

attn. Mr. Dino Gustin & Mamma Lena

Remembering Italians Who Came In Ships To Australia

Nicoletta Favi (#3575)

I recently attended a most memorable function regarding "Italians Who Came In Ships" (to Australia). I went to the reunion not knowing what to expect. It surpassed my wildest dreams, reinforcing (if that's possible) an appreciation of our culture and of the trials and tribulations of Italian migrants to Australia.

I feel more Italian than ever, *very comossa*, (deeply moved) after attending a reunion of Italians who came to Australia in ships on Sunday, August 2, 1998. The Italian Historical Society of New South Wales, here in Australia, arranged this special day of reunion and remembrance. It was part of the "Tears, Fears and Cheers" celebration and exhibition at The Australian National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour, Sydney.

The program began with a session in the Museum's theatre entitled "Memories and Mementoes." It was hosted by Mr. Peter Tesoriero of The Italian Historical Society of New South Wales. It was a sharing of memories about leaving Italy, the voyage and arriving in Australia. There was a panel of special guests that included surviving representatives of the principal shipping companies and representatives of the Italian welfare organizations.

People from the audience recalled the sadness of leaving, the shipboard life, and the friendships that were formed. It was so moving to hear someone mention some incident and to hear the audience almost as one, concur, having experienced the same emotions and feelings at another time, in another place. Someone remembered the singing of "Quel Mazzolin di Fiori." No sooner had that been mentioned, than almost all in the auditorium burst into song, totally spontaneously.

A story was told of some who were looking at the bleak Melbourne waterfront, waiting to disembark ship and wondering what lay ahead of them, when one of their number quietly began to sing. One by one the others all joined in singing the "Val Pensiero" chorus from "Nabucco." As this story was being told, the audience spontaneously burst into the chorus themselves. The voices were strong and the words were clear and unfaltering, almost as if they wanted to reach out to those unknown people in the dim past, to be united with them, to say, "Paesani, your pain was our pain."

Some people brought along items of interest, such as passage tickets, menus, and copies of ship's newspapers. Names of ships were called out and people raised their hands when the name of their ship was mentioned. Fellow passengers recognized each other, perhaps for the first time in fifty years. Most of them sailed either from Genova, Napoli or Messina.

I arrived as a child on the *Castel Bianco*, but she sailed from Bremerhaven in Germany with Istrian refugees after the World War II. I was glad to see that the Istrian refugees were not forgotten - many came from Fiume, my birthplace (now called Rijeka). They were moved from refugee camp to refugee camp. We were then put on a train for the long voyage to Bremerhaven from whence we departed for Australia under the auspices of the I.R.O. (International Refugee Organization).

Together with my parents, I arrived in Australia on the *Castel Bianco* on 17 December 1950, disembarking in Melbourne. My one regret is that, being only five years of age at the time, I have very few recollections of the trip.

On the other hand, I am grateful that, being young and innocent at the time, I was spared the anguish of knowing that I was a displaced person and the heartbreak that must have been felt by the young adults and the older generation.

One lady mentioned that they celebrated New Year's Eve during her trip to Australia in the 1950's, but her father did not allow her to dance at the shipboard party. A gentleman asked her which ship she arrived on, and they discovered, to their mutual surprise, that they had both been at the party. Thereupon, the host, Mr. Peter Tesoriero, to the great amusement of the audience, reminded us that we would later be entertained by the band called the "Vento del Sud" and he suggested that since the lady's father was no longer around, the gentleman might ask the lady for the dance that had been forbidden almost fifty years earlier.

Also present at the function was "Mamma Lena" Gustin, who was the surrogate mother to many an Italian migrant, single and alone in Australia, as well as a friend to Italian migrant families. She ran a weekly radio program in Italian in the '50s and '60s in Sydney. Although now over 80, she is still involved with the Italian community and is much loved by us all. She was recently honored when, at her birthday party, a bronze bust of "Mamma Lena" was unveiled. "Mamma Lena" is a real living treasure. I'm not sure she realizes how much she meant to those early migrants; hearing a familiar voice, speaking on the radio in their own language, must have been so comforting for those Italians missing their families and their homeland.

The second part of the program was entitled "Music and Memorabilia." This took place in the Terrace Room overlooking Darling Harbour. The celebrated group "Vento Del Sud" entertained us all with their renditions of popular songs of days gone by, songs that made hearts swell with pride, brought a tear to the eye and a wonderful smile on the faces of all present.

It was also an occasion for old acquaintances and their families to meet and reminisce on days gone by

Che nostalgia!

The importance of our Italian heritage was so very evident and it was pleasing to see many of the younger generation looking at the exhibition and hearing them speak Italian amongst themselves. The Italian immigrants to Australia have made a fine contribution to their new homeland and have instilled a love of the "old country" and its traditions and culture in the younger generations.

I congratulate Mr. Peter Tesoriero, his Committee and the Australian National Maritime Museum and its staff for making this day such a memorable one for the Italian migrants to Australia - for remembering Italians who came in ships.

Dr. Tom,

Thank you so much for promoting not only Italian genealogical research, but also for fostering pride in our ancestors and our Italian heritage. Best regards.

Nicoletta Favi