

family history: a new resource for family historians: microfilms of vital records from the *archivio tribunale*

by **ALAN POLETTI** ALAN POLETTI IS A RETIRED PROFESSOR OF NUCLEAR PHYSICS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND. OVER SEVERAL YEARS HE HAS BEEN GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT MIGRANTS FROM VILLA DI TIRANO (PROVINCE OF SONDRIO) TO AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND. HE REPORTS ON A VALUABLE RESOURCE FOR FAMILY HISTORIANS.

INTRODUCTION

The Family History Library Utah has recently made available microfilms of the registers of births, deaths and marriages (*anagrafe*¹) for many provinces in Italy, in particular for the years 1866-1929 for the provinces of Sondrio, Como and Lecco.² Many of the earliest Italian immigrants to Australia were from these three provinces. These *anagrafe* thus represent an amazing resource for family historians seeking to trace the lives of these immigrants. It is all the more amazing because previously information from these registers had only been obtainable as *estratti* (extracts) of the records of interest by writing directly to the *comune*. (The *comune* is the smallest unit of local government in Italy. There are 78 *comuni* in the province of Sondrio. Each one maintains its own *anagrafe*.)

The universal civil registration of births, marriages and deaths was instituted when Italy became a unified state. In the province of Sondrio they date from 1866. These are the earliest civil registers available except for those from a brief period (1813 to 1816) when the province of Sondrio was ruled by the French. For each event, two identical *atti* (records or deeds) were produced by an official of the *comune*. One was retained and the other sent to the Court Archives (*Archivio Tribunale*) in the provincial capital.³ It is these records that have been microfilmed. They are, of course, all in Italian and some, because of very poor handwriting are virtually unreadable. However each *atto di nascita*, *atto di morte*, and *atto di matrimonio* generally follows a standard pattern, so that even if your Italian is not so good, it is generally possible to extract the information you want.

HOW TO FIND THESE MICROFILMS

The website is <http://www.familysearch.org>. Click on **library**, then **family history library catalog**, then **place search** and find the *comune* of your interest. You should get it underlined in blue, click on the underlined blue until you see a button at the top right

FILM NOTES

Note - Location [Film]

Nati 1866-1903 - VAULT INTL
Film [2140288 Items 2-4]

Nati 1904-1910 - Pubblicazioni 1866-1910
- Matrimoni 1866-1907 - VAULT INTL
Film [2140289 Items 1-5]

Matrimoni 1908-1910 - Morti 1866-1910 -
VAULT INTL Film [2140290 Items 1-3]

Allegati 1866-1871 - VAULT INTL
Film [2140462 Items 5-6]

FIG 1

hand corner: **view film notes**, click on this and then go to the bottom of the screen to get a **printable version** and print out. Fig. 1 shows the first few lines of the film notes for Villa di Tirano. Those for other *comuni* will be similar.

The first film has all of the births (*nati*) for the *comune* from 1866 to 1903. The second has further births and the banns (*pubblicazioni*) as well as marriages (*matrimoni*). Further marriages as well as deaths (*morti*) are on the third film. The fourth film has on it the annexes to the registers (*allegati*). These contain documents related to the registers, such as the advice of a birth etc in another *comune* or a foreign country or deeds submitted at the time of registration of an event.

With some luck there will be a Family History Center⁴ of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints near you. Take your print-out to them and request the films of your interest. They then make the request to the Family History Library in Utah. After some time, they will advise you that it is available. You will then need to examine the films at the Center and you may find that they will be available for only four weeks.

COMMENTS ON MATERIAL ON THE FILMS

It will take a little time to sort out where to find the records of interest. For instance, Item 1 of the first film listed in Fig. 1 is actually deaths in Villa di Chiavenna (1866-1910). As each event was reported it was entered into the Register and given a sequential number. At the end of the year, an alphabetical index was then prepared and this was placed after the records for

that year. Sometimes these indices are missing or they are only partial. Sometimes individual records are, by mistake, not indexed. For the years 1866-1875, all records were entirely written in longhand. Paper was expensive and every line of every page is used. Those for 1875 and subsequent years used pre-printed forms so that the format is clearly defined. For the years in the earlier period, it will be very difficult to decide just where a particular record begins. If you need records from these years, I suggest that you first look at some of those from the years 1875 and after. This will help you to find just where in the record is the material you need.

To assist with the decipherment of these records, I will discuss several of them in detail. These are all from years subsequent to 1875. I have chosen them for their clarity and tried to find records relating to people who migrated to Australia. I begin with an *atto di nascita*.

BIRTH CERTIFICATES (ATTI DI NASCITA)

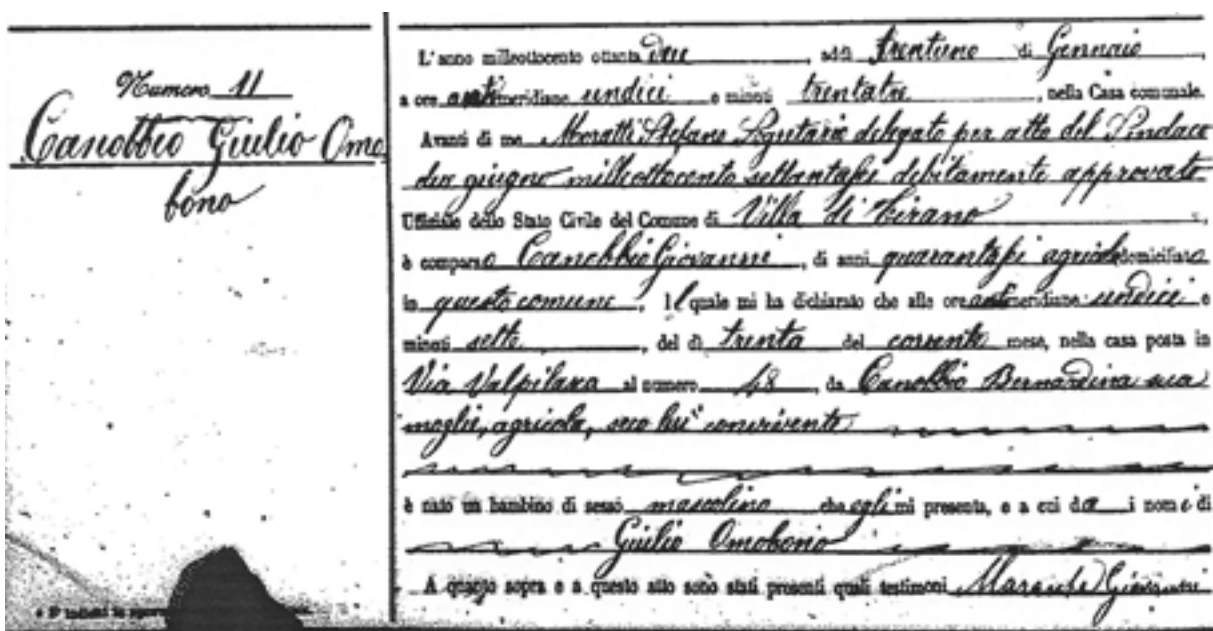
BIRTH CERTIFICATE OF GIULIO OMOBONO CANOBBIO (BORN 30 JANUARY 1882)

At first sight, this is a little confusing because it is in two pieces. However, the *atti di nascita* were displayed three to a double opening. This one was the second on such a double opening. It began toward the bottom of the left hand page and continued at the top of the right hand page.

