

JEAN VIRGONA: Archbishop Mannix's Italian housekeeper

by Maria Santospirito Triaca

Jean Virgona deserves a special place among the Italian Aeolians in Melbourne, having had the privilege of being housekeeper at "Raheen" for Archbishop Mannix for several years. This came about during the Second World War when people were expected to assist with the war effort, like working in munition factories.

Jean wasn't too anxious to do war work. Fortunately my mother, Lena Santospirito, knew that Dr Mannix was looking for a housekeeper so she persuaded Jean to take on the job "temporarily". Jean thought that since Dr Mannix was already 80 years old, he probably wouldn't live much longer. Ironically she ended up in the "temporary" job for 20 years, as Dr Mannix died in his hundredth year.

Jean was an extraordinary person and as my brother Anthony Santospirito remarked in his eulogy at Jean's funeral in 1994: *"She was always self composed. She never dominated the scene, but knowing her you realised there was a guiding spirit within her which made her the basic influence for good she was for all those around her"*. Jean's family originated from Leni on the Island of Salina, one of the Aeolian Islands, from which she inherited a deep religious faith.

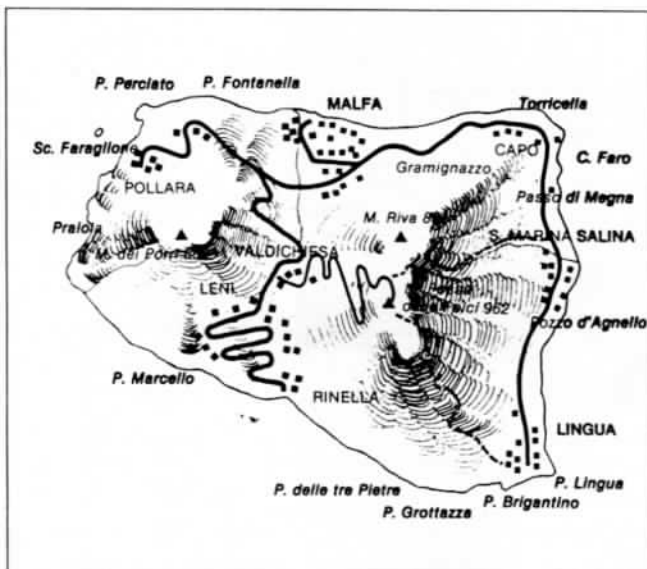
Her grandparents kept vineyards on the Island. Her maternal grandmother ran the first office in the village and was also the teacher. Her father Giuseppe Virgona, like many of his compatriots, emigrated first to America in 1895 where he worked for a few years in order to build up resources. He then returned to the island, where he married Maria Carmela Picone in 1899.

In 1901 he emigrated to Australia and in 1905 his wife joined him and they settled in Terang, a country town in Victoria, opening their own shop in 1906. They were amongst the Aeolian pioneers in Terang.

Their first daughter was born in 1907, the lovely high-spirited member of the family, who surprised everyone when she entered the convent, in 1930. Sr Rupert was extraordinarily gifted as a teacher. One of her pupils received the highest marks in Italian in Victoria and while she was Mother Superior at Presentation Sandringham her pupils won the Presentation Scholarships in each of the seven years she was there. In her early years as a nun in Myrtleford in 1936, she kept in contact with the Italian Community. Moved by their hardship and deprivations, she organised English lessons and formed a lending library of Italian books and magazines.

Her chief support was her sister Jean who wore out a path to the Italian bookshop of its well known owner, Gino Nibbi. Quite often what Nibbi thought suitable for the readers in Myrtleford was not always judged suitable by Jean to be housed in a convent library. Sister Rupert, or "Rhubarb" as her nearest and dearest pupils affectionately called her, provided a much needed and much sought after service in her thirteen years in Myrtleford from where she departed in 1949.

