

LENA SANTOSPIRITO — THE PERSON

by Tony Santospirito

In 1992 the Italian Historical Society acquired the extensive papers of Mrs Lena Santospirito, a woman famed within the Italian community of Melbourne for her outstanding contribution to the welfare of her compatriots during the period 1940 to 1970. Known as the Santospirito Collection, it is now the subject of a PhD history thesis by Melbourne University student Cate Elkner. This article, written by her son Tony Santospirito, gives a revealing account of her personal attributes as well as outlining many of the aspects of the welfare work to which she devoted her life. Tony, a retired lawyer, has volunteered endless hours of his time to the Italian Historical Society cataloguing and numbering the papers.

To all outward signs Lena was, in the words of Sir James Gobbo, an extraordinary person, a living saint, who responded to the needs of thousands of persons in the course of her work in the Italian community of Melbourne.¹ Others have praised her generosity and dedication to this work in similar terms. In June 1950 news of her work spread to Italy through an article by a Mr Gino De Sanctis in which he styled her *'la mamma degli Italiani'*. This article was published in newspapers in Rome, Genoa and Trieste and described Australia as a land of unlimited work opportunities. The article brought forth a series of letters addressed to Lena under the title De Sanctis had given her. The envelopes for these letters were mostly addressed to her at 'Melbourne' but someone at the Post Office knew enough about her to endorse them 'Try 79 Bouverie Street Carlton'.²

Florence Hagelthorn quoted De Sanctis' in her own laudatory article on Lena in the *Advocate*, 28 September 1967, which was in turn referred to

by my sister, Maria Triaca in her article on Lena.³ My sister's article relates that Lena and her older sister Mary assisted Fr De Francesco with welfare work during the time he was Chaplain to the Italian community from 1921 until his return to Italy in 1934. It is not exactly clear what sort of work this involved. There is also amongst her papers a page of 'notes' on Lena by a representative of the then new Italian newspaper, *Corriere d'Australia*. It describes her in glowing terms.⁴

An inspection of the nearly two thousand nine hundred documents comprising her papers, which are now with the Italian Historical Society, will reveal ample evidence of the wide scope and extent of her activities.

It will also reveal the high esteem in which she was held by all those who dealt with her.

Nearly every document yields some evidence to justify everything that has been said about her.

She was already assisting Fr Ugo Modotti SJ in February 1939 in his work of revitalising the spiritual lives of the Italian community in Australia.⁵ Fr Modotti had been sent to Australia from India by his superiors specifically for this purpose only shortly before, in late August, 1938.⁶ It seems that it did not take him long to find out that both Lena and her sister Mary would make worthy helpers.

In 1940 she became engaged in assisting Fr Modotti in the original work of the Committee for *'Assistenza Religiosa Italiana'* which was set up to aid Italian internees and their families. Lena's responsibility was the organisation of fund raising activities, such as bazaars, dances and raffles. She assisted in the collection of



One of the many letters addressed to 'La Mamma degli Italiani, Melbourne'.



Lena (right) with her sister Mary in 1922.

donations of clothing and money for the relief of those suffering from the ravages of war in Italy.

After Fr Modotti's return to Italy early in 1946 Lena became President of the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief and she also became the person responsible for much of the Church's welfare work among the Italian community in Melbourne. In 1948 the Cabrini Sisters arrived in Melbourne from Italy to take over St Benedict's Hospital and Lena became President of the *St Benedict's Hospital Well-Wishers Appeal Committee* and in 1958 President of the St Frances Xavier Cabrini Hospital Ladies Auxiliary.⁷ In 1959, on her resignation as President, she was elected Patroness of the Hospital in recognition of her work for the Cabrini Sisters.⁸

In the late 1940s Australia's great post-war immigration scheme commenced and from 1949 until her resignation as President of the Archbishop's Committee in 1955 Lena was involved in her major activity of assisting thousands of Italian newly arrived immigrants to find work in a very difficult period, when there was high unemployment in Australia. During

this time she also assisted a great number of Italians who were having difficulties obtaining landing permits. She also managed to find time to organise concerts for the Red Cross and St Vincent's Hospital.

Some idea of the strength of her ardent faith can also be gathered from her papers. She actively supported the Rosary Crusade of Fr Patrick Peyton when that priest came to Australia to promote the Crusade.⁹ She conducted a long lasting exchange of correspondence with Padre Pio's secretary, Fr Raffaele, seeking Padre Pio's advice, prayers and Masses for various intentions.¹⁰ In addition she attended Mass daily, and when the opportunity presented itself, she would attend a second Mass. She prayed much. It was she who passed on the Faith to her children.

