



Mamma Lena and Dina

HER VOICE is as familiar to Italians as Ken Howard's was to punters.

She is warm, friendly, kind, unobtrusive, interested and has brains and vigor as well as personality.

No wonder she is known as Mamma Lena.

For four nights a week — Mondays to Thursday — from 7.15pm until 10pm, she advises, informs, gives the news, entertains during 2KY's Italian program during which she has Frank Brazzanti (occasionally a St Vincent de Paul member who was active in the Catholic Youth Organization) as announcer.

They say if you want a thing done ask a busy person — and Mrs Lena Garcia is a busy person.

In addition to continuing and preparing her radio program, she conducts, interprets, translates, does community work and is a housewife and a mother of two.

Though he stays in the background you sense the appreciation the fact that her husband Dina is her prop.

Mamma Lena has been conducting radio sessions for Italians for nearly 15 years. She began with 2SM, for six months, moved to 2CH where she spent 12 years and has been with 2KY for two.

A naturalized Australian she has made a remarkable impact since she first arrived here from Italy in 1926 — and has made an outstanding contribution to the successful settlement in NSW of many new settlers from Italy.

During a visit to Rome a few years ago Mrs Garcia said 90 per cent of Italian migrants were happy in Australia and when they told her they were leaving Australia for good, she always urged them to obtain permission to re-enter the country.

Almost always they wanted to do this after a short period, she had discovered.

Mrs Garcia and her husband live in Bankstown and attend Mass at St Jerome's Church, Punchbowl. Her daughter Rosetta has an Arts degree (with first class honors in Italian) from Sydney University and is now studying a degree course at the National University in Canberra. Robert, her son, is doing a course in mechanical engineering at NSW University.

In 1967 Italy recognized Mamma Lena's valuable work for migrants and Australia and awarded her its second highest honor — The Cross of the Cavaliere — making her one of the few women to be so decorated by the Republic.

And in 1968, she received the MBE from the Queen for her services to the community — the first Italian-Australian woman ever to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

But if success and honors come her way, it was not easy. Mr and Mrs Garcia know what it is to be "strugglers".

They married in 1940 — and you do not have to have many marriages of World War II to know what a young couple had to endure in Italy in those times.

When they first came to Australia from Trieste neither she or her husband knew English and could not obtain work for six months. Mr Garcia had to take a job as a laborer, despite the fact that he is a journalist who has worked on journals in Turin and Trieste.

Mamma Lena was no slouch either educationally and professionally. She studied languages at the University of Ferrara in Venice (she also speaks French and Spanish fluently).

By
KEN SCULLY

Incidentally, when coming to Australia she has been an official Italian-English translator for the Immigration Department, a French and English teacher at an evening college, has worked on the Sydney Italian newspaper *La Fiorina* and until a few years ago, besides her radio and community work, found time to edit the weekly paper *Sempreviva*.

After speaking with Mamma Lena and her husband and learning of what they had accomplished and were doing, I suggested that the best word to describe her was as "a bridge".

For through her contact is made by children to parents, understanding passes over from one to another, letters come from Italy from people seeking news of sons and daughters and other relatives, advice flows out on a multitude of subjects — and always the foundation she shows to all, an innate country which is hard to define other than saying it embraces pain and great joys.

And it was as a bridge, in 1969, that the present Leader of the Federal Opposition, Mr Bill Snedden, who was then Minister for Immigration, described her.

He said she had "helped build a bridge of understanding between the new world and the old. As a voluntary delegate (she has been its president) for the National Association of Families of Emigrants — Associazione Nazionale Famiglie degli Emigranti — she has also interpreted for new arrivals, taken them to hospital when they have become sick, and helped them in many practical ways."

Mr Snedden added: "She has been untiring in her efforts to promote the welfare of newcomers, and help them integrate more easily into the Australian community."

She has worked it with people who are obstinate to Italians, putting them in touch with migrants or sending migrants to them, she has informed the Italian community of special Masses and ceremonies and told them of churches where they may attend an Italian Mass.

