

## AN ITALIAN IN THE AUSTRALIAN MILITANT LEFT 1927 - 1983 - Luigi Stellato

by G.L. Abiuso

Among the many individuals of Italian origin in the history of the Italian presence in the Australian Left, Luigi Stellato cannot be overlooked. Stellato's name is associated with two history-making events within the Italian community of Melbourne: he claims to be the first person to propose the name "Australian-Italian Anti-Fascist Movement",<sup>1</sup> which was accepted in preference to Mr. Matteo Cristofaro's opposing proposal of "Italian Democratic Movement"<sup>2</sup>, and he was elected to the fifteen member committee, together with such distinguished names as R.A. Shaw, Lecturer in Italian at the University of Sydney, Dr. Omero Schiassi, Professor A.R. Chisholm and Massimo Montagnana, at the First General Assembly of Italia Libera, held at Assembly Hall in Melbourne on 18 March 1943, an event that was attended by eight hundred people.

Luigi Stellato was born in Castro Libero, near the city of Cosenza, Calabria in 1897. He was soon to be involved in the turbulent years of land reform in Italy during the "Belle Epoque". It was during this period that peasant organisations such as the *Contadini*, *Mezzadri* and *Braccianti* (small farmers, crop sharers and rural labourers) coalesced all over Italy into a close network that became known as the *Leghe Contadine*.

This movement spread like wild-fire from the North to the South of Italy, and the Southern Federations of Peasants regained vigour and courage and started considerable strikes in Sicily and Calabria.

This milieu of politicisation of the peasants in Southern Italy is of great importance in the political education of the young Luigi Stellato, progeny of an age of revolution. As a child, he listened to his father Francesco Antonio's stories of injustices against the Calabrian peasants by the absentee land lord of the *Latifondi* (wealthy property owners).

Such was the mood of enlightenment at the time that many who had traditionally been opposed to the advancement of the least well-off in the rural society could no longer ignore the issues of justice and human rights. Of one story in particular, Luigi Stellato was fond to recall:

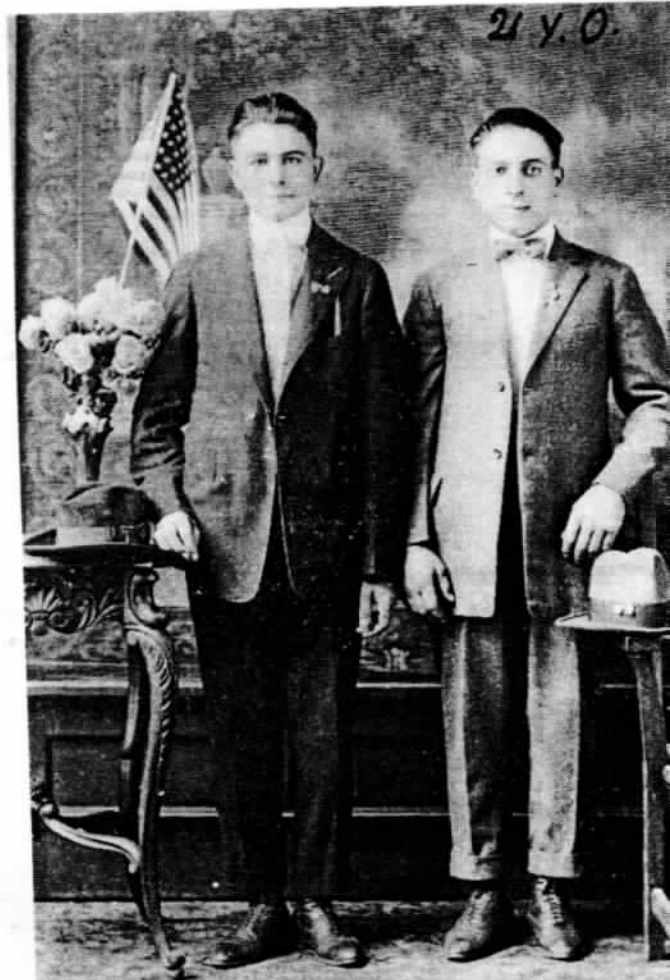
His father reported to his employer Don Francesco Ricciulli, a wealthy landowner of the Cosenza district, "Don Francesco, I am sorry to tell you, but the peasants of nearby estates are in agitation, however, ours haven't started yet! to which Don Francesco replied, 'These people are courageous, well done! It is time they wake up - they have

