



CO.AS.IT.'s first President, Mrs. Elda Vaccari sadly passed away on 7th August 2007 at the age of 95. The Hon. Justice Gaetano Pagone spoke of her work and legacy at a Memorial service held in her honour.

## **VALE ELDA VACCARI**

**Memorial service to celebrate the life of Mrs Elda Vaccari, St. Anthony's Church, 16 September 2007**

*G.T. Pagone, President, Co.As.It.*

Elda Vaccari was a remarkable woman. Most of you know that and need no reminder. I met her only once and it was earlier this year, on 27 March, when her son, Franco, kindly arranged a meeting with her at her home. It was important for me to meet with her because I had not long become President of CO.AS.IT. and wanted to meet the woman who had been its first President and whose presence I could still feel there. I have always been conscious at CO.AS.IT. of Elda Vaccari as a force in its creation and as a continuing part of its present dynamism. The meeting did not disappoint me. I found an elderly 95-year-old woman of extraordinary energy, determination and independence. Her hearing was not as good as it must once have been, but she was sharp in thought and determined that she, and not her youngest son, would make me a cup of coffee on the modern equipment in her kitchen. The determination paid off and I enjoyed some of the famous Elda Vaccari hospitality.

I also found on that day a woman of great generosity, willing to talk about whatever we felt like talking about without restriction or qualification. We spoke of CO.AS.IT. and of the land at South Morang which had been bought under the guidance of her husband. She recalled events with great clarity and I had no doubt about being in the presence of quite a woman.

One of her recollections is also recorded in the recently published biography *Gualtiero Vaccari: A man of quality* by Geoff Easdown. It was of the first meeting between the young Elda Nicoletti, as she then was, and her future husband, Gualtiero. Their first meeting occurred in the historical ruins at Pompeii in 1937 when Elda was reportedly remonstrating with a group of homebound Australian travellers. Elda was attempting to pay for her share of the costs of visiting the historic ruins at Pompeii but the Australians, they thought generously, were refusing to accept payment from her. A then as yet unknown gentleman sought to intervene. She remembered the gentleman as having "a lovely, lovely smile". He helpfully explained what the Australian was saying, but Elda maintained her view. The gentleman's assessment of

the young Elda was an admiration of her "independence". And independent she was. At 95, she still lived at home, able largely to look after herself and to make a coffee for a visitor.

That same independence is built into the very fabric of CO.AS.IT. and is part of the legacy that she has left the Italian community in Victoria. Between 1967 and 1970, the Italian Government established and funded a number of agencies to provide welfare services to Italian immigrants. One of those is CO.AS.IT. in Melbourne. In 1967, Elda Vaccari was invited by the then Consul General, Dr Ferrari di Carpi, to form a CO.AS.IT. in Victoria. She was, by then, already well known for her involvement with charitable bodies helping Italian migrants. She accepted the invitation but did so on two conditions. The first was that her "CO.AS.IT." was to be independent of the Italian Consulate, the second was that it should be a welfare agency structured according to the laws of Australia. These two conditions are fundamental to the success of CO.AS.IT. and explains its independence. They were also used as a model for other migrant organisations which later followed. CO.AS.IT. in Victoria today enjoys an important degree of independence from Italian or Australian Government interference, which enables it to mould its activities as it thinks best for the benefit of its community.

In remembering the contribution of Elda Vaccari, I do not want to lessen the importance of the many other people who were also part of the creation of CO.AS.IT. in its infancy. She could not, of course, have done it all on her own and without many other people with ideas, leadership, hard work and unthanked disappointments. However, my desire not to be unfair to others should not be at the expense of failing to recognise her contribution as one of those leaders. The times may also have contributed to some of the success of the opportunities which were taken up, but on any view she was part of the group providing leadership at a time when those opportunities were there to be moulded and accepted.

Elda Vaccari's involvement in CO.AS.IT. was not just at the Board level: She was very much a hands-on worker. In her early days, she taught Italian to the children of Italian migrants, some of whom may be present at this mass. Elda Vaccari believed that CO.AS.IT. had a role in teaching Italian and in 1968 the first CO.AS.IT. Italian language class for children of Italian migrants commenced at St Georges Primary School in Rathdowne Street. The number of students increased from that initial course year after year, and many will remember the annual "concerto di fine anno" at the Camberwell Civic Centre attended by more than 1,500 proud parents.

