

THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

by Lorenzo Iozzi

In an age where we are bombarded by images at every instant through internet, television, cinema, print media and advertising, it is hard to imagine a time when the photograph was a rare phenomenon. And yet, this is not long ago. For example, many Italian migrants travelling to Australia in the post war years could not afford the luxury of a portable camera to record what was for them the journey of a lifetime.

We are at crossroads. The growth of digital technology is challenging the nature of photography. Historical photographs such as those held in the Italian Historical Society collection will form a rare and vital record of our past.

In February of this year the Italian Historical Society embarked on a major project to catalogue its historical resources beginning with the photographic collection. Apart from the obvious aim of improving access to the collection, the project is a means of preserving for future generations the historical images which capture the many stories of Italian migrants to Australia.

The Italians

During the 1950s and 1960s as many as 100,000 immigrants – of which the Italians constituted the largest non-English speaking group – were arriving in Melbourne every year. They were funnelled from countless ships onto Station Pier, the main disembarkation port, and onto shore to make their way through the unfamiliar streets of Melbourne. Over the years each person would, in one measure or another, make some contribution to the culture and history of Australia.



Members of the Facchin family at the Port of Trieste departing for Australia, 1955.

Station Pier today is comparatively lifeless. That only a few cruise ships now berth there belies the fact that this was once a platform for such a large chunk of Australia's history. In fact, the pier lay abandoned for many years, with the

Government undecided on its fate once the great wave of immigration had ceased. There were suggestions of converting it into an immigration museum in the early 1990s. This proposal was abandoned when the former Customs House in Flinders Street Melbourne was chosen as the preferred place for a museum to enshrine the migrant story.

A visit to the Station Pier site raises the question: where have all the migrants gone?

We are therefore fortunate that some migrants had the foresight to record 'the journey' for future generations and still more fortunate that a few eventually made their way to the Italian Historical Society to record that history before it vanished. The disparate records – evidence of their experiences – which they handed over to the Society for posterity, were small but priceless items. Some of these evocative images include a photograph of a young man grasping a suitcase in one hand and waving goodbye with the other, a mother and child stepping off a ship and onto a gangplank, a boat load of proxy brides en route to meet spouses they hardly knew... the first home in the new homeland, an espresso bar where there had been none, working on the construction of a hydro-electric dam, cutting cane in Queensland, staying at the Bonegilla camp.

If we accept that a knowledge of the present and the future presupposes a knowledge of the past then it is important, crucial in fact, that ancestral histories such as those handed down by

Italian migrants do not fade. But fade away they might, if the custodians entrusted with the care of these records were not prepared to protect them from the ravages of time itself: from environmental changes, disasters and excessive handling.

It is for this reason that the Italian Historical Society, with limited financial and human resources, has embarked on a program of preservation, including the creation of a computer database, for the photographic collection.

The Collection

The Italian Historical Society was founded in 1980 to record the experiences and contributions of Italian migrants in Australia, through the collection of photographs, documents, artifacts and recording of oral history interviews. Its aim is to preserve, foster and make available this knowledge for research.

Today the I.H.S. photographic collection consists of approximately 12,000 historical images in print and negative format tracing many aspects of Italian immigration to this country. This figure is a paradox: large in terms of the number of items to be preserved but minuscule in terms of the number of lives and events it represents; and yet a single image may be sufficient to connect us to elements of the past. Of course the Italian contribution is not restricted to recent history alone and can be traced to the early chapters of Australian history. Accordingly, the collection spans back to colonial days and the discovery of gold in Victoria [1851]. However it is particularly rich in material relating to post World War II immigration to Australia.



Angelo Taranto's espresso bar in Russell Street, Melbourne, c1956.



Family friends gathered at the house of Emilio and Maria Russo, in Albion Street, Brunswick, in 1960 to pluck chickens for the celebrations of the baptism of their first child born in Australia.

The Italian Historical Society, the only one of its type in Australia, is committed to the ongoing collection of material relating to the migration and settlement experiences and the contributions of Italian immigrants to Australia.

Although the program is still in its infancy and it will be some years before a comprehensive database is realised, we have taken significant initial steps in the right direction.

Access

The first of these has been the purchase of the computer equipment and installation of the cataloguing system. Considerable planning has gone into devising a textbase structure incorporating the necessary research fields.

The hardware purchased by the Society includes a Pentium computer processor, a CDR Pro-kit compact disk recorder, a Microtek A3 flat bed scanner, an Epson colour printer. The software adopted for the cataloguing is the Inmagic DB/TextWorks program, as endorsed by Arts

Victoria and Museums Australia to be standard for smaller museums. This software package is being put forward by them in the hope that a common program may be adopted within the museum sector to ultimately facilitate integration of databases throughout the State.