slept enough and it's time they start to reclaim their rights'.<sup>3</sup>

### In the United States - The Bummery Influence.

As a child, Stellato had learned from the experiences of the peasants' alienation from the land. As a young man, his politicisation was developed further by his experiences of labour alienation. The period of his life marked also his first experiences of life in another land.

One year before the start of WWI, Luigi Stellato was called to the USA by his elder brother, who was a foreman in a private railway company at Rogerspark near Chicago. He was to remain there for ten years.



HAMMOND, INDIANA U.S.  
with friend JOE RICHICHI 1918

Luigi Stellato with friend Joe Richichi in USA in 1918

Even though it is not clear exactly when Luigi Stellato came into contact with anarchist ideas, this long stay in the USA was of tremendous political importance to the young man. It is known that he was avidly reading L'Umanita<sup>4</sup>, the Italian daily of Enrico Malatesta, and this reading formed part of a pattern of intellectual pursuit that was to grow firstly on his return to Calabria in 1923 where he also cultivated friendships with leading Calabrian anarchists and then later in Australia where he became involved in political organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Although he was a young boy when he arrived in Chicago, the Italian Community was large and politically active; it could not have been long before he came into contact with socialist/anarchist thinking. The record demonstrates the vigour of the promulgation of democratic and revolutionary ideas amongst the Italians, for it was about this time that pamphlets such as La Parola Dei Socialisti (1908) began to circulate in Chicago and Detroit. Of this periodical, H.S. Nelli has noted that

while [La Parola Dei Socialisti] was small in total circulation, Socialist and Anarchist [Italian language] papers went from Chicago as far east as New York, Massachusetts and Vermont, and as far west as Iowa.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major causes supported by this press was the opposition of patriotic manifestations (that is, pro-Italian) by Italo-Americans during the Abyssinian Venture in the 1890's and the Libyan War of 1911-12. This exposure to anti-war activism was of great importance for Luigi Stellato's political education; later, during his period of activism in Australia, he was to repeat the same struggle in Melbourne against the Fascist aggressions against Abyssinia and Spain in the 1930s, and during WWII. One anarchist paper of Chicago, Il Nuovo Proletario (1918-21) was, perhaps more than any other periodical, the leading I.W.W. (International Workers of the World) mouthpiece, expounding the class struggle as seen by the Wobblies, as the I.W.W. was colloquially known. It was through papers such as this that, at the time of his arrival in 1913, echoes of the long and notoriously violent struggle by textile workers at Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, must have reached Stellato who was working as an unskilled labourer on a private railway line supplying materials to six brick yards.<sup>7</sup> As Ian Turner has detailed in his Sydney is Burning<sup>8</sup>, the I.W.W. chose to make propaganda where the unskilled migrant workers predominated. And it was in Chicago from 1908 to the end of WWI, where Stellato lived and toiled, that the reckless determination of the I.W.W. "Bummery" concentrated its American unionism.

