

19/12/94

Pic 25/12/94

Lena

WITH COMPLIMENTS



STATE LIBRARY
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

I heard you were ill.
I've rung several times, but
there's been no answer.

Wishing you a speedy recovery.
My thoughts are with you.
Con affetto Julia

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On 11 June 1940 the bucolic lifestyle of Federico Bonisoli, a 58-year-old Italian poultry farmer from Sydney, was shattered. Italy's entry into the war the previous day ensured that. Bonisoli was seized by two policemen and within weeks joined his three younger brothers and hundreds of fellow migrants in internment camps around Australia. Two years later the numbers reached the thousands. Italophobia was on the rise even though the much vaunted fifth column, the rationale for the mass confinements, never materialised.

In 1922, in his native Lombardy, Bonisoli had celebrated Mussolini's March on Rome. On its first anniversary he migrated to Australia. A witness to the momentous political change in his homeland, he went on to chronicle the great upheaval which blighted the lives of his compatriots in their adopted country.

Bonisoli's wartime experiences behind barbed wire are vividly captured in his three diaries, now held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. The diaries, in army-issue exercise books, are written in a cramped Italian narrative - his economical use of line and page is probably due to the strictures of wartime paper rationing. They evocatively chronicle the brooding and violent coexistence of Fascist and anti-Fascist internees and juxtapose this with the daily banalities of camp life.

After Bonisoli's death in 1954, the diaries passed into the custody of his niece, who as a schoolgirl had written to him in Hay Camp, NSW. In 1992 she presented the library with

The Italian connection

Jim Andrighetti

Mamma Lena at 2CH with her husband and producer, Dino Gustin (standing), and her English language announcer, Friel Smith c.1963. Photograph by Brian Bird.

both her uncle's diaries and her letters to him. The library's holdings of unpublished accounts by Italian internees had previously been negligible.

For many years the collections of Australian libraries, archives and museums have inadequately represented the contribution of ethnic communities to our society. The 'Towards Federation 2001' conference in 1992 addressed the collective responsibilities of these institutions and set down an action plan in relation to the documentation of Australian cultural diversity. On the eve of the federal government's launching of the National Agenda for a Multicultural

Australia in 1989, the State Library of NSW accepted an invitation from the Italian Historical Society of NSW to preserve jointly the state's Italian documentary heritage. The project aims to collect, preserve and make available for research in the library the documentary record of the Italian presence in NSW.

The State Library of NSW has always collected original material such as correspondence, diaries, photographs and paintings recording the participation of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds in the history of NSW. The historical record of the Anglo-Celtic majority of the population has, however, overshadowed that of the ethnic minorities. A consequence of such exiguous sources has been the marginalisation of various groups in the recounting of Australian history.

During the 1980s the library made a concerted effort to redress this imbalance in its collections and to reflect the state's rich cultural diversity. In 1985 it took custody of the first consignment of records from the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW Oral Histories Project, featuring taped interviews with postwar European migrants. Two years later, the library's 'Ethnic History - Why Care?' project, aimed at raising community awareness of the importance of multicultural records and encouraging their deposit in the library, met with mixed success. Some records were received, but the disadvantage of not having staff with relevant cross-cultural skills who were capable of nurturing an ongoing liaison with ethnic communities became evident. The salutary lessons learned from this exercise proved invaluable in consolidating the State Library of NSW's relationship with the Italian Historical Society of NSW.

As the library's contact officer for the project, working from the Mitchell Library manuscripts section, I am responsible for liaising with the Italian Historical Society and other community groups. As a second-generation Italo-Australian, I bring to the project a working knowledge of my parent's Veneto dialect and a background in research and archival work. My duties include attending the society's committee meetings; conducting field trips; organising talks and publicity; and arranging and describing materials, particularly those with a significant Italian language component. An unexpected duty was organising the society's inaugural ball in 1990. The library came to the party, so to speak, not only in staff attendance, but also in the design and production of the evening's program!

