

# family history

## TRUE STORY OF A GIRL: LINDA POLESEL (née Cengarle)

by Linda Polese

Translated by her son John

I was born in 1916 in Passariano, near the town of Codroipo in Friuli in northern Italy, at the time of the Great War. When I was a baby, we were forced to leave our home and flee to Florence as refugees for some months. We then returned to Passariano.

My parents, Carlo Cengarle and Emma Schiava, owned a small tavern and sold groceries. My brother Bruno and I were the youngest of 11 children— 6 girls and 5 boys. The older sisters looked after us. They were hard years. On Saturday nights, we would play *tombola* [bingo] around the hearth. We enjoyed it greatly.

I started school at the age of 6, doing three years at Passariano with my teacher Maria Rotaris. Then we left our village and went to live in nearby Codroipo, where I completed my 6 years of primary schooling.

My father did not have much work. I had a number of older siblings who were married. So at 10 years of age I was sent to Romans di Varmo to live with my oldest sister Nicolina and with my brother Sante who had taken over the tavern in Passariano. My mother would say, 'At least that way, Linda, you will get something to eat'.

Linda Cengarle  
with her daughter  
Fiorella. 1947.



As I grew up, I became tired of moving and I wanted to earn some money. So I decided to go to the nearby silk factory to ask for work. The manager, Mr Toniolo, looked me up and down because I was small and skinny and I was only 12 years old. He said nothing but the next day he sent his assistant to tell me I could start work. I was unbelievably happy. I had to wear high heels

to reach the workbench. I would run and slide along the floor keeping the weavers supplied with yarns. The manager said I was small but fast.

I would bring home 35 lire each fortnight, and my father was very happy because my sister Tina also worked in the silk factory and earned the same amount. It would all have been well, but there wasn't enough work to keep us going all year. We would get unemployment benefits for the first three months but then we had to look after ourselves. My father and mother did not receive any benefits or pension. So I would help out a local woman by looking after her children and helping around the house—not for pay, but for food. When I was 17 my sister Clelia, who was working as a maid in the southern city of Bari, asked me to join her to work on a large country estate. The family of a Marquis lived in the upstairs of the mansion and the servants lived below. There I learned to become a maid. I looked after the children of the Marchioness, while my sister worked as a cook.

After a year or so, I returned to Codroipo to work in the silk factory. When I was 19, I met a young soldier called Fiore whom I loved and with whom I became pregnant. I cried endlessly, I was devastated and did not know how to tell my mother and father. But Fiore came to my house one night and told them everything, stating that he had been ordered to leave for the Russian front in two days. He said I could go to live with his parents in Borgo Sabatino in Latina, a town 70 kilometres from Rome. We went immediately to the parish priest to arrange for our marriage. But luck was not on our side as Fiore's superior would not grant him permission to delay his departure for Russia. A few days later I left by train for Borgo Sabatino. Fiore sent me a letter asking me to pray that he might get leave for our marriage.

In April of 1943, I gave birth to a baby girl. Fiore's mother asked me to call her after her father, so I named her Fiorella.

A few months after the birth of our little girl, two officials came to our house to bring us the bad news that Fiore was missing in action in Russia. After some time he was declared dead, although this could only be confirmed after many years when we were finally given the location of Fiore's grave in Russia. Fiore's father was devastated. His other son had just returned from Russia where he had sustained horrific injuries resulting in the complete paralysis of the left side of his body.

Fiore's family was made up of good, honest people with hearts of gold. They had 11 children, 8 girls and 3 boys. Just before the war I had taken Fiore's last letter to the municipal offices in Latina. But because all the Council's records and archives had been destroyed during the fighting, I could not give Fiorella her father's surname. Fiore's parents wanted to adopt her but I did not want to lose my daughter.

I remember, not long after her birth, the Germans invaded. These soldiers were very malnourished and a young German would often come to ask Fiore's mother for food. She always gave him something. Later, the Americans arrived and there was a lot of fighting and we were in grave danger.

The American headquarters was near our town so they decided to evacuate us by boat to a town near Salerno. The Americans treated us very well, and gave us clothes and food and some money. As I had the little baby, they would give me a little more. We stayed in Salerno as refugees for a few months and then returned to Borgo Sabatino. We were pleased to be home and find our house still standing, although many others had been completely destroyed.

The more time passed, the more I felt lonely and understood I could not stay with them forever as I was not married. After speaking to my elderly parents in Friuli, I decided to go to live with them. I went back to work in the silk factory. I had lost a huge amount of weight because I had contracted malaria in Latina and was still coming down with bad fevers quite often. Fortunately, Doctor Ballico (God bless him!) managed to obtain from Venice a medicine which helped me a great deal.