In 1916 a fire wiped out everything the Virgonas had set up in Terang. The great esteem the people of Terang felt for the Virgona family was shown by the help various families gave them. The solicitor's wife and the hotel keeper lent Giuseppe one hundred gold pieces. In addition, some close Aeolian friends and the bank took care of them and lent them money encouraging them to rebuild and start afresh. They opened



Island of Salina - Aeolian Islands

them to rebuild and start afresh. They opened the first icecream and soft drink factory and the first refrigerated cool rooms for fruit in Terang. They remained in Terang for 26 years.

Following an unfortunate accident in which Jean's mother, Carmela, broke her back leaving her an invalid for life, the family was obliged to move to Melbourne in 1931. They settled in a house in East Malvern and opened a fruit shop nearby. Three years later their father Giuseppe died.

Jean had wanted to join the Carmelites when she was 17 or 18. This might have been a very strong wish, but when her mother became a cripple she said to her children: "*Who is going to look after my family now?*" Jean put up her hand and said: "*I will*". It must have been a deep sacrifice. That was the end of Jean's hopes of joining the Carmelites.

Jean was a marvellous nurse for her mother, looking after her until her death in 1942. This made it possible for Jean to accept the invitation to take over Raheen's housekeeping and it was not long after that Jean's sister Lena and brothers Vin and Ernie were also involved in this important task.

Little did they know what they were walking into. The responsibility and organisation of "Raheen's" housekeeping and looking after Dr Mannix was a huge undertaking; not only was the place huge but so were the Christmas and Easter feasts. These were attended by large numbers of guests. There were so many courses to be served that on one occasion Jean's brother Ernie, who used to help in the kitchen or serve at the tables with his family, forgot to serve one of them.

The sumptuous dinners were always accompanied by a variety of wines and selected liqueurs which were always on the table. Dr Mannix never drank, so often his guests wouldn't drink either. Some of the clergy who would drink as private guests, would not touch the wine and liqueurs at banquets if no-one else started. Eventually Jean went around the table and poured the liqueurs into their glasses or coffee to save any embarrassment. One of the Bishops who had taken the pledge not to drink, once noticed that Jean had put a little more wine in the soup and made the remark that he didn't think Dr Mannix would take spirits, to which Mannix retorted: "*I never question what the cook puts into the meal*".

The clergy were not the only visitors to "Raheen". Dr Mannix often had notable visitors who had to be looked after. To mention a few: Sybil Thornfyke, Sydney McEwan, the Prince and Princess of Luxembourg and the Duke of Norfolk.

Another special visitor which would have been very special for Dr Mannix was the visit of Ireland's first Minister Plenipotentiary to Australia, Dr T. J. Kiernan accompanied by his family.

I remember when the Virgona family first started the housekeeping at "Raheen". Jean caught His Grace out of the corner of her eye, picking up a book on his desk and turning it over to check if it had been dusted and putting it down again with a satisfied smile. I don't think



Archbishop Mannix, c1940.

anyone realised how much time and effort it took to keep "Raheen" shipshape but I know how much His Grace appreciated the Virgona family and he wanted to show his gratitude.

He had decided to sell the land around "Raheen" to raise money. There was a lot of prime residential land overlooking the Boulevard and Yarra Bend. He wanted to give Jean one of the blocks. Jean asked him why he was selling the land. He said to raise money for schools, churches and other charitable causes. She answered: *"Then if I want one I will buy one"*. Jean was generous and always thinking of others.

"Raheen" came first for the Virgonas. They rarely had any time off. The job was full-time, three hundred and sixty five days. The only chance of some leisure or rest was in the summer when His Grace would go to Portsea for a month. They would go to their own home in East Malvern but not for long, having to return to give "Raheen" a spring clean, especially the huge library. This was a nightmare. Apart from the time it took to dust each book, people often borrowed books and didn't return them or they would be books returned and left on top of each other gathering dust. Summer was the only time they could cope with it because there were no visitors to interrupt the exercise. So much for their summer holiday!