Now let's examine this *atto di nascita*. The first two lines give the date (31 Jan 1882) and precise time, not of the birth, but when the birth was reported to the *comune* official Stefano Moratti by Giulio's father, Canobbio Giovanni, age 46, occupation *agricola* (farmer or farm worker), resident of Villa di Tirano, as indicated in line 6. Lines three and four give Moratti's name and say exactly why he is approved to record the birth. The *comune*, Villa di Tirano, is given in line five. Finally lines seven to nine give the precise time of birth (11.07 am on the thirtieth day of the current month, 30 January 1882), place of birth, Via Valpilasca 48, and his mother's maiden name (which happens in this case to be the same as her husband's) Canobbio Bernardina *sua moglie, agricola, seco lui convivente* (Giovanni's wife, *agricola*, who lives with him). So her marital relationship to the person reporting the birth is given as well as her occupation and the fact that she is living with Giovanni. The following two lines give Giulio's sex, record that he has been presented to the official and the names Giulio Omobono given to him by his father. Two witnesses are named (last line of Fig. 2a and the first two lines of Fig. 2b). Moratti then states that he read out the *atto* to Giovanni and the two witnesses and then all four signed.

Years later Giulio had given two precise dates for birth. Pity they were not accurate. Giulio was a bit of a character. When he was registered as an alien in 1915 he gave

FIG 2A: First part of birth certificate of Giulio Omobono Canobbio (born 30 January 1882).



ATTI DI NASCITA

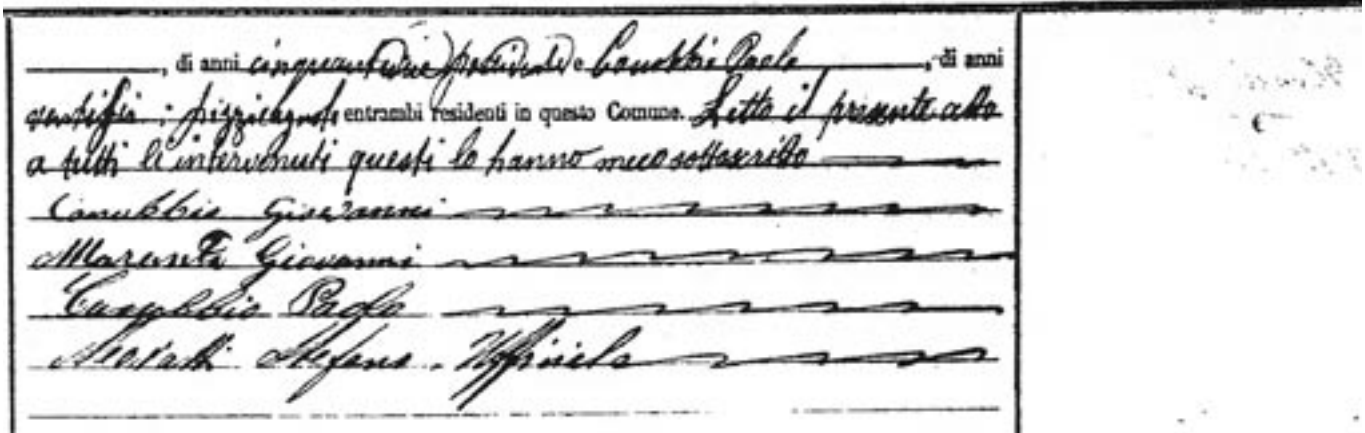


FIG 2B: Second part of birth certificate of Giulio Omobono Canobbio.

his date of birth precisely: 28 December 1882. In 1940, he applied for naturalisation in Western Australia and again gave a precise date of birth: 25 November 1880. The official dealing with the application was a careful man and in a letter to Canobbio, enquired which of the two dates was correct. Unfortunately, Canobbio's reply is not in the file. Both dates were wrong, as we have seen. Note, too, that in these records, the family name is given first and never with a separating comma from the given name. In many early passenger lists this caused many problems. A name like Poletti Giovanni would often be written on these lists as Giovanni, P. [Ed. This is still the practice in all the Italian official records].

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATES (ATTI DI MATRIMONIO)

In the following *atto di matrimonio* both bride and groom are *villaschi*. [People from Villa di Tirano are *villaschi*. This very concise method of referring to people from a given *comune* is widespread: Sondrio = *sondriesi*; Tirano = *tiranesi*; Bianzone = *bianzonaschi*; etc.

MARRIAGE OF ANTONIO ZANOLARI TO MARGHERITA BRUSASCHI-TURA (15 JUNE 1902)

Each *Atto di Matrimonio* has a page to itself. This one in Fig. 3 is Antonio Zanolari's marriage to his first wife. Antonio migrated to Australia in 1921 with his second wife, Domenica Agata Romaior-Re and his son Beniamino Giovanni by his first marriage. Both Domenica and Beniamino naturalised in Australia, although Antonio did not.

These *atti* come straight to the point. The date of marriage (15 June 1902) is in the first line. The official, Dr Carlo Gotti, then explains why it is he who is doing the job. The printed form

then takes care to point out that he is suitably dressed (*vestito in forma ufficiale*)! Next, the name of the groom: Zanolari Antonio (his age: 28, occupation, place of birth and residence is then given, together with his father and mother's names). His wife comes next: Brusaschi Tura Margherita, age: 36 with similar information. Why 'Tura'? It is the *soprano* of her family. We would write it as Brusaschi-Tura, Margherita. The printed section following the names refers to the publication of the banns (*pubblicazioni*) and to the reading out of the three articles in the civil legal code concerning marriage. Then there is the 'will you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?' etc and their names appear again. Two witnesses were present. Finally the entire *atto* was read out and all five signed.

