

CARLTON REMEMBERED

TEXT OF AN ADDRESS TO THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY by

SIR JAMES GOBBO

SUNDAY AUGUST 25, 1990

This is the first of a series of meetings to stimulate discussion and interest in an exhibition being prepared for next year as a joint project of the State Museum, the Jewish Museum and our own Italian Historical Society. It will tell the story of the Italians and Jews of Carlton. It will thereby tell an important part of the story of that suburb which has been one of the more interesting suburbs of any city in Australia. It holds something special over other suburbs and it is important to try and convey that. What has brought that about? I would like to think that those two groups made a special contribution to giving Carlton its special character.

I propose to reminisce with you on a few things that made Carlton special for me. I suppose I ought to start at the beginning and say that I was born in Carlton in 1931, in the Women's Hospital. We used to live down in Newry Street, North Carlton, my parents having migrated to Australia in 1927. I cannot recall anything of that particular event I assure you. My mother told me of one embarrassment. There were very strict rules about visiting at the Women's Hospital in those days, and my father could never get used to that. In Italy the hospital system operated entirely differently. The relatives were at the bedside or nearby most of the time. Indeed they even brought food in and they



Regina Gobbo and son Flavio, Antonio Gobbo second on right, and friends at their Newry Street home in 1928.

were expected to help with the care of the patient. My father was kept at bay and did not like it one little bit. He used to stand in Grattan Street and call out to my mother in Italian. He also apparently brought dishes of ravioli and pasta to make sure my mother - and I - did not suffer from undernourishment.

We survived that and then returned to Italy where I was brought up as a child. We came back here in 1938, so at this point I was truly a migrant. I did not speak any English and I went to school initially at St. George's in Carlton. We then went to North Melbourne where my parents conducted a restaurant with the unlikely name of "The St. Kilda Grill Room". Why anybody would have a restaurant in North Melbourne called "The St. Kilda Grill Room" I never have been able to discover. In later years a new owner called it "L'Alouette". We returned to live in Carlton at 501 Drummond Street in 1947. It was a house which had been modernized by a man called Mardegan. Mardegan and Negri were concrete contractors. The house had beautiful internal polished stucco, which now costs the earth to have done with a special paint finish. It had a long rear garden with grape vines and then a shrine at the end, where there was a Madonna with a light that came on special occasions. All of that was pulled down when the Housing Commission put up those dreadful concrete flats. This house and its neighbours could never, on any view have been regarded as a slum but, because there were a few old houses in the block, the Commission pulled everything down except the nearby hotel. One of the buildings that fell was the Jewish Synagogue and I came into that story much later because, when I was a barrister, one of my specialties was appearing in cases that deal with compensation for acquisition of property - I actually appeared for the Jewish Synagogue in their claim for compensation in 1968. By then the Synagogue had a congregation of only some six persons, all of whom lived in Caulfield and Balwyn. We were awarded \$88,000.

Between 1947 and 1965, save for four years overseas, I lived in Carlton or North Carlton. I saw an enormous transformation during that time. In 1947 Carlton had not one Italian restaurant or Italian coffee shop. Italians conducted one grocery store and a couple of fruit shops. We find that hard to believe. But in the space of approximately ten years the Italian character of Carlton was firmly created.

One of the important things about Carlton is that in the immediate post-war era there were many

terrace houses whose owners took in lodgers who either slept in sleep-outs or in the house. It was a very common practice and Carlton was a kind of dormitory for the early post-war migrant waves. What we tend to forget is that most of the early migrants who came to this country, especially from Italy, came as males on their own as a first step, and then brought their wives and family afterwards. These men had a very lonely time of it. They were living in very spartan accommodation. These old Victorian terraces lent themselves admirably to that sort of thing. There would be a kind of sleep-out affair part of which was a canvas awning. When the Jewish families and the Italian families moved out, whether to St. Kilda or Caulfield or to Bulleen or Doncaster and were replaced by the academics and the trendy set, all of that very useful and cheap accommodation disappeared. For many years we had a lodger at 501 Drummond Street. This man now owns one of Melbourne's best bakeries where beautiful "pasta dura" bread is made. The bread is baked slowly and, as a result, it is well cooked and has real flavour.

The whole story of the single men of Carlton is important. It leads into the story of the espresso bars and the important role they played - a sort of home-away-from-home for a lot of male Italian migrant men. There was a downside too. At one point, some of the espresso bars were places which were agencies for brothels, not to put too fine a point on it. It is one of the stories that could perhaps be pursued as part of the work done for this exhibition.



Mrs. Santospirito with immigrants at Bonegilla.