Another piece of evidence, though of an indirect nature, of the influence of the "Bummery" movement in the early political development of Stellato was the passion he developed in the USA for writing songs, especially during periods of tremendous (usually

employment-related) stress, concerning issues of social justice. It should be noted that whilst the "Bummery" movement bore the official title of "Direct Actionists", they were popularly referred to by the former name because of their addiction to the famous Hobo Song "Hallelujah I'm a Bum", the lyrics of which, along with other 'rebel' tunes, they espoused as a folk manifesto of their political cause and identity. It was probably under this influence, therefore, that Luigi Stellato composed his first English song in Chicago, 1919, titled "A Voice of Peace". This interest in expressing his political views in song was to manifest itself regularly throughout his life: some years later, in 1928 in Seaton, Victoria, he even composed a proposed Australian National Anthem<sup>9</sup> while digging sugar beets for the Victorian Government-owned sugar mill in Maffra. Although inoffensively titled "Hymn of Australia"<sup>10</sup>, the social realism and the focus on human rights issues of the folk music popularised in Chicago by the "Bummery" movement seem to pervade the lyric with the result that the content of Stellato's Hymn contrasts sharply with the sweet and calm atmosphere engendered by the official national songs, such as the British "God Save the Queen" and the popular "Advance Australia Fair", he encountered upon migrating to the Antipodes. For example, in verse two, Stellato acknowledged the prior sovereignty to the indigenous Kuri peoples by referring to Australia as the "Land of the Aboriginal people," a view which, to this day widely contested, must have been very provocative in 1928. Moreover, although he had been in Australia for less than a year when he wrote the Hymn, the fifth verse shows quite clearly that Stellato had already succumbed to the Eureka Stockade legend of the birth of the revolutionary spirit in this country.

At Eureka the chains were torn  
And vision of freedom born  
Their spirit burst into thunder  
And democracy rose from them.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the anarchist influence which may have reached Stellato in Chicago, the young man was much shocked by the horrifying conditions of employment that men like him had to endure under the *Padrone* (the labour contractor) System of hiring workers. This infamous system of exploiting Italian migrants in Chicago during the first two decades of this century was so iniquitous that the USA government set a special board of enquiry, The Dillingham Commission<sup>12</sup>, to report on it. One of the most exploitative aspects of the *Padrone* system was the 'Bossatura', a fee paid by the labourer in order to obtain employment through the *padrone* who was contracted by certain companies to provide a steady supply of cheap, uncomplaining labour from the new migrant classes. The bossatura, never sanctioned by law but tolerated unofficially for years, was paid secretly in advance of commencing work; in addition to collecting this money, the *padrone* also strove to suppress the formation of trade unionism by keeping

the migrant worker in a state of abject fear and misery. The *padrone's* attitude was that "the beasts must not be given a rest. Otherwise they will step over me."<sup>13</sup>

The greatest iniquity of the *Padrone System* was that after paying the '*bossatura*' (often as high as fifteen dollars) the worker would only be given a couple of days paid employment before being sacked without explanation.<sup>14</sup> To gain further employment, he would have to forfeit another '*bossatura*'. Given Stellato's reminiscence<sup>15</sup> that the weekly pay packet on the railroad was \$2.00, it can only be concluded that the *bossatura* was in effect a form of institutionalised robbery.

In spite of the hardships perpetrated under the *Padrone System*, Stellato's spirit remained unbroken and eventually at about 19 years of age he found employment in Indiana as a mechanic's offsider. He finally rose to be relieving foreman. It was during this period, up until 1923, that he learnt by correspondence the trades of the barber and the watchmaker.

### Return to Italy in 1923

In 1922, at the age of 25, Luigi Stellato had started to meet with an American girl. As the fashion of the time dictated, he had to declare himself for official engagement, but before doing so, he requested permission from his girlfriend to return to Italy to visit his parents and make sure that he was doing the right thing before committing himself.<sup>16</sup>



As a soldier in the Italian Army in 1922



With his fiancée Elisabetta Passarelli and his brother Eugenio in 1923.

On arriving in Italy he was forced to do his National Service (*Servizio di Leva*). Once in the army, he was assigned to Cremona nella Caserma Manfredini, heavy artillery, in time obtaining the rank of corporal.

