

## MY FATHER, DOMENICO BOFFA

by Maria Boffa

My father, Domenico Boffa was born in New York on the 29th February, 1880. Prior to his birth, his parents, Marco and Anna Rosa, had lost two children in early infancy. In their anxiety for Domenico's survival, his parents took him home to Viggiano in the Province of Potenza whilst still a babe in arms. About two years later, a daughter, Rosa, was born to them. A deep and abiding love was to spring up between Domenico and Rosa and although, sadly, they were not to see each other again after Domenico left Viggiano as a young man, the affection between them never diminished as we were to see from the correspondence between them which spanned over sixty years of their lives.

In due course, Domenico and Rosa went to school and were taught by Professor Argentieri. *Professore* was a courtesy title extended to school teachers in Italy at all levels of the scholastic system. Professor Argentieri must have been an extraordinary teacher in those far off days of the 1880's and 1890s in the mountain top village of Viggiano and he left an indelible mark on generations of his pupils. His teaching in the "elementari" gave them an amazing grounding in the Italian language and other subjects, put to good

use all of his life. Where Professor Argentieri left off, Papa took over and became self-taught.

Like so many Viggianesi, Papa learned to play the violin as a child and, as a young man studied in Salerno. To the end of his life, he looked back on his time in Salerno with nostalgia. He had been happy there. He travelled to England and to German South Africa earning his living playing the violin and sending money home to his parents. He had a natural aptitude for languages and learned German in German South Africa becoming so proficient that, years and years later, he could still carry on a conversation in German with ease.

In 1911, Papa came to Melbourne. His mother had told him to bring her *saluti* to their old friend Maria Aurelia. Papa seemed amazed to find that her daughter Giuseppina had grown up in the meantime. Their courtship ended with their marriage in St. Patrick's Cathedral on the 29th August, 1912. The religious ceremony was accompanied by a full orchestra composed, of course, of Viggianesi. This display of solidarity touched Papa and Mamma very much because Papa was a recent arrival with no family or relations here.



Wedding of Domenico and Giuseppina Boffa in 1912

Papa and Mamma had five children, Rosa, Marco who died in 1981, Giuseppe who died in infancy, and twins Leonardo and Maria.

Papa used to play the violin at the cinema in the days of the silent films. However, during the early '20s, he established the Italian Art Gallery importing marble statuary from Carrara, beautiful examples of Venetian glass, bronzes, majolica from Deruta, Florentine art works. The business prospered. One of Papa's clients was Dame Nellie Melba who would call to make her purchases. It was always with pride that Papa recalled her visits and their conversations in Italian which he said Dame Nellie spoke beautifully.

The Great Depression came in 1929 and Papa's business venture, which was possibly ahead of its time, collapsed in the early '30s. Certainly, by its very nature, it could not survive those awful years. I don't think that Papa ever fully recovered from this blow. He suffered dreadfully because his loss curbed his generosity to his family. Later on, Papa became an interpreter without peer in the Law Courts and an insurance agent. Papa was a multi-faceted man and his buoyancy gradually returned.

Side by side with his deep affection for Australia, his adopted country, and for British institutions Papa retained all his life a love of Italy and of things Italian. He insisted that we should speak Italian and it was he who gave us our first lessons in reading and writing the language. At home, we spoke our dialect with our Nonna as she always claimed that she understood not one word of English. I remember that Papa would take us for walks and we would repeat after him in Italian various things that we passed on our way: *il palo telegrafico, la chiesa, il negozio, i crisantemi etc.*, long words for small children. He bought us Italian language records, with printed texts, when they first came on the market. My sister and I especially had cause to be grateful to him later in life because our Italian became a passport to interesting occupations, she at the Australian Embassy in Rome, and I at the Italian Consulate General in Melbourne.

Papa had a social conscience and I think that, instinctively, he was one of the first social workers. As a child, I can remember people calling at our house in Carlton asking his advice and help in all manner of problems and worries and he gave of his time unstintingly.

Papa was a foundation member of the Circolo Italiano Cavour and several times President of the Club. He loved the Club and put his heart into its activities. The main social event in the calendar of

the Italian community was to become the Club's annual Hospital Ball, held at first in the Lower Melbourne Town Hall and later on in the Main Melbourne Town Hall, in aid of the Lord Mayor's Fund, the proceeds of the Ball going to leading Melbourne Public Hospitals. Papa had organisational ability and the Ball was his "baby". He would devote hours of his time to collecting prizes for the Bazaar held in the course of the Ball and which would swell the proceeds. Some beautiful prizes would be donated and those unsold were auctioned by Papa at the close of the Ball amid the general excitement of the bidders. Needless to say, in the morrow Papa had completely lost his voice.

In recognition of his efforts Papa was made a Foundation Member of the Lord Mayor's Metropolitan Hospitals Fund on the 16th January, 1924. He held Life Governorships of various hospitals including the Children's Hospital and the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

For his services to Italian Red Cross, Papa was awarded a magnificent bronze medal inscribed with his surname.

In 1932, King Victor Emmanuel III conferred on Papa the decoration of *Cavaliere della Corona d'Italia* which carried with it the relative insignia and Magistral Diploma.