"The most important thing I try to do is to drive people to learn how to live in Australia. I hope I am guiding people... even when I'm indicating where they can purchase things they haven't been able to buy, I want to help them to become integrated into the community and to assist them to become Australians. Perhaps I am sounding in some way, for I constantly receive letters thanking me for what I am doing."

"I think they feel they have a confidante in me," she added modestly. And with equal modesty — as if to apologise — her husband commented: "They trust her."

She has noted that problems of thousands facing life in a new country — the loneliness of being a stranger in a new land. Her advice on Australian laws and customs, some of which differ even the native-born Australian, has proved vital in the settlement

of many Italian families.

She gives counsel on housing difficulties, business, health, taxation... but many times all that has been required of her is a patient ear and a friendly word.

For the comfort she has given over the air her broadcast was once dubbed the "voice of an angel".

Though her services have brought advertising and revenue to the radio stations she has broadcast from, it is by no means "commercial"... though without that finance she couldn't continue it.

But it does not begin and end when she goes on air. Early every morning Mr and Mrs Garcia prepare for the broadcast. He, the producer of the program, listens to the world news, and especially Italian broadcasts from Italy, or the news in his home, picks out that which he considers will interest his people here, goes through the local newspapers and translates them, prepares copy for the program, arranges it to format. It takes some six or seven hours preparation for the three-hour session.

News, music, advice, information, travel, a dash of sport and a social, family chat, touch of nostalgia and atmosphere "from home"... and thousands of eager and receptive listeners.

That there is the story of correspondence, the simple

requests written in English that the younger generation Italians send it, this will you tell our parents we love them but can't express in the language they understand.

And the telephone. Mamma Lena, showed under by hundreds of letters which she answers, has hundreds of calls a week. From 7am to 11 at night the telephone rings and the requests come in. Hours off air are spent helping others, doing social work.

The letters and telephone calls come from young and old and the in between. No wonder on her program Mamma Lena plays music that will help people "forget the cause of the day."

Can you find my child who has left home, my daughter who has gone, a husband who has slipped away? Can you contact my parents for me?

And the letters from Italy from mothers and fathers, relatives and friends of those who have come to Australia, but do not write any more.

They might not know where an individual is, or what he or she is doing — but they know where Mamma Lena is and what she does.

These people trust her, especially the poor, the bothered, the concerned, the lonely, the depressed.

All feel she understands them... and so they call her, with affection and with a hint of filial love: Mamma Lena.

EVIDENCES

TV TIMES

Migrants with a problem write to Mamma Lena

YOU are an Italian migrant living in Sydney. You have a problem of the heart, or of the income tax or of the position.

What to do? Why write to Mamma Lena, of course. Lena Garcia, better known as Mamma Lena, presents the Italian programme, the *Programma Italiano*, on 2KY each Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evening.

Her program ranges from Fiat and Pirella, Lancia to spaghetti manufacturers and Padelloni delicatessens. Mamma Lena has been with 2KY for nine years. She knows, understands and cares about migrant problems.

"My program and I came by Australia 15 years ago," she said. "For the first few years it was difficult for me.

I didn't know any English and it was so tough. I was born in Trieste, Italy."

"I had a job teaching Italian at the Auckland evening school and studied English by correspondence course."

"Then, because I had completed my radio programme in Italy, I was given a weekly hour and a half programme with 2SM. I was with 2SM for 12 months before moving to 2CH."

Today, for Lena, the hour does not end. As well as presenting six hours of radio programmes each week she edits the Italian newspaper *Sette Giorni*.

She works hard. She is not quite sure what "the day after" brings at 7am and finishes at 2pm," she said. "The secretary here

our evening meal at home at 11 o'clock."

Lena's husband produces her radio programmes and helps with the production of the newspaper. Daughter Rosetta and son Robert are at university.

Last year a young Italian, Mico Cavallaro, wrote a preface about Mamma Lena in her honor.

In January this year a card came. Mamma Lena began an appeal for the victims. The appeal was read last night with more than 11,000.

On her programme Lena plays the music she likes. "I don't care if it is modern or opera," she said, "as long as it gives something to their heart."

Mamma Lena is wonderful. Probably because she always understands the heart.

— LINDORA HICKLEN