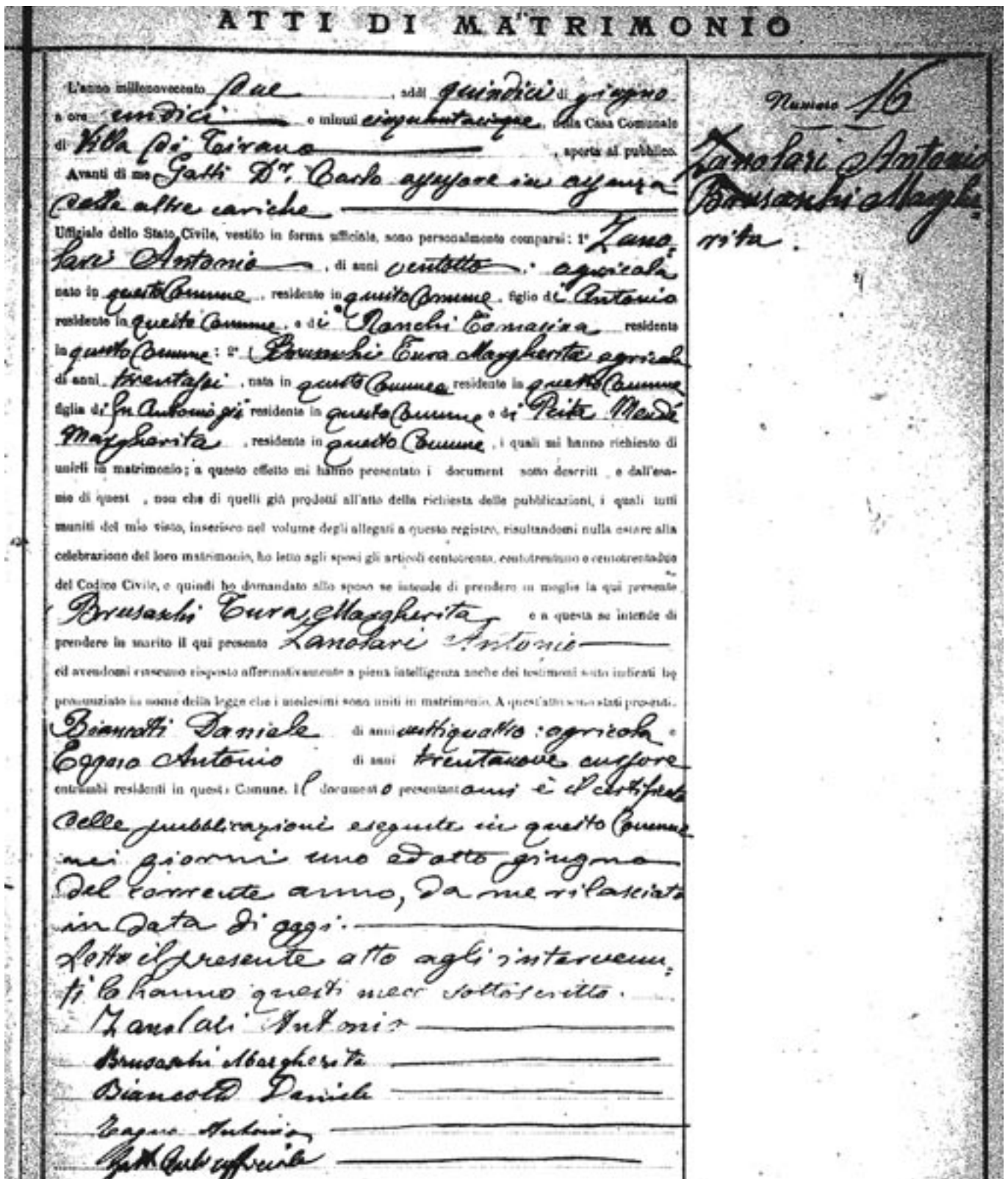
Another member of the family, Giovanni Brusaschi-Tura was one of the earliest *villaschi* to arrive in Australia. Eight years after his arrival in 1858, at the age of 39 he married and settled down to farming at Dunach, near Clunes, 30 km north of Ballarat.

The next *atto di matrimonio* involves a *villasco* (Mosè Morelli) and his bride who is from the *comune* of San Giorgio di Nogaro in Udine province. The marriage was in San Giorgio.

MARRIAGE OF MOSÈ MORELLI TO ELVIRA LOLLIS (6 APRIL 1921)

Mosè and Elvira arrived in Brisbane in 1925. Previously they had lived in France and then in Varese with a child born in each place. Two further children were born in Ayr, Northern Queensland. Although naturalised in 1931, he was interned for four months in 1940 and then re-interned from 1941 until 1943. During his internment, Elvira who was very much his equal in their business partnership had to take sole charge of their storekeeping business in Cairns.

The *atti di matrimonio* for each year were



usually in three sections: *Parte I* (marriages in Villa di Tirano), *Parte II, Serie A* (marriages involving a *villasco* but that took place in another *comune* in Italy) and *Parte II, Serie B* (marriages in foreign countries, again involving at least one *villasco*). The extract in Fig. 4 is from an *atto* in *Parte II, Serie A* for 1921.

Picking up the correct date of the event is

again a problem. This *atto* contains three dates: the first (on the first line) is when the official in Villa received it, the second (9th line) is the actual marriage date (6 April 1921) while a third towards the end of the *atto* and not in this extract is that when the official in San Giorgio di Nogara (in Udine) sent it to Villa di Tirano. The first paragraph of the *atto* states when and by whom it was

FIG 3: Marriage certificate of Antonio Zanolari to Margherita Brusaschi-Tura (15 June 1921).

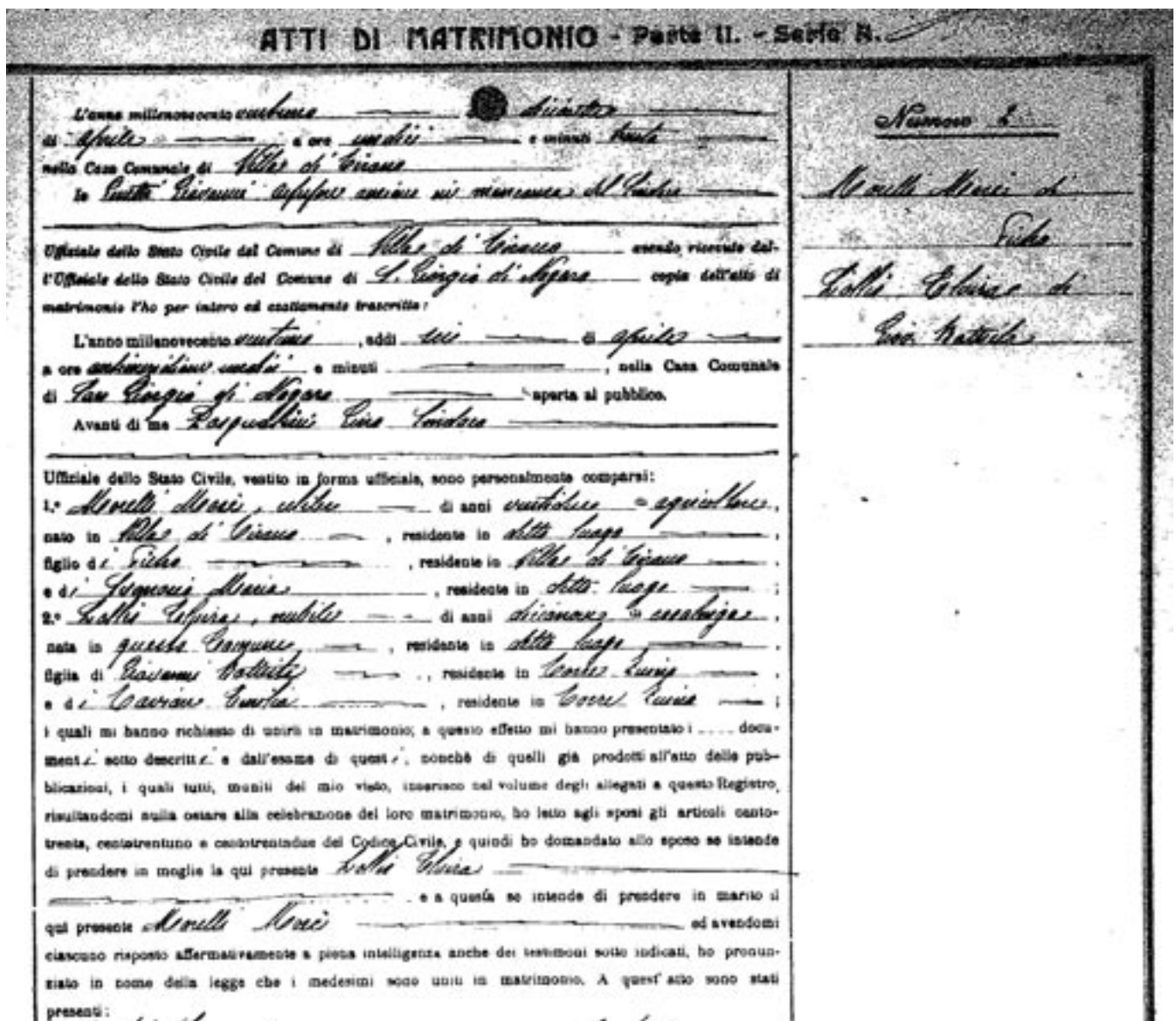


FIG 4: Marriage of Mosè Morelli to Elvira Lollis (6 april 1921).

received in Villa di Tirano from the *comune* of San Giorgio. The rest of this extract is similar in form to the first paragraph in the previous *atto di matrimonio*. Of course, all of this and the rest of the *atto* received from San Giorgio had been carefully transcribed. The original copy from San Giorgio was then inserted in the *volume degli allegati* (the annexe) of the births, deaths and marriages register.