Until 1969 there was no CO.AS.IT. The welfare services for the Italian community were really provided by the few Italian Chaplains in the Catholic Church and, in particular, by a committee called the Archbishops' Committee For Italian Relief, the chairperson of which was a Mrs. Santospirito. She lived at 79 Bouverie Street, Carlton opposite the Carlton Brewery. Mrs. Santospirito's "office" was in the back of the house. There would often be a queue of people down the corridor, out into the street, and even sometimes around the corner into Queensberry Street. In 1951 there were large numbers of Italians coming here as migrants. They were coming at the rate of about 20,000 a year and then there was a recession, the kind we have now. At that time a number of them were up at Bonegilla Camp and there were riots there because they could not find jobs. Our society did not tolerate unemployment in those days. I have had made available to me a trunk full of papers belonging to Mrs. Santospirito. This is a great resource because it contains much of her records of her charitable work. For example, she ran an ad hoc employment agency. She found out what

jobs were available and helped place Italians in them. She was a great note-keeper so she would have notes such as : "Miss O'Neill, 63 Saunders Street, West Coburg, to repair hearth". Directions would follow as to how to get there. She would then translate all this for the Italian who wanted the job and off he would go. Her papers provide a remarkable store-house. Mrs. Santospirito would even put ads. in the paper. In the *Argus* of February 1953 this appears: "Men, Italians, available, all kinds of work, also skilled tradesmen, ring or write 79 Bouverie Street, Carlton". A typical reply is this:

"Dear Sir, Noticing your ad in the *Argus* I was wondering if you had an Italian who could do fern cutting, scrub cutting. I have a 500 acre property at Tooradin North, 5 miles from Tooradin. It has a house on it and I really want a man, part-time, that I could give him ten acres or so to grow potatoes for nothing and he could keep up to four cows if he wanted to. If you think anything of this let me know at once. There is a school in the middle of the property. Awaiting your reply, H.C. Vale, 9th February 1953".



Mrs Santospirito (left) and Mrs Cincotta (Sinelli) receiving an award from the Italian Consul-General in the presence of Archbishop Mannix in 1958.

It's interesting that a system of finding jobs in an ad hoc way was carried out by this unusual lady. She kept good records and the Society has the carbon copies of much of what she wrote. There are literally hundreds of letters and each tells a story. I suspect that, if we could do it in a way that did not offend their privacy, some of these people would love to be able to come back and make a public tribute to the work that this woman did, all of which was completely unpaid and went on for years.

In 1944 there was the famous "Pyjama Girl" murder trial. The Pyjama Girl murder, for those who do not remember, was about a dead woman who was found in her pyjamas lying under a culvert in Albury in 1938. Her face was partly burnt. An attempt had been made to burn her body but it had not succeeded. It had been wrapped in a blanket. The body was preserved

in a formalin bath for at least six years. Then a great saga began to identify the woman. There was a parallel case of a missing heiress and it was essential to find the heiress in order to make a distribution of the fortune. So there were next of kin coming forward saying that the body was that of Sandra Morgan, the missing heiress, which would enable her money to be distributed. One thing that went wrong was that the police had an Albury dentist examine the fillings of the teeth but he got the description wrong and the description that was sent around actually came to the dentist who had done her teeth. He came forward and said he thought it looked like Linda Agostini whose teeth he had looked after. The police looked at his notes and what the Albury dentist had said, and sent him away. If they had listened to him they would have identified the woman immediately or within a few weeks.

16-12-47- PENTRIDGE
COBURG
VICTORIA

Dear Mrs. Santospirito,

When Father Modotti spoke to me of your activity on behalf of our Community he also added that you had offered to come and visit me. While grateful, I felt it was neither right nor fair to impose on you to such an extent. Prisons are necessary, but are not nice places to come to, even as visitor and I did not wish to be the cause of submitting you

For six years this saga went on, until 1944, when one Agostini was arrested. He had lived where the murder had occurred, namely 589 Swanston Street, Carlton. If you know Swanston Street, just before you get to the city, on the right there is a hotel on the corner, and there used to be three shops beside the hotel. The Agostinis lived above one of these shops and then two doors up was an Italian grocer from Naples called Castellano. Castellano was our next-door neighbour later on in North Melbourne, and Castellano always used to tell my father - as father told me later on - that Mr. Agostini had a very deep secret. In 1944 the great secret was found and he was charged with the murder of his wife. He confessed that he had had a quarrel with her in the bedroom and she had taunted him and placed him under great provocation. Part of his story was that it was an accident with a gun. There were, however, bruises on the body. He said these were caused by her body falling down the stairs as he was taking it away.

Now, what has all this got to do with Mrs Santospirito? Well, one of the nice letters that we have been given is a letter written by him. He was convicted of manslaughter, not murder, he ended up in Pentridge and he served three and a half years. Then he was deported to Italy. He was befriended by her during that time. He was a journalist and quite a sensitive sort of

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to wish you and family the greetings
for Xmas and New Year -

Sincerely yours

Toni Agostini

P.S. From Father Galante's last visit - June last -
I understood he would have called again -

Not having seen him since I am led to
believe he might have returned to Italy.

