

## **REBECCA BAGNARA**

*(AUSTRALIA)*

Italians have been migrating to Australia since 1788, however, the Italian migration peaked post war, with most Italian migrants settling in Australia between 1949 and 1970. Italians came to Australia in search of a better life, fleeing from war, persecution and poverty. It was with tremendous courage that they ventured to a foreign country, with a foreign language that would later become their home. Australia is a vast and spacious country and the distance between each state meant that Italian populations around Australia were unique. Often Italians already in Australia would sponsor family and people from the same town to come into Australia, meaning that persons from the same town would settle in the same area forming little networks and communities. For example, many Sicilians were in the Eastern states and would sponsor family and friends to come out, resulting in a large Sicilian population settling in the Eastern states and only a small Sicilian population settling in South Australia. Prior to the war a large Molfetta population settled in rural South Australia, namely Port Pirie, where many would work as fisherman, later having a great influence on the fishing industry. Given these differences it is only fair that I concentrate on the Italian population in South Australia, given that is where I am from and can speak with confidence of only this population.

Prior to the war the largest regions of origin in South Australia were Veneto (29.2%), Calabria (20.5%), Puglia (11.6%) and Campania (9.6%).

However, post war the make up of the region of origin of Italian migrants changed dramatically, with Campania being the largest region of origin (27.9%), followed by Calabria (23.5%), Veneto (10.5%), and Abruzzo (8.6%). The largest town of origin within the Campania region is Altavilla Irpina, Provincia di Avellino, followed closely by San Giorgio La Molarra, Provincia di Benevento.

The mass migration experienced post war had a life changing impact on South Australia. The homogenous society in South Australia was faced with their ideals and beliefs being challenged. A white Anglo Celtic community were being challenged by the invasion of a new culture. The lack of the English language, illiteracy, colour and their foreign language and culture were all seen as inferior characteristics and unwanted flaws that were not going to be tolerated. This intolerance grew to racial hatred and discrimination that led to many Italian migrants being mistreated and unfairly victimised. However, in the face of adversity, Italian migrants stood tall and continued to work hard, ensuring they could build their home and provide for their family. Many migrants sponsored family and friends to come out to Australia, meaning that they would often provide for family and friends who would be boarding with them.

Many migrants worked and lived in the market garden areas; being the North Eastern and Western suburbs of Adelaide. As a result the two areas formed two distinct communities, often mirroring each other. Adding to the development of these two areas as Italian communities was the construction of a Roman Catholic Church in the heart of the two communities.

Later in the 1950's and 1960's other migrants capitalised on the Italian domination and set up Italian businesses such as pizza bars, cafés, Italian restaurants, Italian style butchers and other Italian owned businesses which not only offered Italian produce and brands, but also provided employment for many Italians. With the development of many Italian clubs and associations, these two areas created two "little Italies". Despite these two "little Italies" offering a taste of Italian culture, it was predominantly Italians who were the consumers, offering a familiar lifestyle that would provide comfort and support in their new homeland. The density of the Italian population in these two areas was astounding, but none more so than that of the North Eastern suburbs. According to the 1991 Census, the Italian population in the North Eastern suburbs of Adelaide particularly that of Payneham and Campbelltown Local Government Areas had a population of 12%; that is one person out of every eight persons in the area were Italian.

Second generation Italians who would attend school during the 1960's and 1970's were subjected to racial discrimination and school yard bullying, however, it was through

those Anglo Celtic students who befriended Italians that the slow process of acceptance would begin. Many were teased and bullied in the school yard for having smelly salami sandwiches and other strange foods, or for having funny habits, or limited English ability, yet in some schools, particularly where Italians were the majority of students and Anglo Celts became the minority they played together and became friends, resulting in white Australians being introduced to the Italian culture.

As a result of many second generation Italians being so desperate to fit in, like all young people, many would rebel by refusing to speak Italian at home and change their behaviours so as to fit in better with their Anglo Celtic fellow students. Many married non-Italians, joined the work force made more non-Italian friends and denied their Italian heritage. As a result their children were raised with different ideals, often causing friction with the first generation Italians due to conflicting beliefs.

Italian migrants continued to assimilate into Australian culture and Australians were slowly being introduced to the Italian culture through food and Italian quality products, yet it was only in the 1980's that Italians started to become more accepted among the wider Australian community.

More to the point, Italians became accepted once the new wave of migrants commenced. It was the "Asian Invasion". White Australians became fearful of Asians and consequently, Southern Europeans were now deemed to be part of the wider society, giving way to the new concept of multiculturalism and living in a multicultural society.

During the 1990's Italian culture became fashionable with the introduction of dining alfresco and more Italian brands and fashion made their way into mainstream fashion. It is at this point that third generation Italians become interested in reconnecting to their Italian heritage and roots.