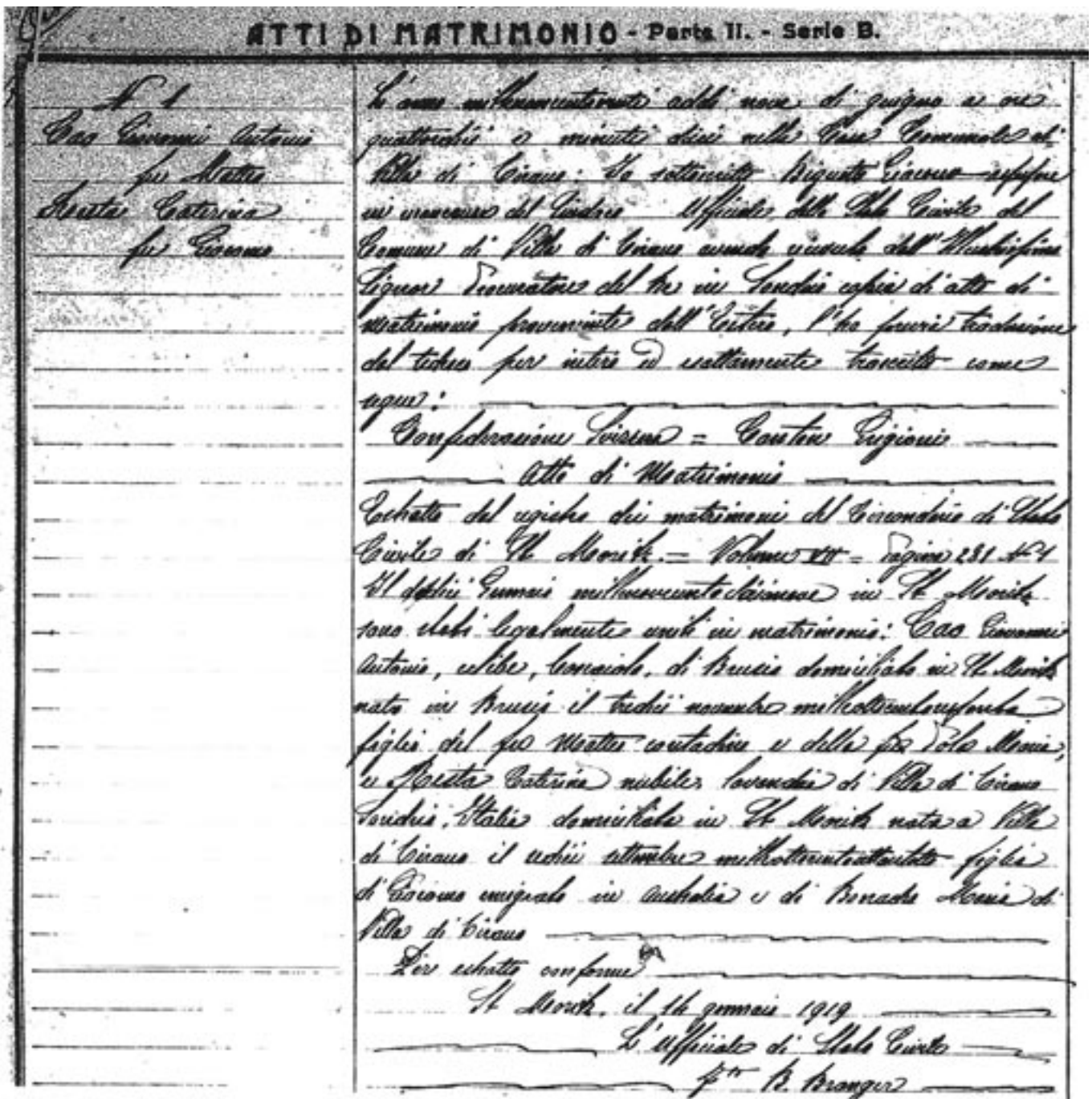
Now an *atto di matrimonio* involving a *villasca* (Caterina Resta), but the marriage was in a foreign country (*all'estero*), in this case in Switzerland.

MARRIAGE OF GIOVANNI CAO TO CATERINA RESTA (12 JANUARY 1919, ST MORITZ, SWITZERLAND)

Fig. 5 is an extract from this *atto*. It is from *Parte II Serie B* for 1920. Since many *villaschi* went to work in Switzerland, there were generally a few like this each year.

There is now no pre-printed form to help in its decipherment, but the general shape is similar to the previous *atto*. Again, the image is an extract only and again there are three dates, two of which are in the extract. The one on the first line (9 June 1920) is when the advice was received in Villa di Tirano. The actual marriage date and place is on the fourth line of the transcript after *Confederazione Svizzera = Canton Grigioni*, that is 12 January 1919 in St Moritz. Following this, the names and attributes of each one of the couple are listed. Unlike most other *atti di matrimonio*, their actual birth dates are given: respectively 13 Nov 1860 and 11 September 1888. Caterina's parents were Giacomo (*emigrato in Australia*) and Bonadeo Maria.

Giacomo and Maria Bonadeo had married in Villa di Tirano in 1876. He had then emigrated to Australia in 1882, but obviously had returned to Villa di Tirano by 1888, before again emigrating to Australia.



**THE BANNS
(PUBBLICAZIONI DI MATRIMONIO)**

Much of the information in the bans is also in the *atti di matrimonio*, but in addition, the ages of the fathers of the bride and groom are given. This is often a useful check and sometimes a clue as to where to look for the parents' births in the archives. In addition, the bride and groom must furnish copies of their own birth certificates and if a parent has died, their death certificate. These are then placed in the Appendices to the Register (*Allegati*). I have not so far had a chance to examine the *Allegati* in the microfilms, but they are likely to be very useful.

ILLEGITIMACY AND WHAT WAS DONE ABOUT IT IN CIVIL RECORDS

Of the 339 births recorded in Villa di Tirano in the years 1897-1900, about 5% were to either or both an unknown father and an unknown mother. This was for births in the *comune* which had been formally reported. We all understand how the father could be 'unknown', but an 'unknown' mother? The answer lies in the Civil Law of the Kingdom of Italy. It was provided that if a mother did not wish her name to be registered, she just declared that she did not consent to be named: *donna che non consente di essere nominata*. Sometimes, the child remained illegitimate, but legitimacy could be achieved in two ways:

FIG 5: Marriage certificate of Giovanni Cao to Caterina Resta (12 January 1919, St Moritz, Switzerland).

1. If the couple subsequently married they could declare at that time that the child was actually theirs.
2. The second involved the drawing up of a deed by a notary stating that one or other (or both) of the parents recognized that the child was theirs, (an *atto di riconoscimento*). These *atti* appeared in *Parte II Serie B* of the year in which they were enacted. This could be several years after the birth.

LEGITIMISATION AT THE TIME OF MARRIAGE

The simplest case is when the parents although unmarried, both came to the *casa comunale* to declare the birth. The parentage of the still illegitimate child was established at that time. Sometime later if the parents married, the child could be legitimised. Again, this could be some years hence. For instance when Maria Agostina Cattalini was born 27 February 1902, her father Pietro Cattalini and mother Maria Bignotti reported the birth, but it was not until their marriage 29 May 1904, that she was legitimised in their *atto di matrimonio*.

