

TWO CULTURES MEET

by Marisa Capuana

Marisa Capuana is a teacher/librarian and is currently cataloguing print materials for the Italian Historical Society. She came to Australia at the age of ten. In 1975, after graduating as a teacher in Melbourne, she headed North to Santa Teresa Mission. The Mission, founded by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, was first established in 1934 in Alice Springs, but moved to Altanga during WWII to escape an outbreak of meningitis. It moved to its present location, 82 km south of Alice, in 1953. In this article Marisa gives an account of her first and lasting impressions of the Mission and of the Eastern Aranda people.

I couldn't believe it, was it true? Was I actually going to a Mission station, somewhere in the Northern Territory? How would I cope with the heat? I am one of a few people who loves winter. Rainy days, grey skies and the front lawn covered in white - are all beautiful to me. Was I too hasty in my decision?

On a hot, sultry, tar-melting January day in 1975, I was sitting on plane bound for Alice Springs. A teacher friend had been at Santa Teresa Mission for the past two years. The Mission station, I had been told, was situated 82 kilometres south of Alice, on the edge of the Simpson Desert. During one of her holidays in Melbourne we were sitting around exchanging gossip and our plans for the future. I told her I wanted to leave Melbourne, but I didn't have a destination in mind. I had barely uttered these words when she told me that the Mission needed teachers. She suggested that a year at the Mission would give me time to reflect, to take stock of my life and work out what I really wanted. Who can argue with such logic? Without thinking I heard myself say: "Yes, I'd like to come. Who should I write to?" It was just as well that I didn't know then that Outback Australia is not the place for the ambivalent or the undecided.

Making an instant decision carries a heavy penalty - afterthought. How was I going to tell my parents? My mother and father had been extremely generous; in matters of education no expense was too great, no obstacle too difficult. In all other areas of my life my parents were traditional Sicilians. Mixing freely with boys, staying out until the early hours of the morning were the things my friends talked about, but were forbidden to me. Now I had opened my mouth, without thinking. I would have to tell them I was leaving home. To my surprise my parents did not take much convincing. Did they detect a note of determination? Whatever the reason, I could see that they were bewildered and hurt. After all the

trouble and expense to give me a good education, I was going to a place they had never heard of, for reasons they did not understand. I think I would have rather had a shouting match, but in this instance, there were no raised voices, and no arguments.

At the Alice Springs Airport I was met by one of the Mission workers. Don introduced himself and told me that we would leave for Santa (short for Santa Teresa) after he had completed some errands in town. Meanwhile I could wait for him at the Catholic presbytery. It was four o'clock when Don returned. I can't remember much about my first trip to Santa. I didn't notice the red hills, the wild hops, the tiny desert daisies or the brilliant, delicate purple flowers growing alongside the dirt road. After an hour or more of being bounced along, (the road was full of pot-holes and corrugations), Don turned to me and told me that he could see the Mission church up ahead.

It was a Spanish style church and its clean white walls stood out against the background of browns, reds and ochres. As we drew closer we noticed that an excited crowd had gathered at its steps. People were shouting in a language I could not understand. I sat in the land-cruiser and waited for some kind of explanation. Suddenly a brown face appeared at the window and said: "We bin kill a king brown". I was soon told that a king brown is one of the deadliest snakes in Australia. Two boys had bludgeoned the snake using nulla nullas (sticks).

It was soon after this episode that I began to have grave doubts about my decision. Still, I had to stay ... at least for the night. My room consisted of a single bed, a set of drawers and a small wardrobe. Bathroom facilities were two doors away from my room. There was really nothing to complain about, after all, this was not the Hilton. Apart from the field mice scurrying through the

empty drawers, my first night in the Outback was uneventful. During the long night I rehearsed my speech to the superintendent, Fr Clancy. "Try to stay calm, be rational ... unemotional", I told myself. If pushed for an explanation I would be honest and admit the truth. I had made a serious mistake. "Everyone makes mistakes" I reassured myself. I was deeply disappointed when I learned at breakfast that Fr Clancy had left for Alice immediately after Mass. I felt utterly isolated, it seemed like there was no way back to the world I had thoughtlessly left behind.

My fellow teachers must have noticed my distress. I am sure that the trip to the village was an attempt on their part to cheer me up. It was another oppressively hot day. On our way to the village we walked into a willy-willy; the fine sand hit my skin and stung like needles. My friends informed me that we were going to visit Miriam, one of the lay missionaries who lived in the village with the Aboriginal people. Her dwelling consisted of one room, made from local stone. There were no windows. The furniture amounted to: two single beds, several suit-cases, a tucker box that served for seating and a Coolgardie safe. A small fire place provided heating against the cold desert night and kept the billy on the boil. The smell of stale smoke was heavy. Ablution facilities were about a hundred yards away. Nevertheless Miriam seemed accustomed to it all. She made billy tea and spoke of her friends and life at the village. I tried hard to be attentive, pretending not to notice the geckos scaling the walls.