In 1968 the Australian Government was persuaded to provide a grant to pay the salary of a social worker employed by CO.AS.IT. This was a significant development and was the first grant of this kind in Australia and was to be the forerunner of many such grants for migrant communities in this country. Another outstanding achievement was to register CO.AS.IT. with the Hospitals and Charities Commission, which would allow tax deductible financial donations and would attract funding for the refurbishment of the new office in Drummond Street, which was officially opened in 1971.

In 1968 she was instrumental in forming a group of active and enthusiastic volunteers primarily to visit Italian families at home, individuals in major hospitals, in baby health centres and in various institutions where they

provided interpreting services. Families, especially children and mothers, were a priority for Elda Vaccari. Together with the late Mrs Linda Muscat, coordinator of our Italian language classes, Elda Vaccari organised the first "colonia marina" at the Don Bosco Holiday Camp in Dromana. This gave approximately 70 children of Italian origin the opportunity to enjoy a holiday they might not otherwise be able to have. A priority for children and mothers also saw the establishment of childcare centres, with the first childcare centre being established in 1977 in Brunswick with the financial assistance of the Australian Federal Government.

The social work activities of CO.AS.IT. often came in contact with dramatic problems, particularly where families were in conflict. This created a need to provide at least temporary accommodation, especially for women and children who needed to leave their family homes. Together with the social workers, Elda Vaccari looked for a house to rent close to the office so that the needed support could be provided in a safe environment. In 1976, the first migrant "half-way house" in Australia (later referred to as the women's refuge) was established. Furniture was generously donated and the house was painted by a group of American Mormons in exchange for meals.

Financial resources in the early days of CO.AS.IT. were scarce and its activities relied heavily on volunteers. Elda Vaccari was not only the President of CO.AS.IT., but an integral part of the volunteer network. I am told that some can still recall her coming to CO.AS.IT. every day in her white "Fiat 132". Some claim even to recall that she would occasionally find her car space occupied by one of the staff (probably a newly appointed staff member unaware of the reaction that this "unauthorised" occupation might provoke). On such occasions, I am told, staff would scuttle about finding things to do while the parking arrangements were being "sorted out".

I am also told that Elda Vaccari was famous for her working lunches with Government Ministers. In that regard, she and Mrs Gina Triaca would frequently cook at their place and bring their Italian specialties to the office. These "tempting" occasions gave encouragement for Ministers to give additional welfare services to the Italian community when convinced that the Government was not doing enough for the community.

In 1971, Elda Vaccari wrote in her report as President that:

*"... Initiated by the efforts of a few for the benefit of many, CO.AS.IT. Melbourne fulfils a duty, which is both humanitarian and civic. The work of CO.AS.IT. is a necessity because it fills a gap in this country. The help, understanding and encouragement of Australian society is the migrant's right. The experience and support of his co-nationals is of supreme importance in facilitating the migrant's integration. In its three years of activity, CO.AS.IT. has affirmed itself and it has laid sound foundations for the future".*

In 1978, Elda Vaccari wrote in her President's Report:

*"Entering into the second decade of CO.AS.IT.'s activities, we cannot resist looking back and judging this organisation, its accomplishments and failures. I invite people interested in the welfare of Italian migrants to think about CO.AS.IT. which started relying only on the goodwill of people and has grown to*

*become an agency of professional services for Italian migrants. My firm belief, after many years of close involvement, is that CO.AS.IT. has exceeded the expectations of its initiators through providing a wide range of welfare services such as counselling, welfare rights, employment, childcare, youth work, housing and emergency accommodation services, women's refuge and Italian classes. My last but not my least thought is to my late husband who, from the beginning, was always supporting me and CO.AS.IT., ensuring the growth of this organisation and, by promoting and then establishing the home for elderly Italians, "Gualtiero Vaccari", he made it possible to alleviate one of the major needs frequently confronted by CO.AS.IT. in the Italian community".*

Giancarlo Martini is recorded in the biography of Gualtiero Vaccari as referring to him as "Elda's rock" (p.142) in her work and commitment to CO.AS.IT. That may be, but for CO.AS.IT. the rock was Elda herself, and through the hard work and commitment described by Giancarlo Martini, she has left us with a legacy that is real, material and significant. The loss we feel now that she has gone is felt with a profound gratitude that she was who she was, that she has left so much, and that her presence is still felt.

