

# family history

## A MAN OF MANY TALENTS: ELIO FRANZ

*This loving tribute was penned by their daughters Joy and Gloria Franz.*

*I FIND MYSELF ON A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY WHERE I LIVED MY TENDER YEARS IN THE SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS OF MALEMASERIA, FRIULI. NOW AT THE SUNSET OF MY LIFE, I AM AT A CROSSROADS WITH MY THOUGHTS. THERE IS AN OVERWHELMING FEELING TO PUT TO PAPER, THE RECOLLECTIONS OF MY YOUTH. PERHAPS, WERE I TO TAKE STOCK OF MY PAST, I'D HAVE REGRETS ABOUT CHANCES MISSED, BUT THROUGH A SEA OF MEMORIES, I FIND THAT, NO MATTER THE EVENTS IN TIME, I WOULD HAVE DONE IT ALL AGAIN. LIFE IS A BIG ADVENTURE. (EXCERPT FROM ELIO'S MEMOIRS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH)*

Elio Enrico Giovanni Franz was born in Siena, Tuscany on 28 October 1918, in the final days of the First World War. He was the oldest of four: sisters Vilma and Maria, and younger brother Danilo. While his father, Tarcisio, was fighting in the war, his mother, Scolastica, came as a refugee to Siena as a result of the fierce battles fought in Friuli against the Austro-Hungarian Army. The family eventually returned to Friuli and settled in Tarcisio's village, high up in the district of Malemaseria. On one side was Monte Stella, on the other Monte Bernadia. Early in his childhood Elio would roam, hungry for new places and adventures, making contraptions to catch birds. He would draw and paint animals and scenery, and climb dangerously high. You could not keep a boisterous lad indoors, much to his mother's frustration. Finding work as a builder, his father took the family to Romania. There they stayed for two years, before returning to Friuli, this time to the township of Codroipo.

Elio's sense of adventure did not leave him: he enlisted in the Italian Army. However, he found it rather uninspiring, and when the opportunity came to join the airforce, he immediately applied. Unfortunately, one couldn't transfer at whim. In desperation he wrote to Mussolini, the King and the Queen of Italy, his Colonel and also to the Pope, with the hope that they could do something. To no avail.

In 1936, he was commissioned to work on sensitive communications during the Spanish Civil War. He left Naples for Seville.

Already fluent in Romanian and French, he tackled the Spanish language by adding 's' at the end of each Italian word! Before long he was speaking proper *Español*. Meanwhile, a Spanish couple dancing to Ravel's passionate Bolero captivated his imagination forever.

In 1938, on the eve of the Second World War, he was recalled to accompany young troops to the Italian colonies in North Africa. Heat, dust, sand, hot days and cold nights. There the soldiers boiled pasta in petrol drums and the sandy winds of the Sahara ensured a crunchy *pastasciutta* that was not very appetising. After Italy had declared war in June 1940, on one of Elio's trips with a fresh shipment of Italian troops, disaster struck. In the darkness of night and in the chaos of war the ship was 'bombed'. Only 160 of the 3,500 on board survived, only to be captured and transported as POWs to South Africa. Elio was amongst them.

Despite the hardships of wartime, Elio capitalised on opportunities. At the time, clothing and toiletry items were hard to come by. Surrounded by farming communities, inventive Elio hatched up a scheme to cut the tails of horses and make them into bristles for shaving brushes. Tired of having threadbare undies, he approached the wife of a local farmer with his own design for *mutande*. She drafted the pattern, supplied him with cloth and a sewing machine and he was soon selling his 'designer underwear' and shaving brushes

Elio Franz in Italian army uniform.



Elio and Renza on the day of her arrival in Australia. Sydney, 1952.



at the local markets. Demand led to the establishment of a sweat shop employing thousands of Italian POWs and Black Africans. Multilingual Elio, with his quick wit and ready charm, became fluent in Afrikaans, English and Zulu languages. And his skills were again used in telegraphic communications.