The turning point came on Sunday afternoon. The only contact between the Mission and the outside world was the mail plane which came regularly on a Saturday afternoon, two radio stations 8HA and the ABC, a two-way radio which gave us access to the Flying Doctor Service, and when someone went to Alice, a newspaper. There was no television. We had to rely on our own resources for entertainment. My friends had organised a trip to the orchard. The orchard? How ridiculous! I thought. These people were deceiving themselves; what could possibly thrive in this wilderness, except dust, rocks and flies? We climbed on board the land-cruiser and good naturedly I tried to take an interest in the conversation and hide my scepticism. I was so thankful I had not opened my mouth and expressed my ignorance when I saw Brendan's orchard. Brendan and a few helpers cultivated water melons, rock melons, juicy sultana grapes and the biggest surprise of all ... roses. All this was possible through a bore pump and the irrigation drip system. An Aboriginal family helped Brendan maintain the orchard. Rosie and Max were shy, as were their four children, but

their warmth and friendliness were soon evident. The conversation centred mainly on the orchard, caring for the plants and their children. On the way back to the Mission I did not feel that sense of depression and isolation that had plagued me from the time I left Tullamarine. "Really!" I thought. What was all the fuss about, a deadly snake, harmless geckos or the dust.

I taught for two years at the Mission school and was Aboriginal Co-ordinator at the Catholic school in Alice for two and half years. I learned a great deal about myself and about another culture. Most important of all, I learned about another set of values, not Italian and not Anglo-Celtic but uniquely Aboriginal. The learning process began with my first lesson in front of a class of grade fives. As I was calling the roll I noticed that there were many children with the same surnames. Naturally I assumed that they were brothers and sisters but this did not make much sense, particularly when there were two or more with the same family name. I asked them to raise their hands if they belonged to the same family. Nearly the entire class of twenty-eight raised their hands. I was quite puzzled. Over recess I mentioned the episode to a fellow teacher. She assured me that they were not playing pranks; their concept of family is quite different from our own. Distinctions between family relations are not clear cut, for instance aunts share an equal place in their affections as mothers. Then there were skin groups. The whole system was quite complex. I would have a lot to learn.



Marisa with some of her school children outside the showerblock. The schoolday commenced with showering supervised by the teacher.

There is another episode that I will always remember. I was standing in front of the class intent on my teaching when suddenly the whole class stood up in unison and ran out. It had begun to rain, and a rainy day is quite an occasion in the Centre. Families share everything amongst themselves from a goanna cooked over the coals, to their weekly pay packet. Their ideas of possession and ownership are quite vague. I am sure that their language is scanty on possessive pronouns. Their practice of sharing does not diminish their enjoyment of life, on the contrary, it enhances it.



A class outing in the bush. The children took care of the cooking.

I managed to save enough money to come to Melbourne at least once a year. Naturally my family was very pleased to see me but nothing was mentioned on the subject of the Mission. I tried to arouse their interest with accounts of strange habits and customs, but the questions I hoped for did not come. Then something happened. It was during the September holidays in 1976. One of my friends from the Mission was spending her holidays with her parents at Koo-wee-rup. Pauline had brought with her four children from the Mission to show them the big city. As she was staying longer than anticipated, she asked me if I would look after them for the remainder of the holidays. "Yes" I heard myself say, again without thinking. My biggest concern was my parents' reaction. It was my mother who responded first. What would she cook? What did Aboriginal children eat? Would they like "pasta?" Should she make "pasta asciutta" or "pasta in brodo"? My advice was to cook as usual, but she decided to make a meal normally reserved for special

occasions. Before the evening meal I told the children a little about Italian food. When we sat at the table and my mother ladled the "minestra" onto our plates Matthew stared at it, turned to me and asked: "Will we be able to speak Italian after we eat pasta?" That comment provided just the ice-breaker we needed.

The following day I decided to take the children to the beach. I had heard many accounts about children's reactions when they look upon the blue expanse of the sea for the first time. The real event surpassed all expectations and my parents were there to share it with me. The children stood wide-eyed shouting excitedly in Aranda, "look at the water! look at the water!"

After this first contact was made, my parents started to ask questions about the Mission. What did people do there? How did they live? Was it true that some Aboriginal children had been taken from their mothers at birth? How cruel! I often think of that strange group, sitting at the table sharing a meal - four Aranda children, two Sicilians and an Italo-Australian. I hope we all learned something; tolerance is about making contact with people and seeing them as individuals.

I returned to Melbourne in May 1980. The readjustment process back to 'civilization' was arduous and took months. I don't really know what made it so difficult. Perhaps I missed the people, the wide open spaces or the freedom that that way of living provided. Attitudes that I had grown with and had always taken for granted suddenly struck me as odd.

I often wonder about the time I spent at the mission and ask myself whether I really accomplished anything at all. I cannot claim credit for any significant changes; apart from modern gadgets, like radio and television sets, life for the Eastern Aranda people goes on much the same. I have gained an awareness of some of the problems confronting Aboriginal communities of this country. Until this day I retain an intense interest in all things Aboriginal. The experience in Central Australia has given me some understanding and an insight into yet another culture.