Domenico Boffa, centre standing, and Giuseppina behind him, with members of the Italian Grand Opera Company

During the 1920s there were the Italian Grand Opera seasons in Australia. Toti Dal Monte was to make her name here and go on to achieve fame world-wide. Ever mindful of the Italian Community's contribution to the Public Hospital, Papa asked the leading artists of the season if they would be prepared to sing, free of charge, at a Concert in aid of the Hospitals. They agreed enthusiastically. He then approached the entrepreneurs, J.C. Williamson, and they readily gave their consent to their artists to perform. The Concert was held in The Auditorium in Collins Street (later to become the Metro Theatre) and was a tremendous success. I can remember sitting on Papa's knee during the Concert and when Toti Dal Monte sang La Ninna Nanna, I had the impression that I carry with me to this uncertain age of mine, that somehow she was looking at me on Papa's knee and singing to me. I shall never forget her entrancing smile.

In 1925, Comandante De Pinedo made his epic flight ROME-MELBOURNE-TOKYO-ROME in a sea-plane. The excitement that this heroic feat engendered made head-lines world-wide. On the 9th June, 1925, De Pinedo landed his air-craft on the foreshore at St. Kilda amid cheering crowds of people whose admiration for the aviator matched their excitement and emotion at his safe arrival on these shores. Papa had assisted in the organisation of the welcome and had convened meetings of the Welcoming Committee at the Italian Art Gallery. Comandante De Pinedo's navigator was Maresciallo Campanelli. As the latter, a married man with six children, had shared

in the perils of the flight, it was Papa who insisted that the gift made to Campanelli be equal in value to that made to De Pinedo.

I was fascinated to learn recently from our local historian, Nino Randazzo, that De Pinedo was a Neapolitan, that Campanelli was a Neapolitan and that the sea-plane was named ... GENNARIELLO! When De Pinedo left Melbourne he was singing at the top of his voice *IAMMO IAMMO ... IAMMO IAMMO IA' ... FUNICULI' FUNICULA' ...*

#### PROGRAMMA

Marsia Reale - Gajani  
Chavertus "Guglielmo Tell" - Rosini

Saluto -  
Per la Società "Dante Alighieri"  
Dott. T. M. Ballestracci, Scrittore Onorario  
Per il "Circolo Italiano Crespi"  
D. Boffa, Presidente  
Per il "Circolo Duca degli Abruzzi"  
G. Carra, Presidente

Fantasia "Aida" - Verdi

Discorso del Console Generale  
N.H. Comm. Avv. A. Grossardi  
Presentazione dei doni

Risposta del Comandante De Pinedo  
Risposta del Maresciallo Campanelli

Inni Nazionali

Orchestra di 20 Fagotti  
Diretta dal Signor G. Bizzini

Concert in honour of De Pinedo in 1925

The Melbourne Branch of the Dante Alighieri Society, founded in 1896, was re-formed in the early '20s after its activities were suspended because of the Great War. Together with Ing. and Sig.ra Benini, and Dr. Balboni, Papa was active in the Society's re-birth and my sister and I were very touched when, on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Society in Melbourne, Cav. Uff. Tom Hazell, President of the Dante, spoke of Papa's contribution to the Society in the early years. I remember a soiree which Papa organised when he was well into his seventies. He invited the celebrated Professor Chisholm and Mr. Denys Jackson, an M.A. of the University of Manchester and noted politician and radio commentator of the day, to be guest speakers. He was thrilled when they both accepted his invitation. Papa then telephoned his old friend, Matteo Vita, a Viggianese genius of the harp, who came and made the most magical music on his instrument. Papa's own introductory speech was of a high order.

I remember Papa playing in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Sir Bernard Heinze when he must have been nearly seventy. He enjoyed good health all his life, lost his first tooth at 70 and, although he had a major operation for a malignant tumour at age 80 years, he recovered quickly and insisted on resuming his interpreting work in the Courts.

Papa had always been an avid reader. Indeed, reading seemed to have a therapeutic effect on him. Even in old age he would get up from bed in the middle of the night, close the door of the breakfast-room and sit in his own special corner with a book propped up on the table in front of him and read aloud in Italian, in Spanish or even French translating ad hoc as he went along. Advanced old age robbed him of most of his sight and he was forced to give up his passion for reading.

Now behind every Papa, of course, there is always a Mamma. And so it was with my parents. Mamma was Papa's mainstay. She was humble, loyal, self-effacing and sweet.

Papa died in St. Vincent's Private Hospital on the 29th June, 1975. He was born on the 29th, married on the 29th and died on the 29th. We were all at his bed-side. He was as if in a coma. He suddenly opened his blue eyes wide, we were calling out *Papa*, he looked, lucidly, straight at Mamma and then passed away very peacefully. On his death, Nino Randazzo wrote in *Il Globo*: "*Si e' spento il 29 giugno scorso, alla veneranda eta' di 95 anni, il Cav. Domenico Boffa, una delle piu'*

*belle figure di italiani a Melbourne, uno degli ultimi superstiti dell'epoca pionieristica dell'emigrazione italiana in Australia".*



*Domenico Boffa*