

AN OCEAN LINER NAMED AUSTRALIA

by
Lorenzo Iozzi

Lorenzo Iozzi is curator of the Italian Historical Society. He was born in Calabria and migrated to Australia at the age of four. Two years ago, together with his wife Janine, he visited Italy for the first time. This is his story of his migration experience and the journey back home.

My earliest memory is that of being on board a ship out at sea. I was four years old and travelling with my mother, my sister and one of my three brothers and we were sailing away from Italy. So my earliest memory is that of being a migrant. The passenger liner we were on was named, symbolically, the *Australia*. Somehow, the name was more than a name: it engendered a promise. This too was probably the only word of 'English' we knew between the four of us ...Australia.



Passport photograph of the author (left), his mother, Caterina and one of his brothers, Cesare, shortly before migrating to Australia 1954.

We had left our hometown, Girifalco, in the region of Calabria, to join my father and my two elder brothers who were already in Australia. My father had emigrated first, alone, two years earlier. He had settled in Melbourne and worked to save enough money so that the eldest son could join him. They in turn saved enough for the second eldest to make the trip out and so on, until the three of them had secured the passage for the rest of the family. They were at Princes Pier, Port Melbourne, to meet us on the night of 11 November 1954. They were part of a multitude of people congregated on the pier to greet the other 360 passengers aboard the



The ship Australia, with migrants on board departing from Italy on one of her many voyages to Australia during the 1950s.

Australia. And so at last my family was reunited after being apart for so long.

My mother and father would never see Italy again. Nor would they ever see their parents, relatives and friends whom they had left behind. My family would no longer participate in the festivals, customs and traditions handed down through the centuries, some of which can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks and Romans, to pagan times and even earlier.

The character of southern Italians is most defined by their attitude and adherence to these components of life: the family, which they place above all else; their feasts, which are manifestations of their emotions; and the divine properties they attribute to nature. Religion, superstition and magic, metamorphosed over the ages, are at the heart of their traditions and customs.

Over the years I would hear about these traditions from my family. One of the most famous of the festivals was and still is *Carnevale*, originally a festival dedicated to Saturno, the god who descended to earth in Italy – the Earth God – and there taught the original inhabitants the art of agriculture. Every

year my family would have celebrated the *fiesta* of San Rocco, the patron saint of Girifalco, which commemorates the day when, centuries before, the saint is said to have rid the town of the plague. They would also have celebrated the *fiesta della raccolta*, festivals for the harvesting of the olives, the grapes and the corn. In time, they would cease to believe in the divine and magical properties of nature such as those bestowed on fire, which rejuvenates life; or the wind, which when it arrives suddenly and impetuously, brings with it a foreboding of violent death. Or those properties bestowed on matter, such as rock salt which when placed in the home or carried on one's person, wards off malign spirits. Vanishing too were many of the culinary traditions such as the annual pig-slaughtering at home from which they would make their own small goods including *capicolli*, *sopresse* and *prosciutti* as well as such bizarre delicacies as *sanguinaccio*, a dessert made at Carnevale and whose essential ingredients include pig's blood, cocoa and wine must. This last process indicates the lengths that they went to to ensure that no part of the beast (or any food for that matter) was thrown away or wasted.

There are many reasons why my parents did not return to Italy, not the least of which were financial considerations, especially in their early years in Australia. But there are other, psychological, reasons why someone chooses not to repatriate. Even when affordability ceased to be an issue, my parents still did not make the journey back. And this is because, generally speaking, emigrants can be classified into two types: those who leave their country with the notion that one day they will return; and those — emigrants in the strictest sense of the word — who are determined never to return. Why go back to a place that you have abandoned in search of a better life? My father at least fell into this latter category. This should not be interpreted as a hatred for the country on his part, quite the contrary. He was motivated by a belief that in order to surmount the obstacles and difficulties inherent in migration, nothing short of this resolve would suffice. In a sense, he was determined not to look back.