After the war, I worked for two more years in the silk factory. One day I received a letter from my sisters, who had emigrated to Australia, telling me there was an honest and hard-working man who wanted to marry me if I would go and live there. He was aware of the fact that I had a little girl and did not see it as an impediment to our marriage. So I decided to join him in Australia.

It was 1947. It was very difficult to find a berth on a ship to Australia. I was anxiously waiting to hear confirmation of my travel arrangements from James Cook travel company when one day I was told that there was a ship leaving the next day from Genoa. I left with my daughter and a suitcase for Milan. There I met up with my

brother-in-law who the next day accompanied me by train to Genoa. At the port there were long queues. As the ship — a small merchant vessel — was about to leave, a porter helped us on. On board we met two women of Greek background, who disembarked in Bombay. There was a long row of cabins. My daughter and I were located in a cabin next to the one with the Greek women. However, as there was no key to our door, I preferred to sleep with them on a mattress on the floor.

When we arrived in Egypt, we were placed in the care of a very kind English couple who accompanied us by train to Alexandria, where we were met by a representative of the James Cook travel company. He took us to the Hotel Astoria, an English hotel, where we stayed for a month. Each day we would go to the travel agent to ask when we were leaving, but in 1947 there were very few ships available, so we had to be patient and wait.

Finally, we were told we were leaving for Australia but instead sailed to Singapore, where we stayed in another hotel for 20 days. At last we left for Australia. We arrived in Sydney, where we were greeted by my sister Clelia and her family.



Young Fiorella with fellow passengers and crew on board the ship that brought her and her mother Linda from Egypt to Singapore, 1947.

We travelled to Melbourne with them, where I met Francesco [Frank] Polesel, the man they had written about. He was very kind and handsome. The next day I learned that he had been married before and was awaiting a divorce. This provided me with a big problem to resolve.

All the same, the sun began to shine for me. He helped me a lot and sent Fiorella to St George's school in Carlton and later to the nuns at the Academy of Mary Immaculate. In the meantime, we got married in a registry office because we couldn't marry in a church. We lived at 54 Carlton Street, Carlton until 1959 when we moved to East Kew.

Then we decided to have a child. Unfortunately, we lost our baby, Francesco, a few days after his birth. The doctor encouraged us to try again. And so a year later John was born—I chose this name because a book I was reading said that John means a gift from God, and it was easy for me to pronounce in English! John is now working at the University of Melbourne and is married to an Irish girl. They have a son called Stephen.

My daughter Fiorella and her husband Tom have three children, Lisa, Belinda and Robert who are all university educated. My husband died 6 years ago and now I'm alone. My children come and see me often and I am happy—I ask for nothing and do not want riches. I only want my family to get on well and be happy.

Now I find myself embarrassed sometimes because I never tried to learn English, partly because I never worked in Australia. At home we always spoke Italian (or Friulano or Veneto) and so I speak no English. The years in Australia have flown—happy years with my family. I would go to the Fogolar Furlan Club on Saturdays with my husband, my sister and my brother and his wife. We played bingo and my husband would play cards.

My husband, Frank, was good and just. He had his own business, the Exhibition Bakery, in partnership with Carmelo and Elio Migliorini. In my first years in Australia I would help him make the dough. We saw many parts of Australia together and I can say that this country is very beautiful. Over the years we visited Italy twice, once with our daughter and once with our son, to see all the relatives—including my daughter's father's family who welcomed us most generously.

In the last few years all my brothers and sisters have died. Now I'm the last one.

#### Linda's siblings

Nicolina, b.1896, married to Bruno Benvenuti. Migrated to Australia in the 1920s

Sante, b.1897, married to Carmela

Giovanni, b.1899, married to Catalina. Migrated to Argentina early 1930s

Maria, b.1900, married to Maurizio Molinari. Migrated to Argentina early 1930s

Flaminio, b.1902, married to Este

Silvia, b.1908, married to Gino Baù

Clelia, b.1910, married to Antonio De Apollonia. Migrated to Australia early 1940 1940

Fausto, b.1912, married to Alice

Argentina, b.1915, married to Virginio Turco. Migrated to Australia in 1949

Bruno, b.1921, married to Carmen. Migrated to Australia in 1948

Reunion of the extended Cengarle family at the Fogolar Furlan Club, Melbourne, mid 1980s.

