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UPFRONT

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La Dolce Vita? THE GOOD LIFE?

A new exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales reveals the bittersweet experiences of Italian-Australians in New South Wales in the twentieth century.

Bravo! Bravo!

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

THE FLAVOUR OF Italian influences permeates life in Australia with strength and subtlety, like a deep breath engendered by the olfactory stimulation of a freshly made cappuccino or freshly baked focaccia. Nutritionally they equate with coffee and toasted sandwiches but culturally their texture and taste denote the difference between eating 'in front of the telly' and soaking up the atmosphere of a cafe.

Food is a powerful medium for multiculturalism in Australia. One of the greatest barriers against it was 'meat and three veg'.

The upcoming exhibition *La Dolce Vita?* (The Good Life?) due to open in the State Library's Galleries in March reveals the Italian experience and its contribution to the Australian community in a unique way. It presents the lives of ordinary and not so ordinary Italian-Australians via their own photographs, letters, diaries and other records. These artefacts of the home tell the story of the Italian aspect of Australia's ethnic history without the need for ideology.

The experiences of Australians born to Italian parents and growing up between two cultures are also explored. It is Australian history within arm's reach, as simple and as exciting as opening the family photo album.

What will visitors to *La Dolce Vita?* make of the photographs of the FJ Holden proudly parked in the vicinity of the Forum in Rome by Vic Facchini and his sister who had shipped the car to Italy from Australia for a motoring holiday in 1956?

Why did Terry McLain (Maria Teresa Paliani), who represented Italy in the 1954 Miss Universe competition at Long Beach, California, migrate to Australia after modelling here on assignment for *The Australian Women's Weekly* and David Jones in 1955? In fact hers is a story of romance balanced by the realities of life in Sydney, a city she says she has grown up with.

Vic Facchini on the other hand arrived in Australia in 1934 at the age of 16 out of necessity. His father had died after an accident on the family farm in the province of Trento in the far north of Italy.

Vic remembers performing in Italian plays at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in the years leading up to World War II. The Fascist insignia stamped in his script by the Italian Consul General of the time later attracted the attention of police.



Vic Facchini and his sister took their FJ Holden to Italy in 1956, photographed here in the vicinity of the Forum in Rome.

During the war 5,000 Italian-Australians were interned in camps as enemy aliens. Although not interned himself Vic Facchini was sent to a labour camp at Wards River near Gloucester on the north coast of New South Wales. "We made charcoal from timber as an alternative fuel during wartime shortages," Vic said.

When Vic and five of his compatriots first arrived at Wards River railway station a police escort was waiting for them. "Everybody in town was looking out of windows," Vic said. "They knew there were prisoners of war coming and they were all scared."

"After a month they became friendly, they saw that we were not dangerous and were the same as everybody else. They used to invite us to the dances and one of our Italian blokes played the guitar and sang so we were all right."

Vic spent 3 years in the labour camp with occasional authorised visits to his family in Sydney. During this time he was paid a basic wage. He later returned to his trade of cabinet-making. Before the war he was employed by his Italian brother-in-law to make hand-made furniture. After the war he fashioned wooden cabinets for '2 in 1s', that is single cabinets containing a radio and radiogram.

There is no apparent bitterness in Vic Facchini's recollection of his wartime experiences. It is as if for him the event of war explains everything. Other Italian-Australians featured in *La Dolce Vita?* suffered extreme hardship because of internment.

On 11 June 1940, 58 year old poultry farmer Federico Bonisoli was seized by two

police and later interned at a camp in Hay, New South Wales, with his three younger brothers and hundreds of fellow migrants. His diaries "evocatively chronicle the brooding and violent coexistence of Fascist and anti-Fascist internees and juxtapose this with the daily banalities of camp life".*

Federico Bonisoli's diaries were presented to the State Library by his niece in 1992 along with the letters she had written as a schoolgirl to him at the camp in Hay. They are on display in *La Dolce Vita?*

The internment camps at Loveday, South Australia and Orange, New South Wales, were also exclusively for males, the female members of these families had to fend for themselves. A camp at Tatura, Victoria, was the only one where families were interned together.

Paolo and Nicoletta Merenda both came from the Eolian Islands off Sicily. They married in northern Queensland in 1923. It was from Queensland that they were sent to Tatura and interned with their only child, Francesca who was born in 1924.

The Merendas never returned to Queensland. After being released from internment they travelled to Sydney where they opened a delicatessen and became actively involved in promoting the welfare of the Italian community. This followed their efforts to build morale among Italian internees during their years at Tatura.

These bittersweet experiences of Italian families in New South Wales in the 20th century are the source of the exhibition title *La Dolce Vita?* The fact that the curator, Jim Andrighetti, is himself of Italian extraction,

adds an extra dimension to the exhibition.

