

## Lena Gustin - Mamma Lena

Maddalena Morelli was born in 1914 in Azzone, a small Italian village, just a few hours drive north-west of Venice. She can still recall the loss of her father who worked for the local electricity authority when a dam burst, when she was only seven years old.

She grew up in the small village at a time of great turmoil in Italy. It was during the period between the two great world wars. The abdication of the king of Italy to make way for "il Duce". And, his subsequent invasion into north Africa. Notwithstanding this, she became a teacher in Milan and then studied at the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice. No mean feat for a woman at that time.

During her studies she met Dino Gustin whom she married in 1941, who had also studied the finer art of journalism. At the time Dino was conscripted in the Italian army. Besides his love for Maddalena, rumour has it there was another reason why he married. He realized his honeymoon leave would mean he would not have to sail with his ship which was destined for the war in north Africa.

Having lost their first child Alberto as an infant and the chaos after the second World War, Maddalena, now Lena Gustin and Dino set sail for Australia arriving in 1956 with their two children Robert and Rosalba.

Their studies not being recognized in Australia, Lena worked full time as a waiter, while Dino worked in a factory. Journalists and teachers being what they are, they also worked part time writing for the Italian newspaper "La Fiamma" and later for "Settegiorni" for which Lena was the Editor. Their literary skills being recognized, and Lena supported by Dino were given time slots on Radio 2SM, 2CH and 2KY. The

beginning of ethnic radio in NSW and perhaps Australia.

For about a quarter of a century, Lena, by this time known affectionately as "Mamma Lena" was listened to by almost all Italo-Australians. And, as for the Melbourne Cup, the Italian community would stop, turn on the radio just to listen to Mamma Lena's program. I recall as a child while culling rabbits in outback NSW having to walk great distances back to the car with my father and the other adult males, just to listen to Mamma Lena, then going all the way back. As a child I thought it strange for grown ups to behave like this. When I think of it, I could speak English, but for them Mamma Lena was their only way of getting information on what was occurring around them. She explained what was expected of them and what to expect in their new world. Indeed she was and still is the mother figure for all Italo-Australians.

She used her programme to provide information on Government services, job opportunities and keeping Italo-Australians abreast of news and events in a language they could understand. At the time there were no government departments of Ethnic Affairs, or Commissions, (and I might add no unemployment benefits) migrants were forced to gain information about government services, such as health and education by whichever means they could. She would respond to listeners letters for help on air so as to help other listeners with similar problems. She readily supported any italo-Australians in their career or community work. On a personal basis I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her support in the 1991 state elections, and with her constructive assistance in many instances with my community

work as a Councillor and Commissioner of Ethnic Affairs.

In the Italian community she has been monumental, with few if any peers in providing support for Italian migrants and indeed all migrants. All at a time when the word "multiculturalism" as we know it had not yet been invented. To the Italian community in NSW and indeed Australia, she is a living legend. She has inspired films, books and songs. In recognition of her work for others she has been knighted by the Italian Government and has been awarded an MBE by the Queen.

Mamma Lena's dream of building a Child Care Centre has become reality with the "Mamma Lena Child Care Centre" for 60 children being built in Fairfield. In 1968 following the disastrous earthquake in Poggioreale, Sicily, Mamma Lena with contributions from the Italian Community built another Child Care centre in that Italian city.

There is no doubt that Mamma Lena has inspired many italians to success in their new home. many of whom have contributed greatly to the development of Australia. I hope at a time of great anxiety and debate about multiculturalism we have more people with the vision and dedication to make this great country - Australia - a better place for Australians. Thank you Mamma Lena.

*Australia Day 25 January 1997  
Speech given by Michael Cantali  
at Parliament House of NSW  
during a reception for leaders of  
all Ethnic Groups and in the  
presence of Mr. Phillip Ruddock,  
Minister for Immigration and  
Mr. Peter Collins, Leader of the  
Opposition, NSW Government*