Entering the new millennium, young Italian Australians, now third and fourth generation Italians are identifying themselves as having an identity crisis, referring to the double identity of being Italian and Australian and having to find a way to live with both identities simultaneously, despite many conflicting issues arising where the two cultural beliefs are at odds with each other.

Today young Italian Australians have embraced their multi identity being proud of their Italian heritage and grateful for the opportunities Australia offers them. However, they also want to move away from the stereotype of fast cars, fashion and spaghetti being Italian culture. It is time to move forward and show Australia that there is more to Italian culture than such superficial symbols.

Italians are one of the largest ethnic communities in Australia; however, in South Australia they are the largest ethnic community. South Australia is the state with the largest ageing population and with the highest settlement period for Italians being between 1949 and 1963, it is no surprise that the largest ageing ethnic community in South Australia is that of the Italians.

The Italian population has the highest ageing growth rate in South Australia (double the growth rate of the wider population in South Australia). Therefore, one of the largest issues in Australia, but particularly that in South Australia is the access of aged care services and culturally appropriate aged care services for first generation Italian migrants. Italians have contributed greatly to Australia; one only needs to walk around and there are Italian influences on every street corner. The greatest influence has been that of Italian food. Post war many Italian migrants opened up the first pizza bars, cafés, Italian restaurants where Italians could take comfort in familiar smells and tastes. Many of these places would become icons in the history of Italian migration to Australia as they formed meeting places for Italians to be with similar people who spoke the same language and could provide support for each other and a sense of belonging, which is very important as Isaiah Berlin stated in 'Two Concepts of Liberty' "When I am among my own people, 'they understand me, as I understand them; and this understanding creates within me a sense of being somebody in the world.' To belong is to understand the tacit codes of the people you live with; it is to know that you will be understood without having to explain yourself. People, in short, 'speak your language'." Later these eateries became popular venues for non-Italians to experience good quality Italian cuisine aiding not just tolerance, but acceptance of Italians in Australia.

Much of the urban planning in the cities of Australia needs to be credited to Italians with many piazza style areas being created giving a new sense of space as the Italian

influence utilized the spacious characteristic of Australia. Long before the fashion of Tuscan style villas were introduced over the past decade, Italians also influenced the construction of housing.

Many Italians were in the construction business, thus influencing houses they built, but the largest influence was the quality of the houses built and their attention to detail. Many streets have been named after influential Italian families or given an Italian name in honor of important Italians in the community.

Italians have played an instrumental role in sports in Australia. During the 1950's soccer was first introduced to Australia. In South Australia the Adelaide City Soccer Club was formed and many great players have cemented their place in history. Italians also were involved in cycling and athletics as well as an array of other sports. In an attempt to fit in with the wider society, many Italians took up the sport of Australian Rules Football and as a result have made a large contribution to the national sport. Many of the great icons have been Italian migrants and their descendants.

Religion is an important part of the Italian culture which has impacted on the wider community, none more so than the religious feasts celebrated throughout the year. This has sent a public affirmation of the religion as well as demonstrating the Italian culture to the wider population who have over the years come to enjoy the experience.

Prior to the 1960's only one school in Adelaide offered the Italian language as a subject. Since then, the Italian language has slowly been offered at a primary, secondary and tertiary level to today being taught at over 200 schools.

Italians have over the years contributed greatly to the arts with various artists being Italian migrants or of Italian heritage.

In South Australia Italians have contributed immensely to commerce and industry. In a climate that is similar to the Mediterranean, South Australia has become the wine state of Australia. Many Italian migrants have developed the wine industry and introduced many Italian grape varieties. The Olive industry has developed substantially over the last decade.

Australia's love affair with everything Italian today has meant that there has been a boost in Italian commerce and industry.

My name is Rebecca Bagnara, I am 25 years old, born in Adelaide, Australia and am third generation Italian. All my grandparents were born in Italy; on my father's side, my grandmother was born in Larino, provincia di Campobasso, my grandfather was born in Altavilla Irpina, provincia di Avellino and on my mother's side, both my grandparents were born in Altavilla Irpina, provincia di Avellino.

On my father's side, my grandfather had decided to venture to Australia, like many others, in search of work and a better life. Given many others from Altavilla Irpina had made Adelaide their home, he chose to do the same in 1950. Once in Australia, he boarded with others from his village and those who had already been in Australia for some time assisted him in finding work. With no English, the only work he could get was in the labour force in a factory. He found himself with many others at Holdens, an Australian car manufacturer. Once he had set himself up and was settled, he, like many others married by proxy. My grandmother married in 1955 in Italy with a relative standing in my grandfather's place. Once married, my grandmother came to Australia in 1956 and they met for the first time as she stepped off the boat, there was not an instant attraction, in fact, just the opposite, my grandmother took one look at my grandfather and wanted to jump back on the boat and return to Italy. The only problem was that she had no money to get a ticket back to Italy and what was she going to do if she returned. They had their family; they had 6 children, my dad being their third. They coincided in the same household, however, they were never really happy as they did not love each other and my grandmother resented my grandfather her whole life. Once their family was older they decided to separate and live their own lives.