Matters became a little more complicated if the name of neither parent appeared on the *atto di nascita*. This was the case for

Bortolo Orma (born 18 May 1902) who was subsequently legitimised as Bortolo Poletti at the time of the marriage of his parents, Bortolo Poletti and Maria Manoni on 30 December 1904. Figs. 6 and 7 illustrate this case.

Fig. 6 illustrates several features of the *atti* for an illegitimate birth. Although it was almost always the father who reported the birth and presented the child to the official, sometimes if he was not able to (or did not wish to), it was the midwife (*levatrice*). In this case it was Domenica Biancotti who reported the birth and presented the child. The mother did not wish to be named, and in the absence of the father, a family name had to be invented. This was done by the official recording the birth, probably after consultation. In all cases these invented family names were unknown in the *comune* or its neighbours. In this case Bortolo was the given name with Orma as the family name. Following the names of the witnesses, in this *atto* it is further noted that *la dichiarante* (Domenica Biancotti) has promised to care for Bortolo and has asked for him to be given back to her. The official did this. Of course the implication is that Bortolo will be cared for by the mother. But Bortolo was later legitimised at the time of his parents' marriage and we now examine an extract from their *atto di matrimonio*.

FIG 6: Birth certificate of Bortolo Orma (18 May 1902).

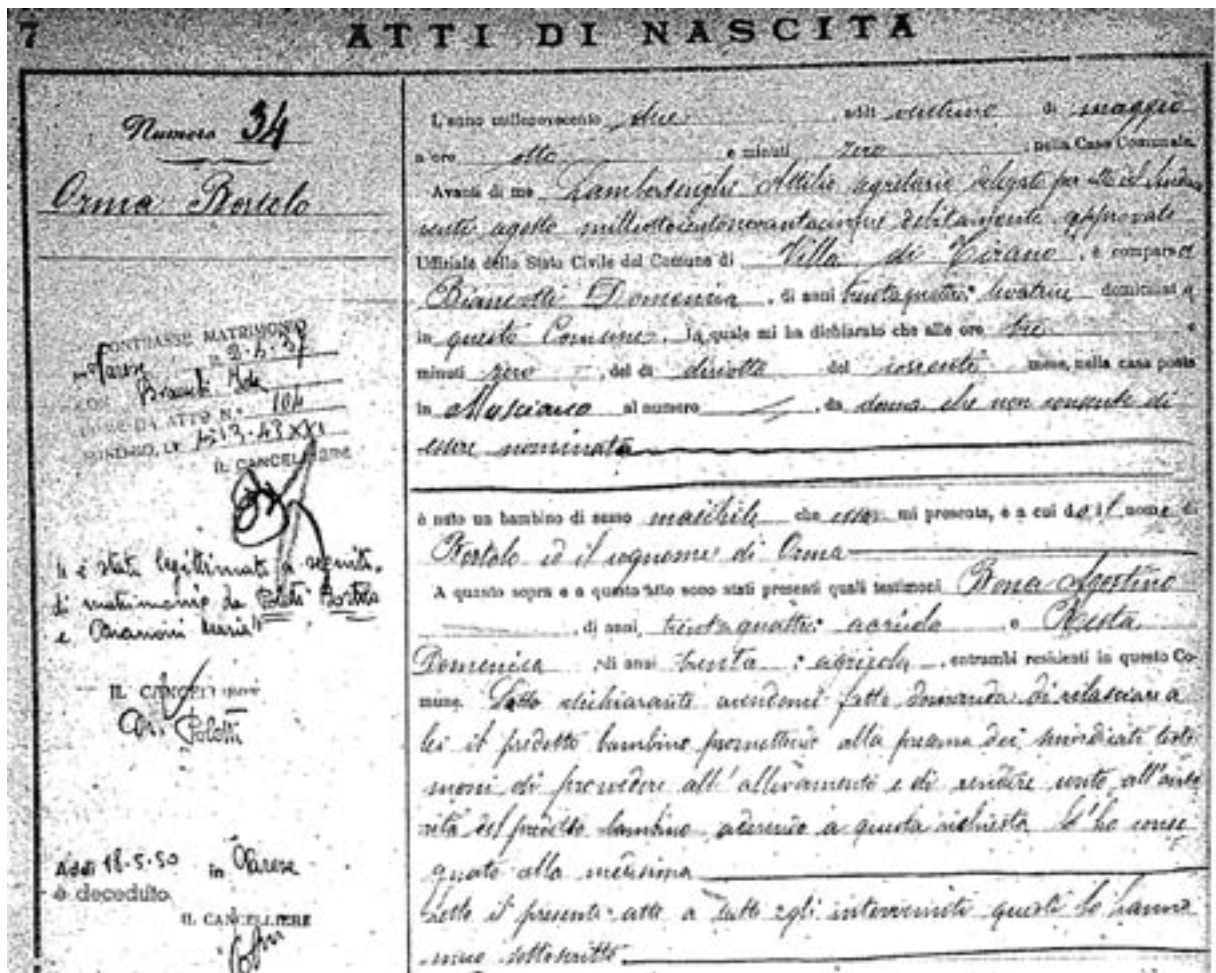
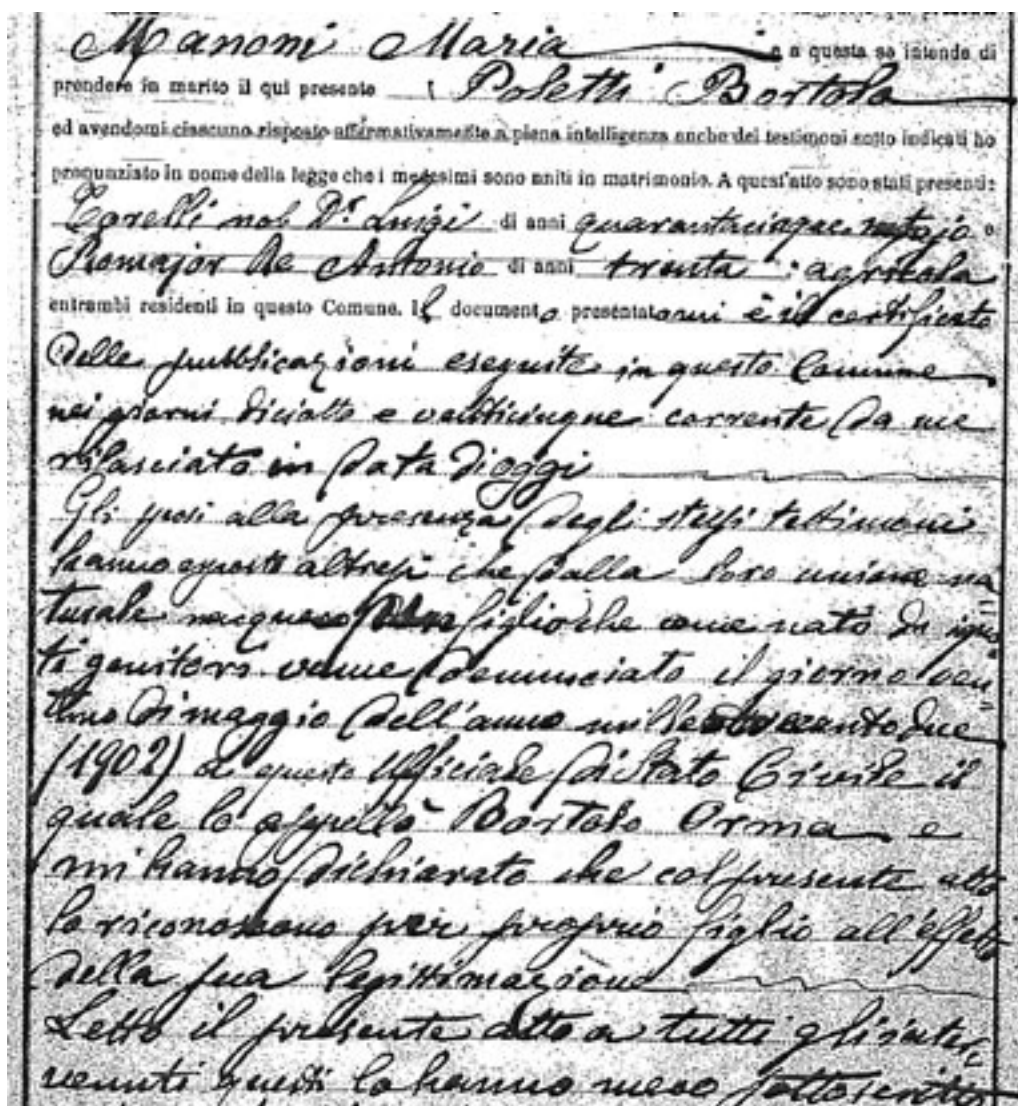