On our first night in Australia we were taken to a boarding house in Collingwood. What a sight Collingwood must have seemed to us in the light of day with its factories, cramped housing and mix of people. To get a sense of this we need only consider that at the time in Girifalco, then with a population of 8000, there wasn't a single factory. There was no running water: one or two taps



The author on the verandah of a boarding house in Collingwood with his father looking on, shortly after arrival in Australia from Italy in 1954.

serviced the whole town: you went to the piazza for a drink at the fountain or further on to the stream to wash clothes. The only people to own an automobile were the landlords. Because of mass unemployment, most people eked out a living as best they could unless they were fortunate enough to have employment within the few government institutions such as the hospital, school or municipal offices. Some went from town to town, peddling eggs, or fruit, or music if they had those commodities, others went from town to town mending pots and pans if one was a tinsmith. Many, mainly those with a trade, ventured further afield for work, to another region or indeed to another country, to Switzerland, America, Argentina or Australia. The people from the region were down-to-earth people, rooted in nature, shepherds, farmhands and peasants. For this was the land of the *contadino*, by which we mean: he who is from and belongs to the land; he who works the land, especially under a landlord. He is the antithesis of the *cittadino*, by which we mean he who belongs to the city (*città*).

Collingwood, on the other hand, was one of the most industrialized suburbs in Australia. One factory alone, MacRobertson Confectionery Ltd. spanned six city blocks on the Fitzroy - Collingwood boundary. Yarra Falls Ltd. Spinning

Mills and Foy and Gibson Woollen Mills were just as expansive; R.N. Raymond Boot Manufacturers and Box Makers were at 6 – 54 and 5 – 45 Easey Street as well as several other locations throughout the suburb. Collectively, these four factories employed the equivalent of the whole population of Girifalco. Bradford Cotton Mills, British United Shoe Manufacturing Company, Dunlop Rubber, Abbotsford Breweries, Carlton and United Breweries Ltd and Godfrey Phillips International Tobacco Manufacturers are just a few of the many factories dotted throughout the suburb which remain in my memory.

One of the promises the name of our ship symbolized was most definitely *work* and in this the migrants who settled in Collingwood were not disappointed. Interspersed among the myriad factories were rows and rows of tiny houses. Commonly referred to as ‘workingmen’s cottages’ — many of them owned by the factories themselves — they were filled with families of every race: Carboni, Adamopoulos, Fortunato, Chandler, Popovic, Johnson, Kyriakidis, Leizerowitz, Italiano, Uebergang, Zsamboky, Sopovski, Russo, Gyftopolous, Crockett, Pitts. We did not feel out of place.

And so it was that my family made the leap from an agricultural society to an industrialised one. And it was no mean feat. In order to achieve this they had to exile themselves from their native land, travel to the other side of the world on the longest journey they would ever make and live as strangers in a ‘strange’ land.

Collingwood in the post war years was a hostile suburb. How could it have been otherwise? Essentially the suburb was one big machine with people herded from near and far to operate it. Much of it was still squalor and it was regarded as one of the ‘roughest and toughest’ suburbs of Melbourne where violence on the streets was commonplace. Many of the youth expressed their manhood by forming or joining rival gangs. Understandably, it was hostile to migrants but more than this it was hostile to life and living in general. It is commonly accepted that at certain stages of it’s history, nobody lived in Collingwood by choice. So why then had my father chosen so deliberately to uproot his family for Collingwood?

Forty-five years would pass before I could answer this question satisfactorily for myself. That’s how long it took me to see Italy again and

discover something of my origins. There were several contributing factors to my inertia. Firstly, some of my father’s reluctance may have worn off on me. Secondly, it was a stigma to be a Calabrian and hence difficult to feel good about your origins, a condition induced more by the perception that northern Italians had towards southerners then, than by the perception that Australians had towards us. Finally, and despite these notions, I always harbored some romantic dream of Italy, which I felt would no doubt be tainted by the reality of a first-hand experience. But avoid my past as I may, the inevitable happened and two years ago I retraced my steps and made the journey back to Italy.

‘There is something special about going back to your place of birth’, a friend informed me prior to my leaving for Italy. At the time I did not know what he meant, believing that this ‘something special’ referred to external things. Consequently I

believed that he was talking about something tangible like finding evidence of Renaissance art in the town or proof that a Roman emperor had passed through, thereby imbuing it with some historical importance which I could call my heritage. I even searched tourist books like the *Lonely Planet* hoping to find something, anything about my

hometown, given the prominence that Italy has for tourists, but Girifalco hardly ranks a mention. The few travel guides that make reference to Catanzaro, the principal city, advise you to bypass the area and head straight for the city of Reggio Calabria or the island of Sicily!

