"Mamma Lena," her people say, "please talk to me tonight"

● Mrs. Lena Guerin broadcasting to Australia's Italian community. They send her 300 to 400 letters a day

In Australia she's "the mother of all Italians"

THE round stare in
spa on the hairdresser, the needle comes down and down, and voices sing softly, "Mamma Lena . . . Mamma Lena . . ." The orchestra picks up the tune, the rhythm quickens to a chorusline, a male voice starts singing in Italian.

Just another good Italian dance number! So you would think unless you understood the words. For the song was written in honour of Italian women like Lena Guerin, known to Italian migrants as Mamma Lena, the woman who brings them news from home.

Mrs. Guerin has been broadcasting to the Italian community of Australia for one year, she will be his daily news reporter, she has two evening programs a week.

In these, reports a background of nostalgic music, she talks about Italy, points to messages between relatives and friends, and gives advice to Italians lately arrived in Australia.

The song, "Mamma Lena," by Nino Cavallaro, expresses the feelings of her listeners. It goes:

"Mamma Lena, you bring back to our hearts and leave our memories behind. Mamma, you bring hope that we will see Italy again some day . . . Mamma Lena, please tell us we again sample such your stories (they indeed sound like the voice of an angel) . . . You are the mother of all Italians."

The record can be found already in more than 2,000 Italian homes. But it is not only for her charming words over the radio that Lena is loved.

For she can speak years she has worked as a voluntary delegate for the Italian organisation, ANFE (National Association for Foster Migrants).

She has accompanied far new arrivals, taken them to hospitals, mediated medical benefits and insurance schemes, pointed out Australian laws and customs, and helped in the many other difficulties a family in a new country faces.

Frame of her work forced back in Italy, where her husband, Dino, lectured on an Italian in Sikh for three years.

I set in on Lena's three-hour Monday night program, "Australian Roots." As I learned, she talked to her listeners about Italy and its people, shared requests, and passed on messages. (Her programme are bilingual, with another announcer giving the English version.)

She came to a lower speaking to a young Italian who had not written to his fiancée in Sicily for three years.

Lena appealed: "Come now, you's a little other. Think of what it will mean to your father — it will be that anguish, and worry which must be in his heart."

At the end of the program a telephone call came from a Sicilian prospector, who said the boy was down working for him and had promised to write.

Mamma Lena smiled her satisfaction.

She and her husband, Dino, lectured me on their home the next morning for a further talk. For nine of their 11 years in Australia they have lived in an unpretentious bungalow with style two children.

It's typical Saturday to take the child off the mother's hands while Lena and Dino told me about their work.

Dino was a journalist and program producer in Italy, and as producer for radio show he also manages a travel agency in Petersham.

"I could not handle it all without Dino," Lena said, smiling fondly at him.

Lena gets up with her boy day at home.

Sometimes Sydney will stay and ask if they can see her to talk about their problems.

The news program is at 6.30 p.m. and on Monday and Wednesday she is followed by her three-hour program. Then Lena and Dino come home and sort through their letters, the next program cues, music records, and prepare notes.

At 10 p.m. they switch on to hear the middle radio news from Italy. (Sydney is nine hours ahead.)

At about 11 p.m. their son, Robert (15), and daughter, Rosalie (21), both now at university, arrive home. Lena marking in the showers, and the family have their dinner and "relaxed time" before retiring.

Work and study give them little time to be together, but they cherish what time and are a close family.

"We keep across so will build a better home and go on holidays. We are friends, but we never have the time," said Dino. "We have never been on a holiday together. For our 25th wedding anniversary, Christmas two years ago, we all took two days off at South Beach."

Lena and Dino are proud of the way their children have adapted. Rosalie is a dress-year Arts student and Robert has started a mechanical engineering course.

But the first years in Australia were a struggle for the whole family.

The 10 months they played a home with a German family in Bankstown. "We got on very well," Lena said. "No one spoke English, we did not speak German, and they could not speak Italian, so there was no quarrels."

Lena was a university graduate there in French and Spanish and Dino was a journalist, but because gender of them spoke English they could not get work, but the Italians remedy here.

"We knew we had to repeat this and were prepared to take unskilled work to get started," Lena said. "Dino's first job was in a factory.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my work in a coffee shop. Then I learnt English and was able to obtain Australian citizenship. I will remember my 18 months there as the best education I ever had."

Although Dino passed from 18 months such things as bulldozer and price inventor, neither Dino nor Lena would change it.

"If Lena had not all her energies into a little shop or something we would have been sick by now," Dino laughed. "But we need one we are happy."

— BARBARA MARTIN

● Lena and husband Dino sort through new records for the program

● A powerful radio installed in her home keeps daily news from Italy