However one day in the middle of this operation the door bell rang. They hesitated. Would they answer it or not? Their conscience won and they opened the door. Just as well, because it was a special relation, a very strict and distinguished gentleman Salvatore Favaloro and family down from Bendigo.

They were caught there and then up ladders, dressed in their old work clothes, certainly not exactly dressed for such visitors. He said: *"Jean, you're doing this work! You can tell me it isn't my business but for the respect I had for your parents this isn't the sort of work you've got to do"*. Jean replied that it had to be done sometime. It was just as well that Uncle Salv didn't know what the daily routine amounted to. It was amazing what the two girls fitted in each day. Jean was a natural gourmet cook so she did most of the cooking in between making appointments for Dr Mannix and taking messages and Lena looked after the housework in between answering the door bell. They would keep as much as possible to a daily routine. This meant that they would have to be up by 6.00am

at least in order to be ready to answer Dr Mannix's Mass at 7.00am and to have prepared the breakfast ready by 8 o'clock and to have as much as possible of the essential daily routine cleaning done before Mass. This meant cleaning carpets, washing and polishing basins before the appointments began or any number of unexpected visitors.

Dr Mannix did not have a secretary at "Raheen". All his business was done at St Patrick's Presbytery by Bishop Fox or Dr Lyons and by Mr Brady who checked the upkeep of maintenance of St Patrick's and "Raheen". The majority of appointments were made at St Patrick's. If people particularly wanted to see Dr Mannix personally, they would come to the door of "Raheen" or make appointments by phone.

Dr Mannix would walk to St. Patrick's everyday until he was well into 90 years old unless he was in a hurry.

On his way he often had the company of a hobo asking for money for a meal. Dr Mannix knew he was going to the pub, but he always gave some money and asked *"What did you do with the other meal?"*

For travelling, he never drove himself but depended on Carr's Taxi Service to keep a car aside for him. Mrs Carr's son Dick would always drive him, especially for St Patrick's processions.

On Saturdays the Virgonas would serve him lunch and then he would go to St Patrick's and not return till late after confessions. Often he would remain at St. Patrick's where he had a private suite of rooms and on Sunday lunch at one of the convents and then open a fete or some other affair and be back to "Raheen" for Sunday night meal.

When the Virgonas were asked if that was their official time off, they answered that it was supposed to be, but they still had to be around because there was always something to do.

Dr Mannix never carried a key. Somebody suggested that he didn't have a key because he didn't want to go into an empty house especially one as big as "Raheen".

To keep in touch with their house in East Malvern, Jean's brother Vin would drive Lena to their home on Monday and come back on Tuesday night to bring her back to "Raheen", so it was easy for 'would be thieves' to know when



Jean Virgona (top row, second from left) and Lena Virgona (top row, second from right) at a "Thank You" party given in December 1949 by the Catholic Welfare Organization, in appreciation of services of the visiting Italian Grand Opera Company members in cause of charity. Mrs Lena Santospirito, president of the Archbishop's Italian Relief Committee is also featured (bottom row, second from right).

to burgle their house and that is exactly what happened.

Jean had been talking to Dr Mannix about the possibility of robbers or squatters breaking into her house. Their house was called "San Giuseppe" and Jean had said to His Grace that while St Joseph looked after their house, they would stay at "Raheen" but if anything happened to their house they would leave. Of course they stayed on.

A lot of Jean's time was taken up making appointments for visitors to see Dr Mannix at "Raheen". There were the frequent ones that I knew of such as Father Ugo Modotti, Chaplain for the Italian Community; Bob Santamaria and Mr and Mrs Arthur Calwell. I have to include my mother Mrs Santospirito who was given the title of 'La Mamma degli Italiani' by a visiting journalist from America for the work she did for the Italians during the war. She could not have done it without the help of Dr Mannix and Arthur Calwell, both dear friends. Through them the Italians were permitted to gather at the St George's Hall in Carlton and it was possible for her to place the children of internees

into boarding schools. Moreover, His Grace was always sympathetic in the fifties when there was an influx of Italians immigrants needing jobs.