Of course my friend was not referring to the physical aspects of the trip, but more the spiritual journey that was in store for me. I did not know this at the time and consequently we didn’t begin our trip in Girifalco. Instead our trip began where so many first visits to Italy begin — Venice. From there we took the well trodden track that maps out the wonders of Italy: its art, architecture, history, music and cuisine, to such places as Florence, Sienna, Rome and Amalfi. I could dwell at length on these wonders now but somehow this trip was about an altogether other mission, one in which all roads led to Girifalco.

The first thing that strikes you about Calabria is the landscape itself: paradoxically, breathtakingly beautiful and at the same time austere and severe. Some of the mountains, for the most part rocky, are so

*‘...the longest
journey they
would ever
make.’*

sheer as to appear perpendicular and you wonder how the terrain came to be inhabited, let alone cultivated. There are two aspects to the beauty of this landscape: the one created by the hand of man, such that the land has become 'sculpted' into its present form through centuries of cultivation; and the one created by the hand of 'God', those areas which appear to be untouched by man. Looking at the landscape, it is easy to be transported back in time and envisage a primordial existence because of these aspects and indeed around Girifalco itself can be found caves and tombs from the Neolithic Period of 30,000 - 40,000 years ago. Calabria is full of ironies, beginning with its very name. Its derivation from the ancient Greek can be taken to mean 'sleeping beauty' or 'a place of beauty', which it is but there are other sides to it.



Back in Italy for the first time since migrating to Australia as a child. Photograph taken in 2000.

Girifalco is a mountainous town. Its isolation, position and layout can be traced to its origins for the town was established when two other towns, Toco and Caria, on the plains below, were invaded and destroyed by the Saracens in the year 836. The inhabitants of these towns fled to the relative safety of the mountains. The etymology behind the name Girifalco is unclear. It translates as 'the circling falcon' and the most plausible derivation of the name is that the survivors of the invasion saw a falcon circling overhead once they reached the site where their future town would be built and took this as their omen.

The last house – if one can call it a house – which my family occupied before we emigrated is still standing though derelict. It is built of

rendered stones or rocks and occupies an area of land measuring approximately five metres by five metres and consists of two small rooms, one-up-one-down, with no outside space. The most outstanding feature of the exterior is the toilet that stands on the front porch abutting the front door. At first sight, one cannot help but ask why it was placed in that position until one realizes that there is *absolutely* no other available area. Such were the cramped conditions of the housing, due in part to the fact that earth quakes in the area were frequent and hence they tended to 'huddle' or 'lock' the dwellings tightly next to each other for safety. Of course the little land afforded to the people and the scarcity of building materials were also contributing factors. The 'kitchen' to our house — a stone oven and tiny basin — was on the landing at the top of the stairs. That night I tried in vain to figure out how up to seven people lived in two small rooms, or just how the beds fitted into the space, let alone wardrobes, tables, chairs, commodes and all the other essential furnishings most of which would not even fit through the front and only entrance to the house. Where did we eat? Where did we bathe? I have since learnt that not only did a family of seven live here but my mother, a seamstress, also worked in the bottom room which doubled as the 'master bedroom' for my parents.

Not all the houses in Girifalco were this bad in the early 1950s when mass emigration took place. And indeed, some were worse. Nor were these conditions confined to Girifalco or Calabria. As a consequence of the Second World War, Italy itself was in tatters, both physically and spiritually. The Italian neo-realist films of this period document a dispirited Italy where unemployment, homelessness and starvation were widespread to the point where even some of the most lavish quarters of cities such as Rome and Milan are depicted as being reduced to shantytowns. But it was the South and places like Girifalco, which really felt the full effects of the War, primarily because of their isolation and hence the exodus from Italy was mainly from the South.

Emigration was seen as one solution to Italy's problems, just as immigration was seen as one solution to Australia's problems. Why else would one government 'push' a million and more of its inhabitants to emigrate? Why else would another government take almost as many 'aliens', as we were referred to in parliamentary papers of the time?

