it seemed beyond our means, as none had any money to speak of.

To follow on the steps of all other Italian newspapers would have been useless. They did not reach the people we wanted to reach and needed to be reached, those in the country. To make subscribers of all those scattered from Cooktown to Albury, from Wyndham to Tasmania, the only way was to call and to canvass from farm to farm, mine to mine, camp to camp, wherever there was one no matter where, and how to get there. To assist us in the financing of this scheme came Mr Portous and Mr Seattow, the advertising experts of O'Brien Publicity Pty. Ltd., and Mr Hutchinson, manager of Lintas, the



ID papers issued by the journal I.C.V.O. to its agent Antonio Agostini, 1925.

Antonio Agostini, in a photograph possibly taken in his office in Swanston Street, Melbourne, c. 1935.



advertising agency for the Lever Bros organisation. Their advice, followed to the letter, proved so sound that after four years the *Italian Journal* had become financially secure—and through this soundness of its financial income had been able of reaching and by-passing all the goals that in 1933 seemed unobtainable. To the general opinion of the newspaper and publicity men of Australia, the *Journal* did high credit to the Italo-Australian [migrants]! This had been the aim and ambition when we were exploring the task ahead.

In May 1933 Agostini moves to Melbourne — with his wife Linda — to establish the Journal in Melbourne. His energies are devoted to widening circulation and selling advertising space.

We soon found a nice cottage on the crest of Punt Road, South Yarra and an office in the 'Shell Corner', Bourke and William Streets.

I went ahead from the very start, backed by the confidence that a happy heart and a congenial task can give. Linda would often look after the office, or travel to the country with me, meeting new people.

At this point Agostini writes about the increasing difficulties in his marriage, the events leading to Linda's death in August 1934 and his subsequent attempts to conceal the murder.

I shall not try to find words to describe the depth of my despair. Faith only prevented me from joining Linda where she had planned to take me. Faith that grasped my hand and at the crest of each wave of despair kept my sanity and urged me to go on with my job. A job that more than before I felt was the most worthy contribution I had to offer to my adopted country. Faith that

kept me here to face the ordeal whenever destiny would decide rather than seek refuge anywhere else. If I had been a coward once, no matter under what circumstances, I had to prove to myself that such an occasion would never be repeated.

Until then I had been successful in establishing a wide circulation of the *Journal* and securing a good share of advertising.

Religion was another problem to solve. The large majority of Italians as soon as they landed were like sheep without a shepherd. Only a few would come into contact with either an Australian clergyman speaking Italian or with one of the two Italian priests here at the time. Consequently this caused a breaking in the tie on which they had heavily leaned on in their home country. This left them guideless and the women particularly felt the harmful effects. The first remark I always heard, made by the many clergymen I came to meet during my travel was how poor the attendance of my countrymen was in the church. The cause of course was the same old one: language. Once astray their return to the church had to be assisted. One of the Italian priests, Father De Francesco, [was] stationed at St Ignatius, Richmond. I went to him offering all the space he needed to start a religious column in the Victorian edition of the *Italian Journal*. The interest shown by the readers was soon so remarkable and clearly pointed out how deeply was the need for a spiritual weekly guidance. Fr De Francesco's section was soon also included in the New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia editions.

Not long afterwards, with the prelates for the Melbourne Eucharistic Congress, arrived Monsignor Terziarol as Papal Master of Ceremonies. He was genuinely impressed by the column I had introduced. He encouraged me and promised support. Support which I had to enlist when a few months later, Fr De Francesco was called back to Italy and was not going to be replaced. This undermined what had been achieved. I collected over 2,000 signatures for a petition to S.J. Order in Rome, and sent it to Monsignor Terziarol. Father Dr Ugo Modotti was sent to replace Fr De Francesco [in 1938]. Fr Modotti was given the opportunity to produce a monthly magazine, exclusively dedicated to religion and to be edited by him. The magazine came to life under the title of *L'Angelo della Famiglia* (the Family Angel)³. Since the beginning of the war and the internment of all the staff of the *Journal*, the publication of the Family Angel was continued by the Advocate Press. In the same period the *Journal* had also achieved another of its

aims: an 8-page weekly section dedicated to women. This section, like the Journal, would gradually go from the Italian to the English language. This brings me back to when I and Monsignor Terziarol were talking to the secretary of Archbishop Dr Mannix, Dr Beovich (now Archbishop of Adelaide). Dr Beovich suddenly switched from English to a flawless and fluent Venetian dialect. His parents were Venetians like us!

At the beginning of 1936, with the Journal soundly established in Victoria, and through the creation of a Limited Company in possession of a printing plant, I left to go to Western Australia. In Perth I organized an office for the company and again took care to increase the circulation and advertising of the paper⁴. The local priests considered the religious conditions of the Italian miners in the main centres such as Kalgoorlie, Boulder and Wiluna shocking. Fr Ryan became my collaborator. Twelve months after, some religious celebrations organised in these centres and also in the southwest region of the state, the 'shocking' situation was wiped out. Money for altars, chapels, etc. was freely pouring in to the astonishment of the priests who were before quite disappointed. All that was needed was a link to reunite the broken chain.

I must say that credit for our success goes to Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane. As the staunchest champion of the Italian cause, he was since the beginning a guiding influence throughout the life of the Journal. Many pages were often honoured and blessed by his pen. Whilst I was not fortunate to meet him personally, even now I am glad that as the advertising manager of the Journal I have followed his advice of never having soiled its pages with advertisements morally and physically detrimental to the interest of the country, no matter how poor our resources were at the beginning.