Dr Mannix would always see anyone who came to the door with or without appointments, no matter how they looked, whether they were down and out or spick and span they all got to see him. Jean said only once she nearly resisted. A man came up on horseback looking bedragged and insisting he wanted to bring his horse into the hall with him. Jean did not want to let him in, let alone the horse! Fortunately someone was there who knew him and enthusiastically called out his name. It was Ray Triado, an extraordinary person, a gifted solicitor and a very interesting personality who wanted to gather a group of families into a family community to live on the land in a natural environment including schooling. The group settled near Mansfield but later disbanded. Sometime later he was sent to Italy with his family to represent Australia for some years. He was certainly well known.

Another time there was a clash of visitors. Mr Bob Santamaria, who was a regular visitor,

arrived at the same time as Clifton Pugh. Pugh's reason for seeing Dr Mannix was to arrange a suitable time to make a few sketches for a painting of Dr Mannix. Dr Mannix spoke to Pugh first and in the newspaper the next day Pugh claimed that Dr Mannix had disregarded Bob Santamaria and attended to him first. Jean was not too happy about this episode because she knew that Dr Mannix spoke to Pugh first *"to get rid of him quickly because he would have needed to speak to Bob for some time as usual"*.

Although "Raheen" was a lot of work for the Virgonas there was a lot of satisfaction and humour. It wasn't always just work. For instance in the racing season Dr Mannix, the Virgonas and Mr Brady would make up a sweep together. One year Dr Mannix won and gave all his winnings to somebody who came to the door to ask for money.

One year during the racing season Jean had some relations visiting from Sydney. Their young son asked Dr Mannix if it was true that His Grace refused to let a horse owner name his horse "Mannix" because he didn't want it to be beaten by a head. Dr Mannix confirmed the story, given that the name of the Anglican Bishop was "Head".

My brother Gerard was Jean's god-child. He was a Xavier student and was in the rowing team with James Gobbo. In 1948 the school took part in the Head of the River races, held on the Barwon River in Geelong; so off we went with a car full of supporters all decorated in the Xavier colours, black and red ribbons. My mother had us praying the Rosary all the way. You can imagine our excitement when my brother's team won, especially because there were two Italians in the crew. Xavier hasn't won since! My mother had us praying all the way back in thanksgiving. When we arrived home, Jean rang very excited and said she'd had Dr Mannix praying for their success. It was obvious that the other schools didn't stand a chance!

A couple of years ago Xavier's Rowing Club made the decision to name nine new boats after the boys of the winning crew of 1948. Unfortunately Gerard had passed away several years before and it was quite moving for the Santospirito family to have a photo taken with the boat named after him. Although Jean was not able to be at the ceremony she was very impressed at the thoughtfulness of those in charge.

Dr Mannix saw people until the day he died on

Melbourne Cup Day, 6th November 1963.

After Dr Mannix died, Bishop Simonds became Archbishop and moved into "Raheen". Jean and Lena stayed for a short time while he settled in. A few things had to be re-arranged. Dr Mannix's old-fashioned bedroom and bathroom were not suitable for Dr Simonds. On the first night he rang the bell and asked for a step ladder. He tried and tried to get into the bed. Dr Simonds asked for a bed he could get into. He said it so seriously they had to laugh. Dr Mannix being very tall had no trouble at all.

As for the bath he was sure he would drown in it. The bath was deep with a corrugated canopy and when the tap was turned on there was a lovely spray that went all around the canopy.

After "Raheen" the Virgona sisters settled into their home in Selbourne Road, Kew. To get an idea of the amount of work that they put in at "Raheen" it is worth noting that when they left, it took four people to replace them and caterers were employed for the big banquets.

Moreover, amidst all their work Jean would find time to help the nuns at the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford, at Caritas Christi and Carmelite Monastery and at functions of the Italian community.

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