# Refractory Migrants. Fascist Surveillance on Italians in Australia 1922-1943

*by Gianfranco Cresciani*

*Gianfranco Cresciani emigrated from Trieste to Sydney in 1962. He worked for EPT, the Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Ministry for the Arts of the NSW Government on cultural and migration issues. In 1989 and 1994 he was member of the Australian Delegation re-negotiating with the Italian Government the Italo-Australian Cultural Agreement. Master of Arts (First Class Honours) from Sydney University in 1978. Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, from the*

*University of New South Wales in 2005, in recognition of "distinguished eminence in the field of history". In 2004 the Italian Government awarded him the honour of Cavaliere Ufficiale dell'Ordine al Merito for facilitating cultural exchanges between Italy and Australia. He has produced books, articles, exhibitions and radio and television programs in Australia and Italy on the history of Italian migration to Australia.*

*There are exiles that gnaw and others  
that are like consuming fire.  
There is a heartache for the murdered  
country...*

- Pablo Neruda

*We can never forget  
what happened to our country  
and we must always remind those responsible  
that we know who they are.*

- Elizabeth Rivera

One of the more salient and frightening aspects of European dictatorships during the Twentieth Century, in their effort to achieve totalitarian control of

their societies, was the grassroots surveillance carried out by their state security organisations, of the plots and machinations of their opponents. Nobody described better this process of capillary penetration in the minds and conditioning of the lives of people living under Communist or Fascist regimes than George Orwell in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1), published in 1949 and warning us on the danger of Newspeak, Doublethink, Big Brother and the Thought Police. However, the process of mass surveillance of refractory subjects preceded the rise of totalitarianism. The Ochrana in Tsarist Russia and the *Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza* (Directorate-General of Public Safety) in Liberal Italy, to give just two examples, had already begun this screening practice at the end of the Nineteenth Century (2). However, it was in the Twentieth Century that the obsession for pervasive, absolute control reached new heights. For instance, when in July 2003 the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) returned to the Federal Republic of Germany the so-called Rosenwood files, the archives of the *Stasi*, the Secret Police of the defunct German Democratic Republic, that the CIA had obtained in 1992 from a Russian KGB officer who had worked in East Berlin, it was discovered that the *Stasi* employed more than 200,000 secret agents and that over 2.4 million East Germans were placed under *Stasi* observation during Communist rule (3).

Fascist Italy, between 1922 and 1945, also set up a system of espionage over its enemies. In January 1924, Mussolini ordered the establishment of a Fascist secret police, led by one of his trusted thugs and Chief of his Press Office, Cesare Rossi, proposing to call it CEKA, "as the Soviet CEKA, it sounds good". It is reported that in June 1924 the future Duce, deeply irritated by the staunch parliamentary opposition by Giacomo Matteotti, asked what was the Fascist CEKA doing to silence the Socialist leader (4), who afterwards was kidnapped and murdered. In 1927, following the disbanding of CEKA, the Regime created OVRA, a menacing acronym, yet again coined by Mussolini himself, that was deemed to mean *Opera Volontaria di Repressione dell'Antifascismo* (Voluntary Organisation for the Repression of Anti-Fascism). It was loosely modelled on the Soviet internal security agency, the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-Revolutionaries and Saboteurs (CEKA), that in February 1922 changed its name to the Government Political Administration (GPU), to become after 1934 the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Also in 1927, the Italian Ministry of the Interior had its old security arm, the *Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza*, restructured into seven Divisions (General and Confidential Affairs, Political Police, Personnel, Armed Forces, Police, Contracts and Supply, Border and Transport Police). OVRA was directly responsible to the Chief of the Division of Political Police (*Divisione Polizia Politica*) who, in turn, reported to the crafty and cunning Chief of Police, Arturo Bocchini. Until his death in 1940, Bocchini briefed Mussolini daily on the plans, or otherwise, of the anti-Fascists. In 1933, OVRA established a network of eleven Zones. Staff maintained surveillance activities, both at home and abroad, through a network of 380 informers, some of whom managed their own pool of sub-informers. The other Divisions also had their independent network of