All of this is ample justification to label Lena as extraordinary. However, I believe that what makes her so special, and a living saint, and an object lesson for me, is that she is all that, despite the fact that she was no super woman. Her office, which she conducted on the dining room table and a desk, was rather disorganised. She



Lena (left) with her mother Bartolina, brother Vince and sister Maria outside their home in Fitzroy, c1937.

would never have qualified as a modern company executive. She was in fact insecure and lacking in self confidence. She had her mother's example to follow in looking after the needs of Italian immigrants. Bartolina Virgona used to house newly arrived immigrants from the Eolian Islands in her own home until they could find more permanent accommodation. However Lena's great work was not performed without personal cost to her. She needed much reassurance to keep going amid all the difficulties she encountered. She told me after she had become President of the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief that she 'never did anything' without first consulting the Archbishop. Her insecurity showed also in other ways. For example she told me that she became most upset when beaten into second place at school by another girl. It seemed to me that that event made her ashamed or at least highly embarrassed. Everything she did had to be done perfectly, otherwise she would be dissatisfied with it.

The reason why she felt insecure is difficult to determine at this point. Her parents ran what my sister describes in her article as 'a very religious, warm and sociable family'. Her father, Bartolo Virgona, died in 1915 when she was twenty years of age. We do not know much about his personality. Lena's sister, Mary, described him as hard working. He used to take the family down to Elwood with the family horse and wagon on Sundays for a picnic. After the picnic he would lie down and have a sleep while the rest of the family enjoyed the afternoon.¹¹ Lena told me at one time that her mother, Bartolina, advised her never to marry a man older than herself. 'They get too set in their ways'. Bartolo was eleven years older than her according to the inscription on his gravestone, although only eight years older according to his own statutory declaration in support of his application for Australian citizenship. However, Bartolina was the one who had all the drive and ran the family. She made all the big decisions.

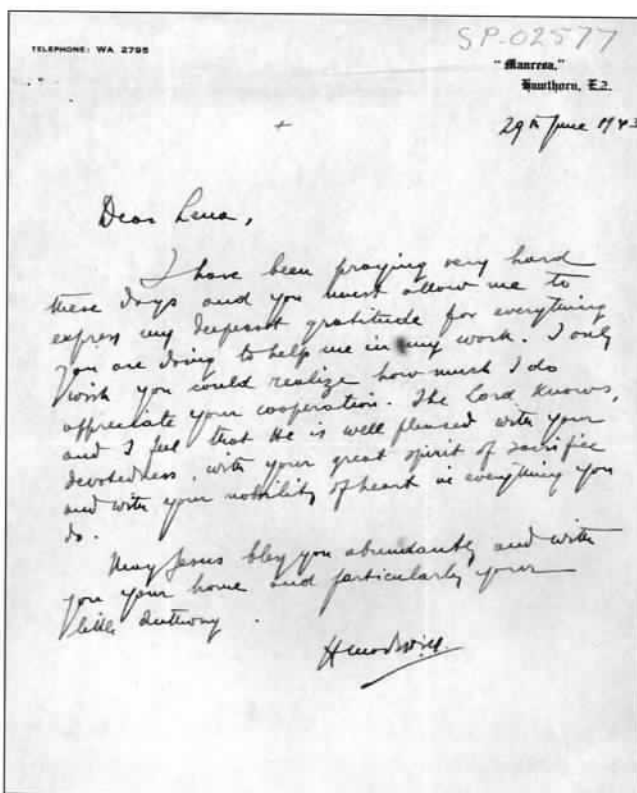
Lena's relationship with her brother Vincent did not seem to be the best. He was about five years older than Mary. Lena told me that he sometimes tried to dominate his two sisters and gave them a hard time. It appears from what Mary says that he may have been adversely affected by the move from Italy. On the other hand there was always a very close relationship between Mary and Lena, and between them and Bartolina. The closeness of the family as a whole can be seen by the fact that when Mary and Lena married and moved out Vincent and his wife Bella looked after Bartolina for many years, including a period when Bartolina suffered a lot from asthma.

There does not seem to be anything unusual in Lena's family situation which would cause her to lack confidence. Mary says Lena had the brains of the family. Lena won a scholarship from St Joseph's primary school Collingwood to the Catholic Ladies College East Melbourne where she did very well academically. At that time Mary left school as she was thought to be anaemic and got a job at a milliner's shop. She learned to decorate hats, which she was very good at.

Lena's academic achievements at school indicate that she would have made a good university student. She told me the question was discussed in the family when she finished school. However they decided against her going to university. It seemed to me that the decision was a disappointment to her, but she accepted it. Her sister-in-law Bella was emphatically against it, I think from a philosophical point of view. There were also financial reasons as there was an outstanding loan from the bank used to buy the shop. So instead of studying for a profession Lena went to work as a telephonist at the Lonsdale Telephone Exchange. She used to walk to work to economise to help pay off the loan.