To date, the State Library of NSW has acquired personal papers and organisational records by making direct contact with individuals and groups. This approach is preferred, as it pre-

Memorie dell' internamento
 7-8-43 Stamane dopo l'ispezione venne fatta una perquisizione alla baracca 28 con il risultato del sequestro di molti utensili per lavorare il legno ed anche: ... metallo. Venne trovati parecchi sellini d'argento i quali venivano usati per fare anelli ed anche parecchi utensili per fare la grappa ed un tiro per la farina. ... azione dell'era il quale fu sospeso malgrado fosse sepolto sotto la terra sotto alla baracca stessa. I soldati dovettero fare sporcizi tremendi per estarlo essendo quasi pieno ed ... internato nel centro dell'area della baracca in una posizione dove un uomo poteva giungersi a stretto vicinato con il ventre a terra. 8-4-43 Sono entrato oggi all'ospedale del campo, il dott. Castellano che mi visito simultaneamente mi ha siglato a farmi operare. Il capit. medico che viene ogni ora si e uno no mi disse che ha già parlato al Maggiore, medico, ma questo, sembra abbia espresso la volontà di ritornarmi egli stesso non si vede mai. Devo stare sempre a letto malgrado non abbia mai febbre. Vi sono pochi ammalati fra i quali tre permanenti: un vecchio colonnello, un vecchio decrepito ed uno cieco. Il vecchio Bellani, ucraino e decrepito, avendo egli lavorato sempre nei caffè in America ed in Sydney un giorno volle ... ricetta per fare un buon CAFFÈ ed anche il

cludes the acquisition of inappropriate materials. Bilingual gift and loan forms setting out access and copying conditions have been produced, but these are rarely used because most donors are proficient in English.

The library's holdings of printed material are minimal; these include periodicals and ephemeral items such as leaflets and posters produced by the plethora of Italian clubs and associations. As a result, the project strives to raise awareness among publishers of their obligation to forward to the library for permanent record one copy of each of their publications.

The steady success of the library's partnership with the Italian Historical Society has been mutually beneficial. For the library, the project has meant increased contact with the Italian community and the acquisition of significant materials long held in private hands and hidden from the purview of Australian history. For the community it has provided the opportunity for prominent as well as lesser known Italo-Australians from all walks of life to contribute to the historical record. Fifty collections have been received, two through the Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme. In some cases original



Above: A page from Federico Bonisoli's third internment diary recording events of 7-8 April, 1943 at Loveday Camp, South Australia.



'What's that tune?': Mamma Lena interviewing Italian pop singer, Pippino Di Capri, at Sydney Airport during one of his concert tours in the 1960s.

records have been lent to the library for copying, usually to be microfilmed or photographed.

The papers of legendary radio broadcaster, journalist and welfare worker, Mamma Lena Gustin, afford a rich record of a very public life. Gustin was the voice of Sydney's Italian community through her popular radio programs which spanned four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. A columnist for the Italian language newspaper *La Fiamma*, she served as the first woman editor of the weekly *Settegiorni* in the late 60s. Gustin is an influential fund-raiser and has helped galvanise the Italian and wider community response to a series of natural disasters in Italy,

including the earthquakes in Sicily in 1968 and Friuli in 1976. Mamma Lena's extensive correspondence with her listeners and readers gives a unique insight into the migrant experience.

Some other notable collections of personal papers received by the project include those of Franco Battistessa, the doyen of Italian journalists in Australia until his death in 1978; Tom Marinato, an early Sydney filmmaker; Angiolina Lorenzi, the well-loved owner of La Veneziana Restaurant in East Sydney during the 1950s and 1960s; the journalist and broadcaster, Pino Bosi; and the poet, Luigi Strano. Also included are the papers of the influential portrait painters, Giulio Anivitti and Antonio Dattilo Rubbo; the former state parliamentarian, George Paciullo; and the papers of a parishioner relating to the Scalabrinian Order's pastoral activities in Unanderra.