During his national service, the USA had closed its doors to immigration because of an economic recession, and Stellato was trapped in his little village of Castro Libero with little to do except watch his father being persecuted by the Fascists for his past beliefs and utterances. Barred from re-entering the USA, the relationship with his American girlfriend lapsed naturally. However, Stellato was extremely lucky to meet a most beautiful woman, Elisabetta Passarelli, with whom he became engaged and then married eventually in 1923.

It was during this forced stay in Calabria that Luigi Stellato avidly began to read *L'Umanita'*, the Italian anarchist paper; among its correspondents, he noted, were some writing from as far abroad as Australia. Their articles re-awakened within him a long-standing love for wide open spaces and before long he wrote to them seeking assistance to emigrate. By the time he left in October 1927, he had joined the clandestine anti-fascist group which met with his father, Francesco Antonio, and his wife Elisabetta had born him two daughters, Maria and Giuditta.

The lengthy delay between his first contact with the

Australian anarchists and his eventual emigration was attributable largely to the difficulties he faced in obtaining a passport from the Fascist government. After years of trying through legitimate channels, Stellato was only able to achieve this through the payment of secret commissions to middle-men and venal officials; in particular, he gave expensive gifts of the value of around 2000 Lira to the brother of the Cosenza Podesta'. Having gained his passport, the final hurdle was to find a suitable sponsor in Australia. This was to be the Italo-Australian anarchist Guerrino Dalla Costa.

### The Australian Militancy from 1927

The Italian community of Australia during the 1920s had within its ranks a very small organised Anarchist group. And it was to this group that Stellato immediately felt himself drawn to. There is no evidence that he ever formally joined the Anarchist group, but the fact that he was an anti-fascist, had been sponsored to come here by an anarchist and spoke and wrote fluent English (a legacy of his years in the USA) must have made an impression on his new anti-fascist contemporaries.

In his own way, Stellato must have appeared a striking personality to the small and very provincial Italian community of Melbourne. First of all, he was a strikingly good-looking man, also he was not typical of the left-wing Italian intellectual who had migrated earlier, such as Dr. Quinto Ercole<sup>17</sup>, Dr. Emilio De Marco, Giuseppe Prampolini and a contemporary of Stellato's, Dr. Omero Schiassi.<sup>18</sup> The difference between the thirty year old Stellato and these men lay in the fact that they had all come from well-to-do families and had arrived in Australia with university degrees; although they may never have mastered English as well as Stellato, they were well spoken in Italian, were experienced at addressing meetings and had written articles and pamphlets.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Luigi Stellato had finished his formal schooling at the Terza Elementare (third grade) level - albeit with an average mark of seven-out-of-ten in academic pursuits and with ten-out-of-ten for behaviour.<sup>20</sup> So, in spite of his natural intelligence and diligent pursuit of self-education, one must assume that his ability to conceptualise in his mother-tongue must have been limited, especially when it is taken into consideration also that the important formative years from the age of 16 to 25 were spent in the USA labouring by day and learning trades by correspondence at night.

Stellato falls more closely into the stature of the self-made thinker, such as Isidoro Bertazzon and Francesco Carmagnola<sup>21</sup> with the difference that

these two anarchist leaders had done all their political education in Italy and were politically mature by the time they arrived in Australia in 1922, five years prior to the arrival of Stellato. They were leaders of great talent, able to write in Italian with such proficiency that they founded and edited three Italian anarchist papers, Il Risveglio (1927), La Riscossa (1928), and L'Avanguardia (1930), and were charismatic speakers who could win over large audiences as Frank Carmagnola did in the May Day of 1931 when he incited a 7000 strong crowd on the Yarra banks to shout "death to Mussolini".<sup>22</sup>

Luigi Stellato, by his own admission, inclined towards pantheism:

"From the very dawning of my mouth I was filled with humanitarian thoughts and often I would rescue from the water drowning ants and other insects".<sup>23</sup>

He could never incite Italian migrants to rebel against the Australian Government, let alone incite people to kill. In fact, in his interview Stellato emphatically declares that he never joined any Italian political party and when, in his early 30's, he was asked to join the CPA, he declared<sup>24</sup>

"We are in a foreign country. If they want to change the present government, it's their business, it is not our duty to do so; if the Australians want to change it, we can only help them".

