

MY MOTHER: "LA MAMMA DEGLI ITALIANI"
by
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Mrs Santospirito and Members of the Archbishop's Committee for Italian Relief

My mother was first given the title of "La Mamma degli Italiani" in a newspaper article by an Italian and an American journalist who came to Australia to assess the assimilation of the Italian immigrants in this country. Frances Hagelthorn quoted the title in her article "Profile: La Mamma degli Italiani", *Advocate*, 28 September, 1967, page 25.

She also quoted from the article which described my Mother, Mrs Santospirito, as "one of the able assistants in engendering better Italian-Australian relationships and assisting assimilation". In the same article there is a tribute from Frank Galbally: "a lovely mother of a lovely family, Mrs. Santospirito was always ready and willing to help those who se need she knew and understood. She has stood well the test of true Christianity".

The Italian Government awarded her "La Stella della Solidarita" in recognition of her many years of welfare work in the Italian

Community. The award was presented to her by the Italian Consul Marchese Serafini at "Raheen", the residence of Archbishop Daniel Mannix.

My mother would say that she could not have done the work without the support and encouragement of Archbishop Daniel Mannix whose friendship she valued so much.

Her welfare work for the Italian community stemmed a long way back from the wonderful example of her own mother. Her parents Bartolo and Bartolina Virgona were Italian immigrants themselves and emigrated from the Eolian Islands, arriving in Australia in 1890. Her father was a fruiterer, as were many other Eolians. They settled first in Melbourne and later in Ballarat where my mother was born on 4 April, 1896.

They were a very religious, warm and sociable family and kept in close contact

with the small Italian community. My grandmother was a very compassionate, gracious and astute lady, and she helped many an Italian family to settle into the different environment in Australia. Soon after my mother was born, the family returned to Melbourne as Ballarat did not prove as rewarding as they thought, and they had lost a lot of money. There were four children, a son, Vincent, and three girls, Maria (Mary), Angelina, my mother, and Rosa who died at the age of 16 from diabetes. The girls went to school at the Catholic Ladies College close to Smith Street, Fitzroy, where they lived. The house is still in the family. My mother Lena proved a keen and aspiring student and should probably have gone on to University, but unfortunately she did not get the encouragement that she gave to her own children. After leaving school she went to work at the Central Telephone Exchange, and her salary helped to pay off their debts, as their father died at an early age.

The two daughters, like their mother, continued her welfare work assisting Father De Francesco, the Italian Chaplain in the 1920s and early 1930s. Father De Francesco's efforts for the Italian Community were limited because he was attached to the St. Ignatius Parish, and was obliged to do parish duties as well as attend to the needs of the Italian Community, so he must have needed to rely on helpers in the community.

In 1925 Father De Francesco celebrated the marriage of my mother to Antonio Santospirito, who was born in the Eolian Islands in 1892 and whose parents emigrated to Australia in 1897. When he married he was already a successful wholesale florist and was later referred to as the "flower king". They lived in 79 Bouverie Street Carlton, a house my father had built. They had three children, myself, and two younger brothers Gerard and Anthony.

We lived a fairly normal life I think, until the arrival of Father Ugo Modotti, who took the place of Father De Francesco as Chaplain of the Italian Community. I remember his arrival vividly because I was barely 10 years old, very shy, and in Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital along with several other Genazzano pupils, with

Scarlet Fever, when Father Modotti visited me. This vision swept in - a great, big, tall man, enveloped in a white medical gown and mask and a kind expression. That is, what I could see of it. He made a great impression on me which remains with me still.

After Father Modotti's arrival 79 Bouverie Street was never the same again. It virtually became "La Casa degli Italiani" as it was the centre for all the action and organisation in the Italian Community especially during World War II and the post war years of immigration and unemployment in the early 1950s.

During World War II Italians were not allowed to congregate in any one place except St. George's Hall, Carlton. This privilege was obtained through the auspices of Archbishop Dr. Mannix and through the help of the Hon. A.A. Calwell who was a wonderful friend to the Italians. The Archbishop Dr. Mannix Committee for Italian Relief was inaugurated because there was need for an organised body to assist Italian immigrants particularly during the war and soon after because of the sudden influx of large numbers of them.



Mrs Santospirito, left, and Mrs Sinelli at Bonegilla

My mother was the president of this committee for several years, c. 1938-1953 and she worked tirelessly to assist any Italian in distress whether it be emotional or financial, employment, accommodation or whatever. My mother would leave no stone unturned to help anyone in need.

She encouraged and helped migrants to sponsor their relatives in order to unite their families together again. She was always very grateful to Mr Calwell for his guidance and support and prompt attention to her enquiries and problems.

Often Mr Calwell would be in Canberra so this meant long conversations with Mrs. Calwell who became a great friend and they often talked until late into the night. This continued until they were fairly aged and ill-health prevented it.

In the early 1950s unemployment crisis there would be long queues inside our house and flowing outside, often up to 40 people. On one occasion the rooms were all occupied and I needed to do some sewing so I ended up wheeling our good old Singer sewing machine out into the back yard. Archbishop Little, who was Father Little then, remembers my mother constantly on the telephone endeavouring to procure employment for the throngs in the queue. I remember it too, only too well. My Mother would suggest that she and I would go shopping, particularly when I was shopping for my trousseau, an important time in a daughter's life. More often than not I would still be waiting for her at four o'clock not even being able to get a word in between telephone calls and

I would finally have to dash off by myself before the shops closed. My father had to put in an extra telephone line so that he could make his rather important business calls.

