

Women's Weekly

PRICE

August 16, 1967



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

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

THE record starts to spin on the turntable, the needle comes across and down, and voices sing softly, "Mamma Lena, Mamma Lena . . ." The orchestra picks up the tune, the rhythm quickens to a rumba, 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 honor of Sydney woman Mrs. Lena Gustin, known to Italian migrants as Mamma Lena, the woman who brings them news from home.

Mrs. Gustin has been broadcasting to the Italian community of Australia for ten years. As well as her daily news reports, she has two evening programs a week.

In these, against a background of nostalgic music, she talks about Italy, passes on messages between relatives and friends, and gives advice to Italians newly arrived in Australia.

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

"Mamma Lena, you bring hope to our hearts and lessen our sorrows and nostalgia; you bring hope that we will see Italy again some day . . . Mamma Lena, please talk to me again tonight with your sincere voice which sounds like the voice of an angel . . . You are the mother of all Italians."

The record can be found already in more than 1000 Italian homes. But it is not only for her cheering words over the radio that Lena is loved.

For the past eight years

she has worked as a voluntary delegate for an Italian organisation, ANFI (National Association for Family Migration).

She has interpreted for new arrivals, taken them to hospitals, explained 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.

Praise of her work flowed back to Italy, where her

I sat in on Lena's three-hour Monday night program, "Arrivederci Roma."

As I listened, she talked to her Italians about Italy and its people, played requests, and passed on messages. Her programs are bilingual, with another announcer giving the English version.

She came to a letter appealing to a young Italian who had not written to his father in Italy for three years.

they have lived in an unpretentious bungalow with their two children.

We sipped liqueurs to take the chill off the winter's night while Lena and Dino told me about their work.

Dino was a journalist and program producer in Italy, and so produces her radio show. He also manages a travel agency in Perth.

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

Lena gets on with her busy day at home.

Sometimes Italians will ring and ask if they can see her to talk about their problems.

Her news program is at 6.30 p.m., and on Mondays and Wednesdays it is followed by her three-hour program. Then Lena and Dino come home and read through their letters, discuss program ideas, select records, and prepare notes.

At 10 p.m. they switch

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 Bondi Beach."

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

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

For 18 months they shared 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 were no quarrels."

Lena was a university graduate fluent in French and Spanish and Dino was a journalist, but because neither of them spoke English they could not get work for the first six months here.

"We knew we had to expect 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. There I learnt English and was able to observe Australian customs. I still consider my 18 months there as the best education I ever had."

Although their present busy life excludes such things as holidays and other luxuries, neither Dino nor Lena would change it.

"If Lena had put all her energies into a fruit shop or something, we would have been rich by now," Dino laughed. "But instead we are happy."

—BARBARA MARTYN

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

former countrymen recently honored her with the Cross of the Cavaliere, Italy's second highest award. Only five or six women possess it.

When I called on Mamma Lena at station 2CH her green eyes twinkled as she acknowledged her nickname.

"Recently I got a letter from Italy addressed to 'Signora Lena Gustin, Mother of Italians, Sydney,'" she said.

"The Post Office was stamped and sent it to the Italian Consulate, who forwarded it to me."

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

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

Mamma Lena smiled her satisfaction.

She and her husband, Dino, invited me to their home the next evening for a further talk. For nine of their 11 years in Australia

She turned to me with a laugh and said, "We are a little unusual, we have been married 27 years and we are still in love. Perhaps it is because we have been so busy trying to help other people we have had no time to quarrel."

Their day is a long one. They rise in time to hear the 6.45 a.m. news from Italy on a radio installed at their home by 2CH. They combine the Italian news with general and local news.

Dino then goes to work at his travel agency while

on to hear the midday radio news from Italy. (Sydney is nine hours ahead.)

At about 11 p.m. their son, Robert (19), and daughter, Rosalba (21), both now at university, return from studying in the libraries, and the family have their dinner and "together time" before retiring.

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

"We keep saying we will build a better home and go on holidays like our



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



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