Like most Italians of the 1920's, Stellato went to work in the countryside and in 1928 he modestly became leader of the Calabrian community around Maffra, Victoria. One of his most notable achievements at this time was the securing for a group of Italian workers seven months back-pay.<sup>25</sup> It was also around this time that he met up with Francesco Carmagnola and Isidoro Bertazzon and started to co-operate with them in their anti-fascist activities. He was given two specific tasks: to receive the Italian socialist paper L'Avanti from France under the name "L. Nemo" (the surname translates literally as 'omen') from which articles were copied for the Australian anarchist paper La Riscossa; the second, more demanding, task was to proof-read La Riscossa at the Industrial Printing Office near the Victorian Trades Hall and then collect the paper and bulk-post it to Francesco Carmagnola in Ingham, North Queensland. These were in themselves two small tasks, but Stellato recalled in the Genovese interview that if he had been discovered by the Federal Police he would have risked a rejection of an entry visa for his wife Elizabeth and their two young daughters, Maria and Giuditta, who eventually joined him in 1931.

With his wife and two daughters in Australia, Stellato became settled in Melbourne, having, in 1930,

opened his own business, Louis Stellato Wholesale Fruit, Vegetable and Produce Merchant, General Commission Agent, located at vegetable stand 37-39 at the Victoria Market in Melbourne. With this new responsibility, Stellato settled to a more stable life, however he still made his house and office available to the cause of anti-fascism.



*Elisabetta, wife of Luigi Stellato, with daughters Maria and Giuditta in Cosenza in 1928*

It is claimed by Stellato that he was the originator of "Gruppo Italiano Contro La Guerra" (literally, 'Italian Group Against War') and that he was the one to introduce Matteo Cristofaro to Australian politics.<sup>26</sup> The two had met working in the countryside in the late 1920s picking sweet corn, and when Stellato was asked to join the CPA he suggested that Cristofaro join in his place as he had a family, a business to look after and would not have the time for active politics within the frame-work of an established party. Eventually, Matteo Cristofaro was to become the Communist leader of the Italian community.

The Italian Group Against War was founded in 1934 with a management committee of six people. They were Giovanni Corso, President, Matteo Cristofaro, Secretary, Angelo Coladotti, Ottavio Brida, Boris Franceschini and Luigi Stellato.<sup>27</sup> To create such an

organisation in 1934 at the time when Fascism seemed the most stable political regime to Italian migrants here was no mean feat. This group arose like a phoenix from the ashes of the irreparably split and inefficient Matteotti Club when it was thought that the anti-fascist movement in Australia was as dead as the proverbial Dodo. In fact, at the time of the Italian Group Against War's conception, the few hundred anarchist followers of the Matteotti Club were doing little else other than continuously fighting amongst themselves as to which of the two anarchist leaders, Isidor Bertazzon or Francesco Carmagnola, should be wearing the true mantle of the anarchist prophet.

Francesco Carmagnola's group aligned around La Riscossa, while Isidor Bertazzon's followers mouthpiece was L'Avanguardia Libertaria. By 1930, in the first issue of Bertazzon's paper, one can feel the sense of abject despair surrounding the anarchist leaders. The unsigned editorial, Ai Compagni (To the Comrades), reflected:

(our newspaper) is a brotherly tie among the scattered comrades in this vast country; a warning to the winners of the moment; an incitement to the lazy and the slumberers; a serene affirmation and an unshakeable faith which inspires us; and a newspaper which brings among the disbanded proletarian cells, lost in the harsh adversity of their exile....<sup>28</sup>