FIG 7: Marriage certificate of Bortolo Poletti to Maria Manoni (30 December 1904).



In Fig. 7 which is an extract from the marriage of Bortolo Poletti to Maria Manoni (30 December 1904), I have left out all of the formal part which is of the same form as that in the marriage of Antonio Zanolari to Margherita Brusaschi-Tura (Fig. 3) and instead focus on the notes following this. The section of interest is that beginning: *Gli sposi alla presenza degli stessi testimoni ...* (The bride and groom in the presence of the same witnesses ... Note the long 's' in *stessi* = the same and *altresi* = also - very confusing!) It is in this section that Bortolo Poletti and Maria declare that Bortolo Orma is their son. They do not give his date of birth, but instead give the date (20 May 1902) of its registration. Finally, by this declaration, he is legitimised.

MARGINAL NOTES AND THEIR USEFULNESS

The extract from the *atto di nascita* of Bortolo Orma in Fig. 6 shows clearly how marginal notes in these *atti* can give some very useful genealogical information. Unfortunately, most were not as clear as the ones in this *atto*. The first marginal note records his marriage to Ida

Brauchi in Varese on 2 May 1937. (This note was not placed here until 1943. Mussolini came to power in 1922, the 'XXI' after 1.3.43 signifies that it is the twenty-first year of the Fascist era). The next note says that Bortolo was legitimised by the marriage of Bortolo Poletti to Maria Manoni, although the date is not given. Finally the last note records his death in Varese, 18 May 1950.

Here are two other examples of the usefulness of marginal notes. The only marginal note on the *atto di nascita* of Anna Morelli (born 11 Aug 1883) states that she married Pietro Pasetti on 4 September 1903 in Australia. This *atto* together with information on Pietro Pasetti from the *liste di leva* leads to a substantial revision of the family history of this couple⁵. Often these marginal notes recorded naturalisations. And sometimes renaturalisations! The one marginal note on the *atto di nascita* of Pietro Arminio Biancotti (born 25 August 1901) is *in data 19-4-1956 ha ottenuto la naturalizzazione Newzelandese*.

This clearly identified a certain ‘Peter Biancotti’ who was known only from hazy recollections of my own family.

LEGITIMISATION VIA AN *ATTO DI RICONOSCIMENTO*

**MARIANNA RADA (B. 25 FEB 1915) /
MARIANNA ANDREOTTA (RICON. 19 FEB 1918)**

In the *atto di nascita* (#22 of *Parte I*, 25 Feb 1915) the midwife, Ida Carenzio reported the birth of Marianna Rada, unknown father and *donna che non consente di essere nominata*. There were no marginal notes. She was legitimised three years later in the *atto di riconoscimento* (#1 of the *Atti di Nascita, Parte II - Serie B*, which is shown in Fig. 8.

If we remember the way these *atti di nascita* are laid out, finding the information we need is not so difficult. The date (10 May 1918) when this deed was entered in the Register is on the first line. The official, Emanuele Tavelli then explains why he is authorised to act. Then on line 6, he says that he has received an *atto di riconoscimento* drawn up by Dr Luigi Torelli (a lawyer in Teglio) dated 19 Feb 1918 and with the number 7525. In this deed (we are now at line 10), *Andreotta Cristina di Giacomo*, spinster, farmer (*agricola*), born and resident in Villa di Tirano declares that she is the mother of the (girl) child born (*data alla luce*) 25 Feb 1915 as recorded in the Register at # 2, *parte I*. (it was really # 22—a small mistake) and named *Marianna Rada*. Tavelli then goes on to say that he has checked his copy and that he has also placed Torelli’s original *atto* in the Appendices to the Register and signs the deed.

If you had really been looking for *Marianna Andreotta*, you would have had a hard time. The only place where she is only indirectly mentioned, is deep in the above *atto*. Almost certainly, Marianna’s mother married the following year. The civil marriage of *Re Delle Gandine Abbondio fu Martino* to *Andreotta Cristina di Giacomo* took place in Villa di Tirano 21 Jan 1919.

The case of *Antonio Biancotti*, (born 12 August 1912, Villa di Tirano) is an interesting one. The *atto di nascita* reveals only the birth of a certain *Antonio Biotti*, son of *ignoti*. In the National Archives of Australia [A435, 1947/4/211] we find in a letter dated 16 May 1947 that *Antonio Biancotti* (born 12 August 1912, Villa di Tirano) came to Australia ‘in the company of his mother when 8 mths old and reckons he disembarked at Cairns in Apr 1913. In addition, his father was *Antonio Giuseppe Biancotti*, resident of Babinda, naturalised at Melbourne 19 May 1915’.

However, from the Military Draft Lists (*liste di leva*) in the *Archivio di Stato* in Sondrio, on the 31 January 1933, *Antonio Biotti* (born 12 August 1912) was declared to be *renitente*—that is he had not turned up for his Draft Board interview.