Apart from all the activity in the home, fundraising was also a very large part of the scene. During the War soft drinks must have been scarce because every Saturday we used to make up batches of coloured cordials in our large wash house (laundry they call it now) which we would sell at the Italian dances which the Archbishop's committee would organize every Saturday night at St. George's Hall, Carlton and later at the Cathedral Hall Fitzroy. Fund raising also included annual bazaars, raffles on a big scale, concerts, plays (some written by Father Modotti himself). I remember the Dante's Divine Comedy slides very well and the St. Agnes play Sir James mentioned in his address of 19th May 1988, but unfortunately I can't remember his part in it. Fund raising also included the big attraction of the year, the annual Italian Debutant Ball. I made my debut in the first one in 1946, although I was still at school, but I wanted to be in the first one. It was so exciting! I remember also some fun picnics in the hills, and some treats for the workers sometimes at our beach



Mrs Santospirito with Mrs Calwell at the Debutante Ball in 1947.

house. When I look back now most of the people who did the hard work are no longer with us. Oh! how I would like to be reminiscing with them now and express appreciation.

My mother and the Committee were also interested in the welfare of the prisoners of war and members of families interned and Italians from other countries who had been sent to Australia. We met some interesting people, for example an Italian professional couple from Kuala Lumpur who ended up living in our beach house and Italian families from Singapore.

My mother was particularly concerned with the children of these people and where possible she was responsible for placing them in boarding schools. An Italian Army Officer was sent to Australia to investigate a mishap at a Prisoner of War camp. He was accommodated at our place and I still feel guilty for having scorched a silk shirt of his when I was helping my mother by doing the ironing - she was probably in the telephone.

After Father Modotti left Australia, the Capuchin Fathers took over the house in Power Street. Father Carlo di Matteo was in charge and my mother continued to help with her usual enthusiasm and one of the outstanding successful fund raising efforts was the concert organized at the Melbourne Town Hall in three weeks only, featuring the artists of the visiting Italian Opera Company.

My mother was also helping the Italian orders of nuns that were gradually arriving over a period of time. She was always at the Airport to welcome them and drive them to their new abode and did all she could to encourage them and support their specific activities. When the Cabrini nuns arrived she was the first president of the St. Benedict's Well-wisher's Committee and later when the new hospital was built she was the president of the Saint Francis Cabrini Hospital Ladies Auxiliary when it opened in 1958.



Presentation of cheque to Mother Candida of the Cabrini Hospital, 1948.



↑ THESE out-of-work Italian migrants were happy yesterday washing up after a banquet given them by the Italian Relief Committee.

They were told that some of them would be given work if the committee bought a 1300-acre estate at Alexandria. (SEE STORY LEFT).

At yesterday's banquet, they ate hors d'oeuvres, spaghetti, stuffed veal and salad and fresh fruit.

They danced and sang national songs after they learned of the plan to buy the estate, which would achieve an ambition for many of them—the prospect of a job.

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The Pastorelle Sisters received the same welcome and support and when the Daughters of Divine Zeal arrived she became a close friend of Mother Gennarina, the Mother Superior.

Her large correspondence kept any spare time she had occupied, and she often worked late into the night. Sometimes, she would be going to bed when my poor father was going off to the market. She wrote frequently to Father Pio for advice and prayers. She was a daily communicant and often went to more than one Mass. She had tremendous faith and must have been close to God because her prayers were often answered. She was happiest when praying for other people's intentions and helping those in need and always ready to give solace and comfort.

She died at the age of 87 on the 19th November 1983. At her Requiem Mass which was solemnly celebrated by Bishop Fox with eighteen priests on the altar - a wonderful tribute. Father Ron Pickering noted in his eulogy "she was a lovely lady. So utterly kind and lovingly concerned for friends and even casual acquaintances... whilst she could and whenever she should, Lena Santospirito radiated love, compassion and care for those in need. Her most outstanding ministry to Italian families is well known ... Her Home was a centre of

kindness and practical assistance ... I know full well that she would have me praise, as she often did to me, her husband Tony and children Maria, Gerard and Anthony who paid the consequent price of not neglect, but obvious deprivation of those little attentions less apostolic parents might give in greater measure to their own".

Sir James Gobbo in his address to the Italian Institute of Culture in 19th May 1988, called her "a living saint". I think anyone who knew her would agree with that, but I must admit it is not always easy to live with a saint. I remember once, when I was at one of the weekly Saturday night functions, I burst into tears when I thought of my father coming home after a hard day's work to a lonely house and a lonely dinner which was keeping warm on a bain-marie. I think my father was a saint too.

Whatever one says, I know that my father, my brothers and I appreciated the work my mother did and we were all very proud of her. I think we reaped manifold benefits from the wide experiences her example and her works exposed us to ... and I would not have it otherwise. It will be fitting to close with a quote from an anonymous priest "She was an example and a consolation to those who knew her and a quiet but eloquent apostle for the Lord she loved".