It was in this enveloping atmosphere of doom that leaders of the calibre of Stellato came to prominence and were able to keep the torch alight. There is ample evidence that, between 1931 and 1934, Stellato, with his youthful energy, financial success, his knowledge of English and his profound faith in human justice, played a decisive role in building up the anti-Fascist movement in the Italian community. Indeed, as Giancarlo Cresciani points out, Matteo Cristofaro, the up-and-coming Communist leader of the time, was brought into the anti-Fascist circle by Stellato.<sup>29</sup> Stellato himself went further, claiming that he not only did this, but also discovered Cristofaro, encouraged him to take up politics in Australia and remained his mentor for many years.<sup>30</sup>

The immediate successes of the rejuvenated anti-Fascist movement are well known,<sup>31</sup> and for Stellato they came at a time when he was burdened by pressing business and financial problems. For it was at this time (1930) that he established his Victoria Market business and financed the move to Australia for his wife and two daughters (1931). Given these commitments, he still participated strongly in that small band of 'anti-Fascist Angels' and was heavily involved in the rallying of hundreds of Italians in the mass demonstration of 1934 when 15,000 protested on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne.<sup>32</sup> On a more personal level, the claustrophobic atmosphere within the close-knit Italian community of Melbourne was almost unbearable for Stellato who at the age of

16 has escaped the small town of Castro Libero for Chicago in a quest to find his own space.<sup>33</sup>

Although, by the end of the 1920's, there were about 30,000 Italians scattered all over the Australian continent, with large groups in provincial towns<sup>34</sup>, the anti-Fascist grouping itself did not number more than 50 people<sup>35</sup>, and with the suicidal splitting of the Anarchist group, an atmosphere of suspicion must have existed among its members. For a businessman like Stellato, belonging to this restrictive circle required much courage and faith, for he was putting at risk his own financial interests within the larger Italian community, the majority of which supported Fascist Rome's policies. In spite of these disincentives, he persisted with his struggle and by 1938 he was once again in the leading group working with Omero Schiassi and F.A.C. Cahill on a specific socio-political program for the anti-Fascist Casa d'Italia in Carlton.

It should be noted that the problems Stellato faced in his endeavours to maintain his activism under tremendous financial and social pressures were not particular to himself. Life for all migrants in a new country is usually difficult even in prosperous economic circumstances. For the Italians, who were the 'new Australians' of the 1930s, adaptation to the new environment had to take place under what are generally recognised as the harshest socio-economic conditions Australia has ever had to suffer, the period that is still referred to as the Great Depression. Glimpses of the climate of desperation, loneliness and helplessness for the Melbourne Italian community can be obtained from reading the biographies of some Italo-Australian women in the 1930's. Angela Signor recalls of those times:

During the Depression of the early '30's there was no work for Australians, let alone 'Dagoes'. Not only were they cut off because of language difficulties; ...Dad would sit on the bed in the room we had rented with his head in his hands, bowed with worry...<sup>36</sup>

Maria Paoloni recalls of her Sydney experience in the '30's that her (and her family's) only social encounters were with relatives and Italian friends, although on most Sundays she would go to the Domain:

sitting on the grass and listening attentively to the soapbox speakers lecturing the crowd on religion, politics and racial hatred. ...I listened to get an ear for the language and to pick up some words...

Of course, this is a picture of the poorer Italians. Their hand-to-mouth existence made it difficult for the anti-Fascist group to make inroads among these people. Most of the established Italians had been won over by the Fascist propaganda, making them staunch enemies of the anti-Fascists. This support for

the Fascists among the Italians of Melbourne can be gauged from the memoirs of Amelia Tilbury in which she recalls Fascist meetings where collections for wedding rings were held for the campaign for gold for 'La Patria', the homeland, from thousands of Italian immigrants.<sup>37</sup>

Despite this hostile environment, Stellato never seemed to lose faith in the course of justice, and participated in three more anti-Fascist campaigns in which his contribution was second-to-none: the anti-Fascist demonstration at the Melbourne Port Pier against the visiting Italian cruiser Raimondo Montecuccoli, which saw more than 300 Italians demonstrating and burning an effigy of Mussolini<sup>38</sup> in the midst of a demonstrating crowd of 12,000<sup>39</sup>; the organisation of the relief operation for the Italian War Victims; and the creation of the Italian newspaper Il Risveglio in 1944 which printed 4000 copies fortnightly for 12 years.