At the end of 1937, I left Perth for Sydney where I lived until 10 June 1940—internment day.⁵ In Sydney, [before internment] as manager of that office, my efforts were then confined to coordinate the canvassing of advertising contracts in all the states where the Journal had established offices.

If you have read this rigmarole up to here, you may imagine that all Italians would have appreciated the work the Journal was pursuing. It was quite the contrary. Although a large number made up of authentic workers were sincerely grateful, other sections were antagonistic and in some cases quite bitter. The opposing factions were:



Father Vincenzo De Francesco served the Italian Community in Melbourne from 1922 to 1931.

- The Italian Consuls for their own reason.
- The official Fascists, mainly because they had to share the same views of the Consuls. They were also accusing the Journal of being fundamentally opposed to the Italian interests in Australia. They were not concerned with the interests of Italians permanently settled in Australia.
- The Communists because they accused and painted the Journal of being fascist.
- The so called 'Intelligentia' because they had to criticise anything in which they were not involved.

Put all together they were not many, but very harmful indeed. Under the sponsorship of the first [the Consuls], a lawsuit was lodged in 1938 against the Journal with the aim of sending it bankrupt through some artfully drawn legal expenses. From 1st April to the middle of June an employee [of the Journal] who was asked to leave his job, sued the Journal for insufficient wages. The case had to be fought in the Victoria's Law Court. The Journal could not have lost the case, but to be represented properly and oppose a similarly strong opposition, we had to face the fees of a KC, now Judge O'Brien, and of barristers Fazio and Adami. Every effort of the presiding Judge and KC O'Brien to reveal who was financially meeting the plaintiff legal expenses, estimated at 80 pounds a day, failed. The lengthy and rightful judgement in favour of the Journal did not help in recovering the expenses from the plaintiff who admitted to be penniless and of having been so all the time. Eight weeks of general disruption, and the huge cost had nearly bankrupted the Journal. The bank overdraft was stopped!

It was indeed a job of faith. The more bricks were thrown against my two colleagues and me, the more we were urged to continue with our work.

In those days there was no Bonegilla Reception Centre. No Federal Minister and Clergymen to welcome the several hundred Italian immigrants arriving with each boat. At the wharves the only committee of reception was of photographers from sensationalistic newspapers taking photos of those few unfortunate ones that did not possess a smart looking suit case, but only had a bundle to carry ashore, or of others who had no collars and tie. Their photos would be spread on newspapers and posters throughout the Commonwealth with contemptuous comments as if to be poor was a sin and a collar and tie the dormant wealth of this country. It was natural that under these conditions a large proportion of new arrivals would drift on to those districts where there were already too many Italians and where the process of absorption into the Australian way of life would practically become impossible and be always a source of friction with the average Australian that in those districts felt to be a minority: a “foreigner” in his own home.

Other migrants would be grabbed from the wharves by either the supposed unselfish sponsor or similarly enterprising persons (Italian, of course) and taken to work in farms or fruit shops, from twelve to sixteen hours a day paid at half and often much less than the basic wages. Years later, one word at a time — and never through the assistance of their employers — they would learn English and realise how they had been exploited by their good Samaritan employers who made them believe they had given them shelter and work out of pity.

But the Australian worker was told and firmly believed that his fellow Italian was coming here to cut his wages and lower his standards of living. Therefore he did not like him. While during these years the cases of exploitation that reached the law courts were quite numerous, they only represented a small percentage of the prevailing conditions.

Is it then any wonder that the work of the Journal was not popular with some of our so-called ‘leaders of the community’?

Many practical suggestions on these and other matters were by us put to politicians and Federal authorities of the period, but a cocktail or dinner party at the Consul General’s home usually attracted more attention. However it is now with great satisfaction that I have been able to look back on those years of enthusiastic endeavour and be more than ever grateful to God who gave me the strength to persevere and thus ease my sorrow in a right and unselfish task.

If you have followed me so far, you may also understand how it was possible to have lived so many years without feeling the need to a certificate [of naturalisation] to prove my loyalty to Australia. When the danger of war made me realise my position it would have been unfair to apply for naturalisation.

I am sure that when you asked me to give a summary of the story of my life, you did not expect such a ... punishment! But would a few dates and changes of address and occupation give you sufficient background to understand my life’s view, aims, failure, tragedy and love for this country?

Sincerely yours,
Antonio Agostini

NOTES:

¹ *Il Giornale Italiano: The Italian Journal*. The first edition of the Journal was published on 19 March, 1932. Agostini joined the editorial team early in 1933.

² *La Stampa Italiana*, Perth, 1931-1932; *L’Italiano*, Brisbane, 1932-1942; *Italo-Australian*, Sydney 1922-1940; *Corriere degli Italiani in Australia*, Melbourne, 1928-1939.

³ The first issue of *L’Angelo della Famiglia* was published on 1 January 1939.

⁴ In the annual edition of *Vade Mecum degli Italiani in Australia: Illustrated annual of the Italian Journal*, 28 October 1937, Agostini is described as the director of the Perth office and as ‘One of the youngest and most able collaborators of *Il Giornale Italiano* to whom goes the credit for the success achieved by the newspaper in Victoria’.

⁵ Agostini was interned on 11 June 1940 and released from the Wayville Camp, South Australia, on 2 February 1944. On 7 March 1944, he was charged with the murder of his wife Linda.