

woman's DAY

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Dear Mamma Lena . . .

The hostel was a long, long way from Italy. The food the young mother had tried to persuade her children to eat was strange and unpalatable.

The younger boy had embarrassed them all by slopping his stew on the canteen table as he pushed his plate angrily away. Now, smacked, washed and tucked into bed, he was still gulping down sobs as his mother fought her own wave of homesick despair.

Then out of the worn black handbag which also had come all the way from Sicily to Sydney she took a cheap transistor radio and clicked it on.

Music from Naples eased the panic of loneliness and, as the record finished, a woman's voice, speaking in her own language, brought a message of welcome, comfort and advice.

For this woman and for many of the Italian migrants landing in this strange country, unable to speak any English, the nightly Italian language radio sessions of Lena Gustin broadcast on 2CH-Sydney have meant more than words can say.

Over the first difficult months of adjustment as she struggled to pick up a smattering of English, tried to put on a calm face when her children found school bewildering and alien, and her husband went from job to casual job, Lena's radio program was her life-line.

When she and her family had found their feet sufficiently to team up with another family and rent a house with a garden to grow salads and a shared kitchen where the homely aromas of pasta, mortadella, salami, cheeses and vino mingled reassuringly, she sat down to write to the woman whose broadcasts meant so much to her.

She might have started the letter, "Dear Lena," for Lena Gustin is one of the very few women to have been honoured with the Cross of Knighthood by the Italian Republic. Or she could equally correctly have sent her letter to Signora Lena Gustin, M.B.E., for Lena recently became the first Italian-Australian woman to be made Member of the British Empire.

Instead, she headed her letter "To Mamma Lena, Station 2CH-Sydney." It is as "Mamma Lena" that lively-minded, warm-hearted Lena Gustin is known by the Italian community of Australia.

They brought themselves — and incredible hope

Lena, her journalist husband, Dino, and their two children, Rosalba and Robert, who are now at University, came to Australia from Italy 11 years ago. Like most migrants, they brought nothing much except themselves, a considerable fund of courage and their hopes for a future to be found "Down Under."

War-time privations of Europe had cost the life of their first baby and post-war conditions did not seem to offer much for their two other children. So they struck out for Australia.

Their first couple of years here provided the personal experiences which Lena, backed by her husband, has turned to good account in easing the transition from Italy to Australia for so many of her fellow countrymen and women.

It is for this work in aiding migrants and their families to find their feet and remain as assimilated citizens that Lena has been recognised both by Italy and by the Queen.

Through her radio sessions, by a women's news and problems section of an Italian language newspaper and lately through a newspaper she and her husband have started, Lena Gustin has set her very considerable energies to smoothing the path of Italian migrants in a new country.



Mamma Lena, whose "voice of an angel" brings the Italian migrants in Australia great comfort.

Her problems don't only arrive by mail at 2CH at the rate of 100 letters a day. They also walk up the path of her unpretentious house at Bankstown and are asked to sit down and have coffee at every hour of the night and day.

Some of the problems are simple, but others need the help of Lena's far-reaching grapevine.

Jobs, houses, matters of health, finance, taxation, business, difficult enough for anyone, but made twice as hard for the migrant by his lack of English, all land on Lena's desk and into her lap.

Possibly her greatest contribution to the welfare of Italian migrant families has been in the field of housing. "To get each family out of the hotels and into a house as quickly as possible, that is the point," she said.

By ANNE DUPREE

Lena wouldn't have it any other way. But if you ask her what is the most frequent problem she meets, she hesitates. "Family, work, love, health . . . I am asked about all these," she says.

One problem she frequently encounters is how much freedom children, particularly daughters, should be allowed.

Lena said, "This is a question where I feel much responsibility. If I say to the mother, 'Yes, give your daughter more freedom,' and the daughter uses the freedom in the wrong way, then I am partly to blame if anything bad happens."

"The problem of freedom occurs particularly in families from the south of Italy, where it is traditional for the parents to be very, very strict."

"Here they try to keep the same tight reins; the children mustn't go out at night or with the company they like. When the boys and girls start work the parents take all their pay and save it for them. The children see the others they work with spending money and having a free time and

it causes trouble in the family.

"In some families, even when a girl is in her twenties, the parents will take her pay and not let her go out. The adjustment the parents make to Australian conditions depends a lot on their standard of education."

"Many families, after 10 or 15 years here, are quite different in their mind. They see that in every part of the world relations between the generations are changing and young people need more freedom."

"Our association (The National Association for Migrant Families, known as A.N.F.E.) is visiting the Cabramatta and Villawood hostels. We know the food is good. But it is so different. And there are no interpreters there to help new people make a telephone call or send a message in an emergency. They feel so helpless."

that so-and-so, who has come from this or that part of Italy and has so many children, is looking for accommodation."

"People who have room to take them get in touch with me and then the immigration officials visit the house and decide if it is suitable and for how many. That way we get the new people fitted into the community."

Australian homes for earthquake victims

Right now Lena's one-woman housing commission is busier than ever. "Operation Sicily," the project which will settle 3,000 people from the earthquake-hit villages of Sicily, is under way. So far 1,000 Sicilians have arrived and the rest will be here shortly.

Lena said, "These people have lost everything. Our association (A.N.F.E.) takes clothes to the hostel. Also we take Italian food . . . spaghetti, tomato paste, oil, salami, mortadella, cheese and two bottles of wine . . . so the families can have it at the hostel."

"If after two or three months we don't hear any more of the family, we are happy because it means they have work and are settling in."

It is hard to imagine how one woman manages to get through the amount of work Lena Gustin disposes of every day. Over Station 2CH she has 10 Italian language programs every week . . . a 15-minute news session every day, two sessions from 6.45 to 9.30 p.m. — Arrivederci Roma (on Mondays) and Carosello and Sorella Radio (on Wednesdays) — and a shorter program on Tuesday at 6 p.m.

Recently, Lena and her husband, Dino, added a weekly newspaper, "Settegiorni," to their interests.

Page one news in an early issue was that the editor had been honoured by the Queen with an M.B.E. Proud as she is of the honour and of the telegrams of congratulation which flooded in from Canberra and Macquarie Street, Knight of the Italian Republic Lena Gustin probably prizes her unofficial title most of all.

From Hay to Orange to the Queensland border she is known as "Mother of the Italians." Three years ago songwriter Nino Cavallero was moved to write a graceful tribute to a most sincere woman. It is a pop song called "Mamma Lena."

Some of the words go like this: "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 and bring me hope that tomorrow will be better than today. Your sincere voice sounds like the voice of an angel. You are my mother who keeps me company in the night." ●