A comparison of the personalities of Mary and Lena serves to highlight Lena's lack of self confidence. Lena may have had the brains but Mary had all the self confidence. Mary loved music and dancing. She was a good dancer and could play the piano well. She and Lena sometimes went to the dances at Cleveland's dancing school in Carlton with Frank Conti, who was Mary's main dancing partner. Mary was brave enough to go the first time without asking her mother's permission, but unfortunately someone informed on them. Frank and Mary starred on the dancing floor but Lena just went to 'tag along'. Lena was not keen on

dancing. Nor did she show any interest in cooking. In these areas at least she was overshadowed by Mary and Bartolina. It was not just a case of not being keen on dancing. She felt insecure in social situations. Years later, when Fr Modotti had left Australia and the burden and responsibility of his social work fell on her she wrote to him complaining that she was not cut out for social life.¹²



Fr Ugo Modotti expressing his gratitude for Lena Santospirito's work.

Lena's lack of self confidence is demonstrated also at those times when Fr Modotti was away interstate giving retreats and visiting Italian communities in New South Wales and South Australia. In addition to the reference above to her claim of not being cut out for social life his letters to her are sprinkled with references to complaints by her about her 'weak points',¹³ her fear that she may have 'pained' Fr Modotti by the way she had handled some task,¹⁴ her suffering from being over sensitive.¹⁵ Other examples could be given but it is sufficient to add that Fr Modotti himself made the point I am trying to make when he remarked 'You seem to be disappointed with God and with men whenever you seem to fail in anything.'¹⁶ Each time she makes such a complaint he is compelled to reassure and encourage her.

None of this indicates that Lena was not deserving of the high esteem in which she was held. Far

from it. Nobody is perfect. It is our imperfections which mark us out as ordinary human beings. As Fr Modotti felt compelled to advise her: '...sanctity does not consist in not having human frailties, but in not making peace with them and in trying hard to overcome them with humility for the love of Our Lord'.¹⁷ Lena put this advice into practice throughout her life. What makes Lena so noteworthy is not her imperfections, which few remember. What makes her noteworthy is that despite her imperfections she responded to a call to engage in work for those in need in her community, a call which came through Fr Modotti, and she continued that work for many years, supported only by her deep faith and love of God and the encouragement of those she looked up to. This is what marks her out as extraordinary and as a saint. This is what people remember. In the light of these her imperfections become as nothing. The people she helped would have been completely unaware of them. She exemplified what the prophet Isaiah says:

'If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked word,
If you give your bread to the hungry and relief to the oppressed,
Your light will rise in the darkness, and your shadows become like noon...
you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water whose waters never run dry'. (Is.58: 9-11).

Sources

Italian Historical Society (IHS):

The Santospirito Collection. Documents in this collection are now catalogued and individually numbered SP-00001 – SP-02687. They are also grouped in a number of named series according to topic.

Sir James Gobbo. Address for IHS 19 May 1988, Tape No 37 of Interview of Maria Rodriguez. 29 August 1984.

State Library of Victoria: Advocate newspaper.

Notes

- ¹ Sir James Gobbo. Address for the Italian Historical Society at the Italian Institute of Culture. Pages 13-14. 19 May 1988
- ² IHS. La Mamma degli Italiani Series.
- ³ Maria Santospirito Triaca. 'My Mother: La Mamma degli Italiani'. *Italian Historical Society Newsletter* Vol 1 No 4, September to November 1990.
- ⁴ IHS. SP-02567. Mrs Lena Santospirito. The Woman, the Philanthropist, the Religious.
- ⁵ IHS. SP-02569. Fr Modotti to Santospirito. 28 Feb 1939.
- ⁶ *Advocate* newspaper. 1 September 1938.
- ⁷ IHS. SP-00965. Minutes of meeting of St Frances Xavier Cabrini Hospital Ladies' Auxiliary. 9 June 1958.
- ⁸ IHS. SP-00962. Extract of minutes of meeting of St Frances Xavier Cabrini Hospital Ladies' Auxiliary, 13 July 1959.
- ⁹ IHS. Rosary Crusade of Father Patrick Peyton Series. SP-00424-452.
- ¹⁰ IHS. Fr Raffaele Series. SP-00553-791.
- ¹¹ IHS. Tape No 37, Maria Rodriguez interviewed by Mary Millamaci, 29 August 1984.
- ¹² IHS. SP-02649. Modotti to Santospirito. 4 March 1946.
- ¹³ IHS. SP-02574. Modotti to Santospirito. 20 January 1942.
- ¹⁴ IHS. SP-02587. Modotti to Santospirito. 5 September 1944.
- ¹⁵ IHS. SP-02596. Modotti to Santospirito. 19 September 1944
- ¹⁶ IHS. SP-02604. Modotti to Santospirito. 8 December 1944.
- ¹⁷ IHS. SP-02574