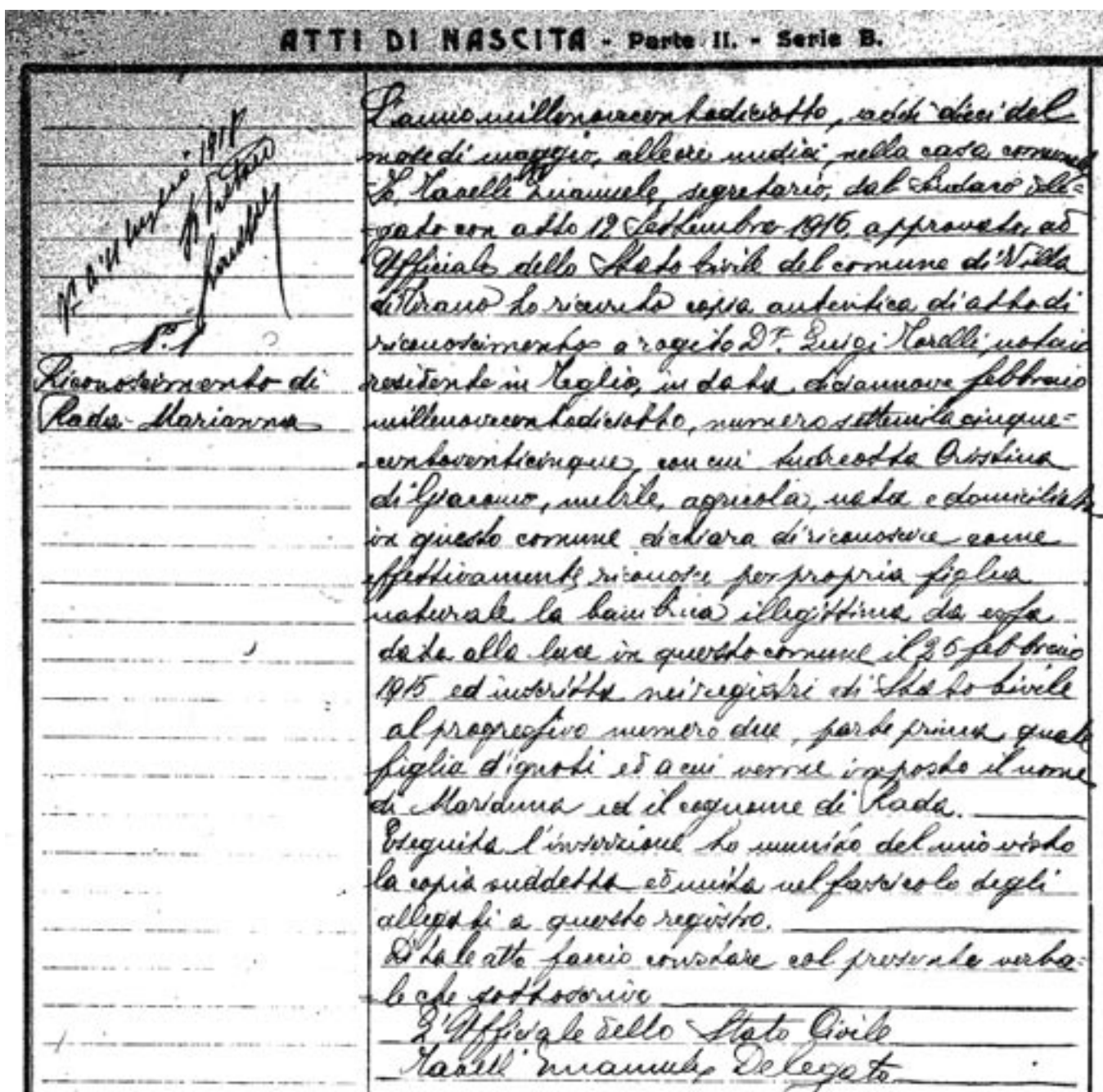
To further confuse things, the marriage in Queensland on the 26 March 1913 between *Antonio Biancotti* and *Anna Teresa Svanosio* is recorded. What is going on? All becomes clear with an *atto di riconoscimento* in the *atti di nascita—Parte II—Serie B*, no. 4, dated 3 August 1922. It covers a page and a half, but in it *Anna Svanosio di Giacomo* and married to *Antonio Biancotti* declares that she is the mother of *Antonio Biotti* and that his father was *Antonio Biancotti*. Although it was only a few months after his birth that his parents married, it was ten years before he was legitimised.

Sometimes, as with *Bortolo Orma*, a marginal note on the original *atto* refers to the subsequent legitimisation. This was the case for *Bello, Arturo* (born 8 June 1899) and recognised as the son of *Maranta, Maria fu Giovanni* in 1904 and for *Farfalli, Fedele Enrico* (born 27 Feb 1886) and recognised as the son of *Poletti-Meotin, Maria di Domenico* in 1897. Lovely names they dreamt up!

CHURCH WEDDINGS AND CIVIL MARRIAGES

For most of the first sixty years of the existence of the unified Kingdom of Italy, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the new state was far from cordial. In matters of marriage, the State recognized only civil marriages and the Church only church weddings. Consequently the dates of the two could differ quite widely. Of five marriages in the years 1871, 1876, 1878, 1902 and 1907 in Villa di Tirano for which I have details of both church and civil marriages, the differences were 4 months, 2 months, 6 months, 3 days and 1 month respectively. In all cases the church marriage preceded the civil marriage. These time differences could have some awkward consequences: *Giovanna Poletti* was born 18 June 1878. Her parents were married in Church on 12 February 1878 while their Civil marriage took place 7 August 1878. In the eyes of the Church she was the daughter of a married couple and her baptism is so recorded. For the Civil authorities when her father reported her birth, she was illegitimate, while her mother had little option but to refuse consent to be named.

It was not until the signing of the Lateran Treaty between the Italian State and the Catholic Church, 11 February 1929, that this messy situation came to an end and



the Italian State recognised religious marriage as valid in civil law. This change is reflected in the marriage register for 1929 for Villa di Tirano: the *atti* for ten of the thirteen marriages recorded in the last four months of the year are transcribed from the reports forwarded to the civil authorities by the parish priests of Stazzona and Motta and the arch-priest of the San Lorenzo in Villa di Tirano.⁶ These were in *Parte II—Serie B* and have the same ‘shape’ as the *atto* we have just discussed in Fig. 5. The date of the marriage comes after the official, as usual, says who he is and why he is authorised to do the job. He also gives the origin of the *atto*. Then follows the

transcription of the *atto* received from the priest.

WAS THE BRIDE PREGNANT?

As well as children born to a couple before they were married, family historians also need to realise that despite the Church’s admonitions, age-old custom and the normal behaviour of young people and those not so young, meant that a significant fraction of the first children born to a marriage were ‘unexpectedly early’. For instance, of the 63 civil marriages celebrated in Villa di Tirano from 20 March 1896 to 20 March 1900, about 13% were in this category. A complication of course, as mentioned above, is that the church

FIG 8: Legitimation of Marianna Rada.

marriage could well have been a few months before the civil marriage.

A SAD LITTLE TALE

Giovanni Scaletti was born 27 September 1878 in the *contrada* of Santa Cristina on the mountain slopes above Stazzona. A marginal note refers to his marriage to Anna Maria Poletti-Dus on 26 September 1909. A son, Luigi, was born 4 August 1910. In May 1912 he left Villa di Tirano for Western Australia where by 1916 he was a miner at Boulder. Perhaps he had meant to return home before then, but war intervened. A year later, on 17 September 1917, while working at the Horseshoe Goldmine in Boulder, he was killed by a rock fall. The Australian authorities thought he was single, but were not sure. His death was not formally recorded in Villa di Tirano until 1929 when his widow and his brother brought a copy of his death certificate to the *casa comunale*. This was faithfully translated and placed in the *atti di morte Parte II, Serie B* for that year.

DEATH CERTIFICATES (ATTI DI MORTE)

For a particular person, these are often the hardest to find. Indices spanning many years may need to be scanned, but they can be very useful. In the *atti di matrimonio*, I have encountered a surprising number of 'Australians', some of whom were even naturalised, who returned to Villa di Tirano and married. Evidence from the *liste di leva* often shows that they settled down in Villa di Tirano after their marriage for that is where their sons were born. So—if you cannot find the death of your 'Australian' ancestor in Australia—perhaps they died in the *comune* of their birth.

After 1875, the usual format was for two *atti di morte* to be displayed on each page. As an illustration of the information in these, I have chosen that for Caterina Tognola who died in Villa di Tirano at the age of 38 on the 24 October 1918.