After finding my paternal home we visited a house of God. God has four houses in Girifalco. In the church of San Rocco, the patron saint of the town, you can see baroque paintings which transport you away from earthly things; paintings like the *Ascension into Heaven* and the *Resurrection of the Dead*. They are some of the few examples of public art in the town. You can also see in the church a plate glass (bullet-proof we were told) display case and in it... necklaces, earrings, wedding rings, brooches and other simple and modest jewellery given by the townsfolk as offerings to God, in some cases no doubt for deliverance, such as sparing the town from further calamities. The only sculpture we saw was a statue of Duke Fabrizio Caracciolo, who presided over the town in the seventeenth century and administered the land. People walking past the statue daily are thereby reminded of Girifalco's feudalistic past.

We were taken to a hilltop overlooking the town and saw the four churches which are the most prominent landmarks apart from one other building, the Psychiatric Hospital or *Il Manicomio*, which is now closed down. The word *manicomio* itself is now in disuse because of its derogatory connotations: manic and maniac, of course, are two derivations. Essentially, it meant 'a dispirited and marginalized place', a little like the English word *bedlam*. Sadly, it is Girifalco's most enduring symbol and one that fits its history, for like many parts of the south, the town was neglected by the Italian Government. If Girifalco is known at all in other parts of Italy, Florence for example, it is first and foremost for its *Manicomio*. The hospital was a former monastery, dating from the 1600s when the Roman Catholic Church ruled the papal states and religious institutions throughout Italy. After the *Risorgimento* and the unification of the various territories and kingdoms, the Church was obliged to relinquish many of its holdings to the newly formed State. The ancient monastery in Girifalco was one such property. And so in 1881 it went from a place for the saintly to a place for the insane. It became one of the leading psychiatric hospitals in Italy. For example, it is credited with identifying Alzheimer's Disease before the disease had a name. Herein lies yet another irony: a town barely able to find the means for its own survival assumed the care for a significant proportion of the nation's mentally ill,

although I suspect that it was initiated more by an 'out of sight, out of mind' solution by the Italian Government. This tells us a lot about the nature of the Girifalcesi, who are characterized as warm hearted, maybe too warm hearted: Girifalco accepted the hospital when other towns in the region opposed and rejected it. The hospital was both a curse and a blessing for the town, given that it was the largest source of employment for the district.

It seems to me that the true Italians are those who emigrate. If I had any doubts about this fact, it was driven home to me in Milan when residents there described their city as the least Italian of all the cities in Italy, and the most European, reflecting the phenomenal changes which have transformed not only Milan but the whole of Italy in the last fifty years; a shift from Italianism to internationalism. The most accurate picture of what defined an Italian or how Italy was fifty years ago, a capsule of history if you like, may well be held in the minds of those who emigrated just after the Second World War and not so much by those who remained in Italy. This change in the essential character of the nation is also apparent in the dying out of dialects, which once gave Italy its variety and uniqueness. Growing up in Australia we spoke a Calabrian dialect which bore little resemblance to the principal language, an indication of just how isolated and individual regions of Italy were half a century ago. I expected to encounter this dialect on my return to Calabria and so it was a surprise to find most of the inhabitants speaking 'Italian'. In fact, legislation has been passed, making the Florentine dialect the accepted universal language in Italy, thus ensuring or enforcing the demise of the individual dialects and with them the regional customs.

Over the years I have been asked many times whether I consider myself Italian or Australian. My problem answering this question in the past would leave me puzzled about who I am, until I realized that the confusion lay in the question, which implies selecting one nationality to the exclusion of the other. If there is one thing that the trip back to Italy has taught me, it is this: I am both.

But the last word on race, nationality and other countries should really go to the Viggianesi. The town of Viggiano in southern Italy is renowned for its itinerant musicians who have travelled the world and hence the opening line of a poem which originated there, begins: "...*Son Viggianese; Tutta la terra è il mio paese*: (I am Viggianese; all the world is my country)". □



View of the township of Girifalco looking towards the former Psychiatric Hospital, which is visible in the background, c1998. (photo: C. Iozzi)



Aerial view of Fitzroy and Collingwood, showing Smith Street (with cable tram), Johnston Street (top right corner) and Westgarth Street (bottom left corner), c1940.