With the collapse of the Axis powers in 1945, the *raison d'être* for 20 years of anti-Fascist militancy became more of an academic interest. His last appearance in an organised left-wing Italian group was his joining of the Italian Socialist Party Migrants' Organisation, the I.F. Santi, in 1979 at the age of 82.<sup>40</sup>



Luigi Stellato in Cosenza in 1952

1. Interview with Luigi Stellato by P. Genovese, 1980: Recordings held by the Italian Historical Society, Co.As.It.
2. Cresciani, G.: Fascism, Anti-fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945, ANU Press, 1980, p.204.
3. Genovese, P.: op. cit.
4. Genovese, P.: ibid
5. Nelli, H.S.: Italians in Chicago, NY 1970, p.158
6. Nelli, H.S.: op. cit.
7. Genovese, P., ibid
8. Turner, I.: Sydney is Burning, Adelaide 1967, p.9
9. Genovese, P., op. cit.
10. Stellato papers with the author
11. Stellato papers with the the author
12. Nelli, H.S., op. cit.
13. Nelli, H.S., ibid, p.61
14. H.S. Nelli, op. cit.
15. Genovese, P., p. cit.
16. Genovese, P., ibid
17. Bentivoglio, M. et al: Quinto Ercole, Italy 1984
18. Pascoe, R.: Bongiorno Australia, Melbourne 1987
19. Cresciani, G.: op. cit. Chapter on Omero Schiassi
20. Interview with Elizabeth and Giuditta Stellato with the author 7/5/91. Also Stellato papers with the author, on which he claims that his official schooling did not last more than fourteen months.
21. Cresciani, G.: "The Proletarian Migrants, Fascism and Italian Anarchists in Australia", Australian Quarterly, Vol. 51 No. 1 1/3/79.
22. Cresciani G.: ibid
23. Stellato papers with the author.
24. Genovese, P., op. cit.
25. Genovese P., ibid
26. Genovese P., op. cit.
27. Cresciani, G.: Fascism and Anti-Fascism
28. L'Avanguardia Libertaria, Anno 1, No.1 14 June 1930.
29. Cresciani G., op. cit., p.20.
30. Genovese, P., op. cit.
31. Cresciani, G., op. cit.
32. How the Kisch-Griffin ban was smashed (anonymous pamphlet) and Cresciani G., op. cit.
33. Genovese, P., op. cit.
34. Espatriati e Rimpatriati - anni 1876-1973. Istituto Centrale di Statistica. Bollettino Mensile di Statistica 01/01/1975, Appendice II.
35. Cresciani puts this number at 35 (op.cit, p.127). Of course, he is speaking of the hard-core membership.
36. Kahan-Guidi, Anna Maria, with Weiss Elisabeth: Forza e Coraggio (Give me Strength), N.S.W. 1989, page.....
37. Triaca, Maria: Amelia - A Long Journey, Melbourne 1985.
38. The Truth, Saturday, 19 February 1938.
39. Cresciani, G.: "Fascism and Italian Anarchists in Australia", Australian Quarterly, March 1979.
40. Interview with Umberto Garotti, former President of the Australian Section of the I.F. Santi - 17 May 1991. With the author.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Joe Abiuso has recently commenced research for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Western Institute, Victoria University of Technology. His study is on the Italian Left in Australia. In order to assist this research I ask our readers who have letters, diaries, documents, pamphlets, newspapers and the records of relevant organisations, to contact the Society, so that these records may be preserved for posterity, and made available for this important research.



*Elisabetta and Luigi Stellato in 1979*