If you can send me a line of acknowledgment
for the present - I shall be more at
ease the coming weeks - But as this letter

is being sent to you not through the ordinary
channel - please don't mention it -

Final page of Agostini's letter.

person and this is the first part of the original letter that he wrote to Mrs. Santospirito dated 16th December 1947 from Pentridge:

"Dear Mrs. Santospirito, When Father spoke to me of your activity on behalf of our community, he also added that you had offered to come and visit me. While grateful, I feel that it was neither right nor fair to impose on you to such an extent. Prisons are necessary but are not nice places to come to, even as a visitor, and I did not wish to be the cause of submitting you to the humiliation of entering the gate of one. Father Modotti agreed with my view but wish I should remember you and wrote your name on the prayer book he has just given me so I shall always have it for the time when I might need you. That time has now come."

He asked for her help to prevent his deportation and she did write to Arthur Calwell, and then we have Arthur Calwell's original reply to her saying it could not be done. It is interesting to find a person of such sensitivity who could write in that way. He did not have an entirely unhappy time at Pentridge because he became the gaol librarian because of his journalistic skills.

Another area of work that Mrs Santospirito did was, of course, landing permits and the bringing out of people; but her friendship with Arthur Calwell was very important. That is a very interesting way



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

OFFICE OF THE
MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
CANBERRA, A.C.T.

(Written at Sydney)
21st February, 1948.

Dear Mrs. Santospirito,

I return herewith the letter sent to you by Mr. A. Agostini which you forwarded on to me for an expression of an opinion as to whether or not he is to be deported.

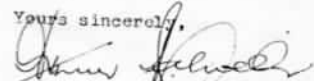
In July last, while I was absent abroad, the Acting Minister for Immigration, Senator Armstrong, approved of Mr. Agostini's deportation and, in the light of all the circumstances, I am afraid there is no possibility of that decision being reversed.

The necessary papers to effect the deportation were signed by Senator Armstrong about the same time as the decision was made that he must be sent back to Italy.

With kind regards from my wife and myself to yourself and all the family,

I remain,

Yours sincerely,


(ARTHUR A. CALWELL)
Minister for Immigration

Mrs. A. Santospirito,
79 Bouverie Street,
CARLTON, Vic.

Arthur Calwell's reply to Mrs Santospirito.

for Arthur Calwell was also a great friend of the Jewish Community. He was a strong proponent of Jewish and Italian migration to Australia. These things were not popular. Not only was it unpopular because Italians were seen as the aliens, but we tend to forget that even just before the war the attitude of some Australians towards Jewish migrants and Jewish refugees was very poor. I was just looking at an article that reports the *Bulletin* of 1938 describing with great suspicion the large number of Jewish refugees, and it contained the suggestion that Jews be sent to Tasmania which would be renamed Jewsmania. That sort of attitude and public opinion had to be turned around both in relation to Italians and in relation to the Jewish settlers who came here and Arthur Calwell was very much involved in that. I think that his humanity, which really grew out of his friendship with those two communities, was the launching pad for our

migration program because, without his conviction that these settlers were good Australia, we would never have had anything like the great open launching into migration. The attitude amongst a lot of his colleagues was very anti-migration, and very suspicious of bringing in numbers of people.

I think back to other matters of Carlton history and the growth of its cosmopolitan character which really started in the 1950s. I was at boarding school for some years and when I went to the university, we lived at 501 Drummond Street. I persuaded my parents, even though they were very reluctant about it all, that I would do better work at university if I could live in University College. My parents pointed out that they had bought this house right near the university so I could just go to lectures on foot and here I was going off to live in Newman College which was only 100 yards away.



James Gobbo with his parents at home in Drummond Street in December 1951 on the night of the announcement of his winning the Rhodes Scholarship.



Ero Milani and granddaughter Gladis at the University Cafe in 1960.

In my days at university, on coming down into Carlton there was nothing Italian available. There was Jimmy Watson's which has, of course, an Italian connection through the Virgonas. There was a Jewish restaurant - Cohen's - now Donnini's. There was a place we students called Nick the Greek's that served, unashamedly, unromantically Australian food - steak and eggs and food like that - nothing that could pass for Continental food and that was that, right up to about 1952 when I went to England to study.

By the time I came back in 1956 there was the beginning of it. We then had the University Espresso Bar and that marked a complete opening out with some Italian butcher shops and some Italian delicatessens. It took off from that time.

There was an Italian boot shop in Lygon Street - Fontana's - and he is still alive and living in Doncaster and we are going to interview him soon. Then there were some tailors - for example, Cavedon, who has a relation playing for

Carlton at the moment - and there were a number of other tailors who all had their shops in Lygon Street. We also had the Bowling Green Hotel which was a meeting place really for people from the Italian community, especially the Juventus Soccer Club crowd who used to have their reunions there.

I should have mentioned before that, St. George's had a hall which was used for a dance and, for a while, it was every week and then once a month. That was the place for young men to go and, under the sort of watchful eye, of the Parish Priest, Italians would allow their daughters to go there for a dance. Among the things that Mrs. Santospirito left is the note book that records the takings for each week for the hall in the early 1950s including the amounts raised, the amount paid for the band and so on. The attendances were usually 500 to 600 per week.

I hope that some of the flavour of Carlton, as I saw it, can be conveyed in the Exhibition next year and that we may find valuable material like that left by Mrs Santospirito.