This *atto* was no. 74 and the official made a mess of the name of Caterina's father in the right hand margin. It is indeed Pietro as in the body of the *atto*. Again the date (25 October 1918) in the first line is that when the official, Emanuele Tavelli recorded the death. The actual day of death given at the end of the ninth line (*ieri*, yesterday) is defined with respect to the first date. The date of death is thus 24 Oct 1918. Lines 6-8 give the name of the two people reporting the death and then, following the time of death, on the

tenth line the place of death is given as Contrada Morelli. Caterina's name (Tognola Caterina), age (38), occupation (*agricola*) and place of residence (*questo comune* = Villa di Tirano) follow. Next, her father, Pietro (Tognola is implied) who is dead (*fu*), his occupation when alive (*già agricola*) and place of residence. Following this, her mother, (Gosatti Domenica), also dead. The last statement at the end of line 15 gives her husband's name (*coniugata a Paini Stefano*). Note that the witnesses who have signed with Tavelli at the end are not the two people who reported the death.

EQUALITY OF THE SEXES?

In the *atto di morte* above, we see that Caterina's death is reported under her maiden name. This is still the case today. To a certain extent "Women's Lib" was alive and well in rural Italy many years ago.

There were also some impressively strong women. At 10 am of the second of June 1903, Domenica Marantelli Colombini appeared at the *Casa Comunale* of Villa di Tirano to register the birth of her illegitimate son, Giacomo Giovanni born 5 days before. She must have been quite determined to have the child registered as hers for she had walked the eight kilometres from her home in the Contrada of Dosso although she had not brought the child as she should have. However, the official forgave her in view of the distance she had come and accepted the word of the midwife concerning the birth and the sex of the child and it was duly registered. Of course, since she was unmarried no father's name could be given. She then set off to return to Dosso, not only the eight kilometres, but a climb of 350 metres. All of this five days after the birth of the child. We still do not know the name of the father. Two years later, she married Andrea Orgnoni. As well as that inner strength we see above, she was clearly an extremely capable mother. Four sons she bore to Andrea appear in the *liste di leva* as well as Giacomo Giovanni

DEATH RATES 1915–1920

Of the 579 deaths recorded in the *atti di morte* for the *comune* of Villa di Tirano in the years 1915-1920, 38 were of soldiers who had died at the front or from wounds. (The deaths of many others soldiers who had died in this period were only to be recorded in later years). But it was the influenza epidemic of 1918 that took the greatest toll. The average number of civilian deaths per year for the five years excluding 1918 was 76. In 1918, it was 162, over twice as many. Was Caterina Tognola, whose death is recorded in the

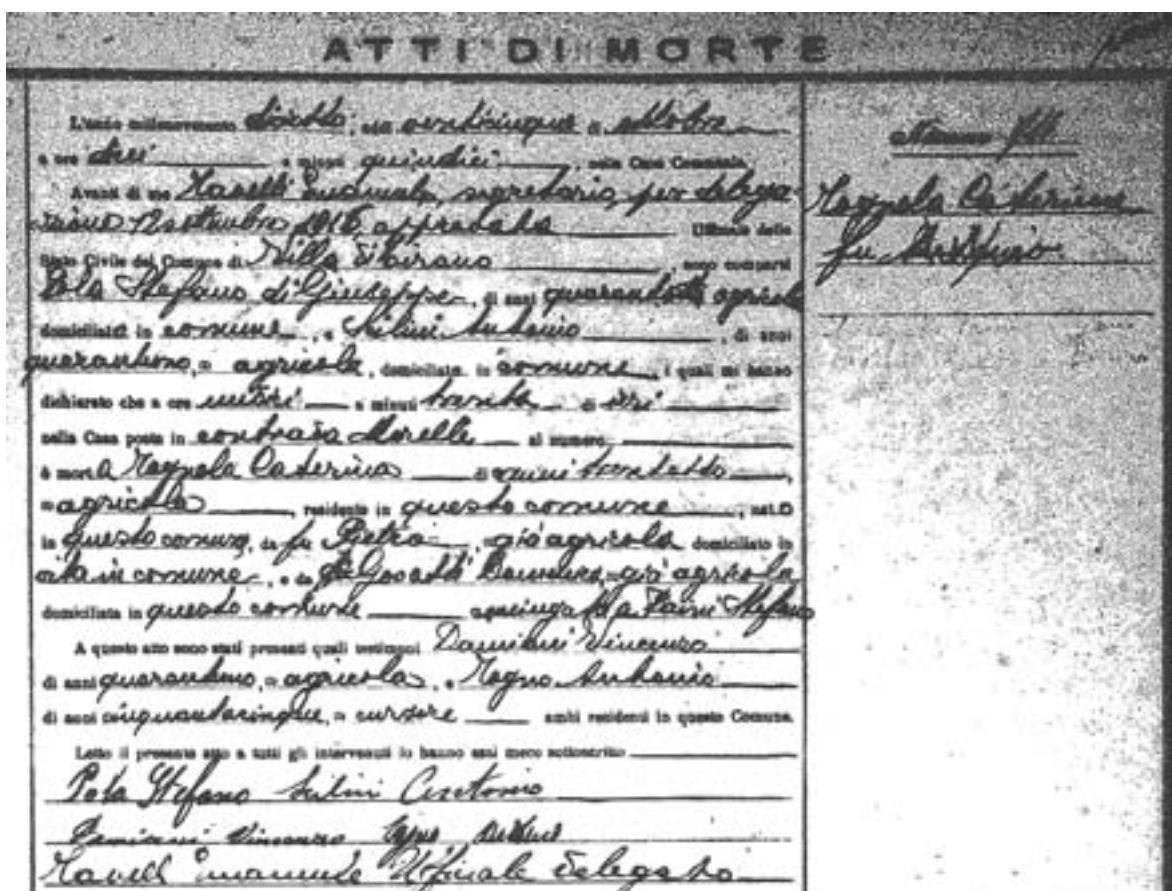


FIG 9: Death certificate of Caterina Tognola (24 October 1918).

atto di morte we have discussed above, an influenza victim? She was relatively young, she had married just eight years before, food was short and was probably still nursing her youngest son who was born 31 March 1918.

CONCLUSION

It is now quite straightforward to track down ancestors in the vital records of many English speaking countries. Computer searchable indices are becoming more widely available: those from Victoria and NSW being the most extensive of the Australian indices. The Scottish records are even more accessible: having identified a record of interest in an index, a digital copy can be downloaded from

the net. For most parts of Italy, things are much more difficult. However the microfilms I have been discussing have improved accessibility immensely for *comuni* in many provinces. Even if you do not speak Italian, now that I have explained where to find the information you want in the *atti*, you should be able to use them. Good hunting! One last comment: the ages given in these *atti* are extremely reliable and must have been checked by the official against the *atto di nascita*. In Australian records, especially for those born overseas, this is not necessarily so.

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NOTES

- 1 I have used Italian terms quite often. These are always in *italics*. I hope that I have explained each one the first time I have used it.
- 2 Hans Fumberger alerted me to the existence of these microfilms. Hans, although Australian, is living in Zurich and has recently been tracing and identifying the large number of Italian-speaking people who have migrated from the Poschiavo Valley (Canton Grigioni, Switzerland) to Australia as well as people from German-speaking Andeer and its surroundings (also Canton Grigioni) who have similarly migrated to Australia and New Zealand.
- 3 I thank Riccardo Borserini for explaining this. Riccardo's family came from Stazzona (Villa di Tirano). He now lives near Como.
- 4 A big thank you to the volunteers of the Takapuna Centre in Auckland for their kindness and help.
- 5 Note on Peter Pasetti, *Italian Historical Society Journal*, Vol 8 No. 2, 2000, p. 35.
- 6 Again thanks to Riccardo Borserini for explaining this.