Under the cataloguing structure created by the Society, researchers can access images and information on one or more of nine fields, including date of the photograph, subject matter, family name, title or description, trades and locality. The database also has provision for viewing the image on the monitor and for producing a digital copy print in colour or black and white for research and publication purposes, subject to copyright restrictions.

The Society will have soon completed the first phase of the project – the scanning and cataloguing of three hundred images. This information will be utilised as a pilot database to evaluate the merits of the project as a research tool. The feasibility of creating a CD-Rom for educational purposes, to reach the network of 500 primary and secondary schools affiliated with the Italian Resource Centre, will be explored.

Although the primary goal is to fully catalogue the photographic images, cataloguing is just one component of a broader plan to prolong the life of the collection.



Bissetto Tailors at 122 Bourke Street, Melbourne, 1947.

Preservation

A preservation program has been put in place to run parallel with the cataloguing process. Hence details of each photograph are entered on the database and the image scanned. The photo-



Nunzio Giudice, top left, with his children Jose, Jole, Gaetano and Giuseppe in Bengasi, Tunisia, in 1935. Giuseppe emigrated to Australia in 1950.

graph must then be protected from the risk of damage from the environment – light, temperature, relative humidity – and handling. This entails, in the first instance, copying the original photograph onto a large format, archival negative. Each photograph is then mounted onto unbuffered [100% rag] backing board and protected in an acid free polypropylene sleeve.

Polypropylene boxes and secure metal storage units create an additional barrier from the threat of possible disaster. Negatives are also protected in a similar way.

The above preservation procedures are carried out on photographs in relatively sound condition. In some cases restoration or conservation work is required to the original item. Any such fragile or damaged item is referred to the conservators at Museum Victoria and the State Library of Victoria, with whom the Society has an ongoing partnership agreement. Under this program, which is considered a model for other Australian collecting agencies, original items will be deposited by the Society at the two institutions to ensure the long-term life of the collection.

It can be seen that the project is of a much greater scale than first meets the eye. Making a commitment to create an electronic database necessitates a wider preservation strategy. An immediate question which comes to mind when we consider the extensive resources [both human and financial] required for such a project is: does the collection warrant the time, labour and money? Is the Italian Historical Society collection so important?

ABC television certainly think so having recently visited the Society to select and film a number

of images and objects for their documentary *In Search of Kings*, which went to air on the network's weekly program Australian Story. The documentary focused on the lives of over one hundred Italian migrants who arrived in Melbourne aboard the ship *Re d'Italia* in 1927, the subject of a book by Tony De Bolfo, soon to be published.

Museum Victoria can also attest to the importance of our collection. Our two institutions have collaborated on a number of major exhibitions, the most significant being *The Carlton Exhibition* which ran for approximately two years and was a great success attracting over 300,000 visitors. A comprehensive history on a theme such as this would not be possible without input from the Italian Historical Society. More recently, the I.H.S. mounted *The Dowry*, an exhibition incorporated in the newly opened Immigration Museum at Customs House, where the permanent exhibition is also embellished with numerous images from the Society's collection.

The I.H.S. collection is increasingly drawn on by scholars, writers and publishers. Recent books to utilise our images include *Lives and Times of Australian Women*, due for publication this year by Ross, Huchinson and Associates; *Production of Australian Food*, a reference text on Australia's food processing industries by Agrifood Media; *Growing through the brick floor* by Diana Ruzzene Grollo; and *Cabrini: a hospital's journey* by Dr Gwynedd Hunter-Payne.



Italians at the Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre, 1952.

But most importantly, the I.H.S. collection is a collection made by Italian Australians. It is they who create history through the personal artifacts, documents and memorabilia they choose to save and donate for posterity.

As custodians of cultural material it is our responsibility to ensure its conservation.

STAFF

Lorenzo Iozzi has been appointed to work on the cataloguing project on a part-time basis. Lorenzo has had considerable experience in the field of collections management. He was the inaugural Curator of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, a position he held for fourteen years. During this time he managed the computer cataloguing, conservation and exhibition programs for the RHSV collection. He has conducted numerous workshops in these fields throughout the state for the network of historical societies. Lorenzo's academic Qualifications include a Diploma in Fine Art (RMIT University) and a Graduate Certificate in Art Conservation (University of Melbourne).

Lorenzo will be working with Laura Mecca, whose intimate knowledge of the collection is essential for the success of the project.

Elsa Paulin has been seconded one day per week to assist with data processing and preventive conservation. Elsa has been with Co.As.It for four years working as a librarian and more recently working with the organisation's multimedia team. Her skills and involvement in these complementary fields will be a great asset.

We are also fortunate to have the assistance of a number of volunteers who support the permanent staff.