Jim's parents migrated to Australia in the early 1950s, Jim was born here. His expertise as a librarian in the Manuscripts Section of the Mitchell Library has enabled him to assemble the exhibition *in simpatico* but without sentimentality. He allows the circumstance and spirit contained in the documents to speak for themselves.

One of Jim's responsibilities is concerned with the collection of material that records the essential thread of migrant history in Australia. *La Dolce Vita?* is the first exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales devoted entirely to Italian migrant history.

The Library's collection of material reflecting cultural diversity in Australia, and New South Wales in particular, dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. However it was during the 1980s that the Library began a campaign to ensure its collections reflected the cultural diversity in this state more fully.

In 1985 the Library commenced a publicity drive to promote the collection of materials from ethnic communities. A large consignment of records from the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission Oral Histories Project was received at this time, as well as manuscript materials from the Greek and Ukrainian communities and many publications such as newspapers in community languages.

In 1989 the State Library accepted an invitation from the Italian Historical Society of NSW to preserve the state's Italian-

The Merenda family showing the dignity that helped them cope with internment.



Australian documentary heritage. The resulting Italians in New South Wales Project has now been running for five years under the guidance of Jim Andrighetti. The success of the work being done with the Italian Historical Society has led to other efforts with the Greek, Chinese and Ukrainian communities, assisted by funding received from the Australian Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation and the Ukrainian Studies Foundation.

One of the earliest and most significant collections to be acquired as part of the Italians in New South Wales Project was the papers of 'the voice of Sydney's Italian community' broadcaster Mamma Lena Gustin. They too will be on display in *La Dolce Vita?*

The most sensational acquisition during the time of the Italians in New South Wales Project, according to Jim Andrighetti, has been the wartime records of the Australian anti-Fascist movement Italia Libera (Free Italy). They had remained hidden for more than 40 years behind the chimney of an inner city house in Sydney where they were discovered during renovations in 1992.

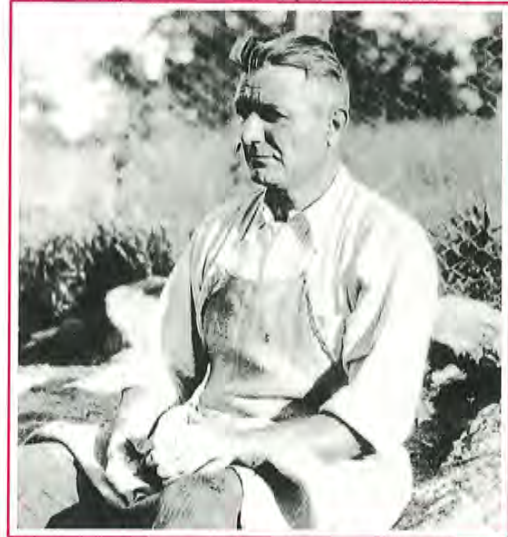
The founding secretary of Italia Libera, Tom Saviane, fled to Australia in 1927 to escape political persecution by Mussolini. Italia Libera lobbied the Federal Government to release Italian anti-Fascist internees, especially after the killing of an anti-Fascist by a Fascist in the Loveday Camp, South Australia, in 1942.

The Italians In New South Wales Project has also attracted invaluable support from prominent community groups such as the National Italian-Australian Women's Association. Two books, *Growing Up Italian In Australia*, a collection of essays by contemporary Italian-Australians and *Buon Appetito*, a regional cook book, are the first fruits of this particular relationship.

Having peaked at almost 300,000 in 1971, the number of Italian-born Australians is steadily declining as the community ages. Collecting the records that document the history and culture of this community is very much a race against time.

Unless Australians of all ages have access

Memorie dell' internamento
7-1-1943. Stamane del 1.0 ispezione venne fatta
visione alla baracca 28 con il risultato del s
ti utensili per lavorare il legno ed anche i
trovati parecchi sellini d'argento i qu
usati per fare anelli ed anche parecchi uti
la grappa ed un tiro per la fer... a xio
il quale fu sofferto un legnante fosse scholto
sotto alla baracca stessa. I soldati dovettero f
mendi per estarlo esendo quasi pieno co
entro dell' area della baracca in una pos



Federico Bonisoli whose diary describes the tensions between Fascist and anti-Fascist internees.

to materials that reflect cultural diversity fully then history and its role in shaping our cultural life will be lost. The advent of *La Dolce Vita?* is indicative of things to come at the Library with regard to other ethnic groups in New South Wales.

La Dolce Vita? is built on the hard work and determination of Italians in New South Wales. The collection of materials gathered under the Italians In New South Wales Project are the source of the exhibition. Its significance derives from the value of the lives it depicts and the enduring influence they and their children have had on this state's economic and cultural life. Bravo! Bravo!

* Jim Andrighetti, *The Italian Connection*, New Librarian, September 1994, page 28.

La Dolce Vita? Italian-Australians of New South Wales

**On Display in the Galleries
from 7 March to 2 July 1995**