The project's most sensational acquisition has been the wartime records of Italia Libera (Free Italy); Australian-Italian Anti-Fascist Movement (NSW Committee). Discovered behind a chimney during the refurbishment of a house in inner-city Sydney, the documents remained undisturbed in a sealed wooden box for over 40 years. They comprise correspondence files generated by the founding secretary, Tom Saviane. A victim of Mussolini's political persecution, Saviane fled for the freedom of Australia in 1927. Under his direction, Italia Libera lobbied the federal government to release Italian anti-Fascist internees, especially after the killing of an anti-Fascist at the hands of a Fascist counterpart in Loveday Camp, South Australia, in 1942. The NSW branch also sought government intervention against the economic discrimination encountered by anti-Fascists who were conscripted by the Allied Work Council following their release from internment camps. Despite many of these Italians being prewar unionists, they were subjected to lower rates of pay and worse conditions than Australian labourers employed in similar work.

These Phoenix-like records amplify previously known sources on the Italo-Australian anti-Fascist movement. Historian Gianfranco Cresciani has drawn attention to their significance as a corrective to the confused oral testimonials of Italia Libera officials whom he interviewed for his seminal book, *Fascism, Antifascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945*, published in 1980. The records also elucidate the formative influence of Italian Jews in the movement, something long eclipsed by Catholics in the history of Italian migration to Australia.

The library has also acquired the organisational records of the Italo-Australian Welfare Centre in the 50s; the National Italian-Australian

Women's Association (NSW branch); the San Francisco Catholic-Italian Association; and the Dante Alighieri Society (Wollongong chapter).

The burgeoning field of oral history has provided the project with other valuable contributions to the historical record. The project has enlisted the expertise of the library's curator of oral history, Rosemary Block, to lend advice and equipment to various works-in-progress; and completed interviews are lodged with the library. The work of Lesley Jenkins with Italians in Lismore is such an example. Jenkins has documented the cultural practices of an ethnic community, and oral histories with Italian migrants formed the basis of her bilingual monograph, *Power of the Land: A Social History of Italian Settlement in Lismore* (1993). A set of the cassette interviews is held in the library for reference use.

The experiences of perhaps the most notorious Italian prisoner of war in Australia, better known in some circles by his nom de guerre, 'The Fox', are conveyed in an unedited interview over three hours which was conducted by the ABC Radio Social History Unit in 1986. Lieutenant Edgardo Simoni attained the grudging respect of his captors while an escapee from the Myrtleford and Murchison POW camps in Victoria. Assisted by Italian citizens in the Victorian countryside, he evaded the authorities and frustrated the authorities for periods of up to 10 months. Raised in a Catholic middle-class family, Simoni had been loyal to the King of Italy and disavowed fascism until his detention and exploits as a fugitive caused him to reappraise his political values. Towards the end of the war, Simoni embraced Communism and, despite being under increased surveillance at Myrtleford, he regularly absconded at night to organise nearby tobacco sharefarmers in their battle for better conditions. Simoni was repatriated in 1946.

The State Library's commitment to improving access to the Italo-Australian documentary heritage of NSW has been assisted by generous funding from the Australian Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation. This funding has enabled the library to employ staff for short periods to approach the Italian as well as the Greek and Chinese communities, and to list incoming collections, predominantly in the English language. Largely as a result of this work, several batches of entries have been compiled for the National Library of Australia's *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia*.

As part of the library's outreach program, 'Nel Nuovo Paese' [This New Land], an exhibition of materials acquired by the project, travelled to the Club Marconi in Sydney's outer-west on the second anniversary of the project in 1991. Situated in the municipality of Fairfield, the most



Federico Bonisoli
on the farm,
Sydney c1939.

ethnically diverse local government area in Australia, the club provided an ideal venue to promote the project. A major exhibition based on the documentary collections of the project is scheduled to open at the State Library of NSW's Mitchell Galleries in March 1995.

Enquiries about, and offers of material to, the Italians in New South Wales Project, should be directed to Jim Andrighetti at the State Library of NSW, Macquarie Street, Sydney 2000. Telephone (02) 230-1506, fax (02) 223-4086.

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