At the end of the war, with a swag of war medals and the tragedies of war behind him, Elio returned home. The reality of Italy's poor employment prospects forced him to follow sister Maria and husband Ken, a British soldier, to England with his other sister Vilma. He worked on farms, but by 1951 he had enough of the damp and cold, and returned to Codroipo. His family introduced him to a beautiful local girl, Lorenza Benvenuto, and soon plans were made for leaving Italy. He tried to get passage to South Africa, a country he had become very

attached to. Tired of with waiting for emigration approval, he opted for Australia instead. His English speaking skills got him to the front of the line and he bluffed his way by claiming trade skills. He left Rome, for an eventful long

5 day flight on a DC4 to Australia involving 9 stops. One interesting stop was Bombay, where he enjoyed an elephant hunt with the local Indian maharajah.

His introduction to Australia was Darwin, where he was shocked by the sheer vastness of the landscape. A short time after his arrival in Sydney, Elio decided to try his luck at farming in Tenterfield, a town in north-eastern New South Wales. On 19 December 1952, Lorenza and Elio's sister Vilma, arrived in Sydney on the ship 'Australia'. Elio and Renza married on 17 January 1953. In nearby Riverstone, with their two children Joy and Gloria and their extended family, they grew tobacco and appeared to do well, until a severe hailstorm destroyed their crop, and forced them to move to Bundaberg. Undaunted, they worked hard to turn a piece of Australian bush into a farm for tobacco, and later sugar cane. On Fielding's Road, Alloway, the Golden Leaf Farm was born and soon became the centre of a social world of Sunday bocce, harvest dances in the tobacco shed and *zuia le ciartis con amis* [playing cards with friends]. There, the Bundaberg Italian Club, 'Across the Waves' was also born.

In late 1970, the family moved to Brisbane and another era began in the big city. But it was in September 1986 that the greatest challenge was to be faced. Elio was diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus.

Farming tobacco in Bundaberg, Queensland.



The outlook was grim. He battled with cancer for several years and survived numerous operations. Eventually his indomitable spirit won the race against time. He was still dreaming his destiny. Out of the blue, in 1993 at the age of 75, the rascal gave us one week to come to terms with his plans to connect with the extended family. His 6-month journey took him to Argentina and then on to his childhood connections in Malenmaseria and Tarcento.

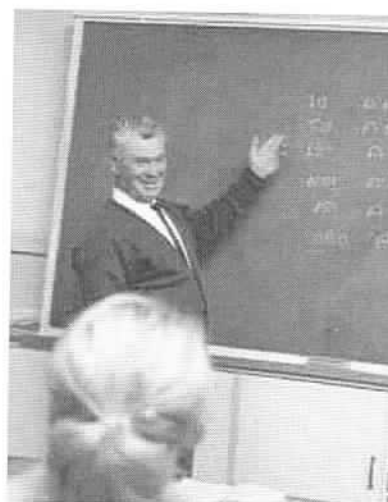
This very special man was a devoted husband to Renza and an extra-ordinary father to Gloria and myself. Although we thought we had him wrapped around our little fingers he had us wrapped around his heart. Scolastica's name for her son was 'the right one'. Elio is from the Greek word Helios, meaning 'god of the sun'. Elio did chase the sun in his sense of adventure, his inimitable sense of humour, his mischievous smile, his Sunday *briscola* [a card game] trips to the Newmarket Italian Club and his passion for astronomy, art and westerns.

And— he is probably advising John Wayne right now. A philosopher and a storyteller he lived a very full life. He lovingly gifted us all and did it his own way.

*You have to feel that you live it, participate in it, experience it with a sense of humour and let your spirit follow your dream. Life is too short— clichéd but true. I realise that I have indeed learned from my mistakes.*

*My story is a record of my life. I am writing my memoirs for my family, in particular for my dear grandchildren with the purpose that they could one day know their Italian roots and secondly that they gain some knowledge about themselves through my own experiences. With love, to Christopher, Jonathan, Alex, Conor and Adrianna. This is for you. Bless you all. Papa e Nonno Elio*

**Elio died in October 2004 at the age of 86. His wife, Renza, followed him to the grave 3 months later. She was 74.**



**FAR LEFT**

Elio and Renza on their wedding day, Tenterfield, New South Wales, 1953.

**LEFT**

Elio Franz teaching Italian at Adult Education night classes at Bundaberg State High School, Queensland, 1980s.