Failed proxy marriages are common, many separated after raising their family, but many stayed together, living miserably their entire lives. I believe this has a profound effect on everyone involved as it raises many important issues. I think there is a greater emphasis on the need to meet the right person, rather than marrying for convenience. The important message is to be true to yourself and to have the courage to do what is right.

The separation of my grandparents was a pivotal moment in my life. I have mixed emotions about the event as it is obviously not nice to experience a marriage breakdown,

however, in a time and place with a culture that did not approve of separation as the marriage of two people is sacred and you must stay together no matter what, show great courage for my grandparents to separate. There is no point living two lives together miserably when they can go their separate ways and live their lives the way they choose. Proxy marriages were truly a marriage of convenience, in my opinion, making a mockery of marriage in the first place and do not approve of them at all.

On my mother's side, my grandparents lived in the same building and were childhood sweethearts. They dated and later married in 1956. With no job opportunities, my grandfather decided he wanted to go to Australia and build a life for his new family there. My grandfather left for Australia three days after their wedding leaving my grandmother with her parents.

He was to go to Australia, find work and get settled and then call for her.

When he went to Australia he found it difficult and took some time to get settled. He too worked at Holdens and boarded with others from their village.

It took my grandfather two years before he called for my grandmother to come to Australia. In 1958 my grandmother went to Australia.

They continued to board with three other couples, but a year later they started their family of three, my mother being the first, and they soon moved out and looked for their own house.

With both my parents being born in Australia and educated in Australia, they were more comfortable speaking English at home. My grandparents had a fabulous idea to ask the grandchildren to speak only in English to them so that they can learn English, however, they forgot about the importance of the grandchildren learning Italian. Despite this, by the age of 5 I could already understand most Italian as I seemed to have a passion for the language and culture from the day I was born. This set me apart from my sister and cousins as they never really picked up the language.

Throughout my school life I also made a point of studying Italian and over the years I have participated in courses that discuss the history and culture of Italy and in particular the Campania region, my family's region of origin. I also chose to study Italian at a university level, but after my first year at university, despite all my studies and efforts, I

felt I was not at the level that I wanted to be at. I wanted to be fluent in Italian and have as high a proficiency in Italian as I do in English. There was only one way to do this and that was to completely immerse myself in the language.

Since I did not have the opportunity to travel at the time, I did the next best thing, I rang around the Italian community asking to please volunteer somewhere I would have to speak Italian. I was sent to the Co-ordinating Italian Committee.

The Co-ordinating Italian Committee is a not for profit welfare agency that provides assistance to the elderly and disabled in the Italian community.

It ensures that they receive adequate services and through social interaction they are able to live in a meaningful manner. It also allows them to maintain their independence and prevent or prolong their need to go to a nursing home. Many Italian migrants still have very limited English skills and when people age they revert back to their native tongue, therefore the Co-ordinating Italian Committee provides language assistance and ensures that they are able to access all service in Australia.

Volunteering at the Co-ordinating Italian Committee was the pivotal turning point in my life. Through speaking to the elderly clients I grew an even larger appreciation for Italy, the language and culture. I had a new found appreciation for our migrants who came out, leaving everything and everyone behind to venture to a land unknown in the hope and search for work and a better life. Many needed to raise their family in a place that could offer them more opportunities than were offered to them and sincerely believed that one day they would return to Italy, their homeland.

However, once they set up these lives for themselves and their families were taking up the opportunities presented to them, they no longer wanted to return to Italy, nor could they as they had set their roots firmly into Australian ground.

Through listening to their stories, I discovered and appreciated the wisdom and knowledge that our first generation Italians have. They became like my extended family and my involvement in the organisation increased to organising outings and special events for them, becoming a program co-ordinator and later a board member. The last 18 months, however, was when I became the manager of the organisation and faced



many challenges, many being conflicting generation and cultural differences, but I found through these various challenges a new found respect for each other.

The Co-ordinating Italian Committee also run the largest Italian festival of its type in South Australia and is unique in all of Australia, Carnevale in Adelaide. It is the one time in the year that all the regional associations come together and work collectively to promote and celebrate the Italian culture in South Australia. There are regional associations who cook regional cuisine for the weekend. There are hundreds of volunteers who are preparing the food months ahead. For two months prior to the

Carnevale, volunteers are making hundreds of kilograms of pasta by hand, preparing pizza bases and preparing the design of their tent. They do an amazing job and the fruits of their hard work are finally realised on the weekend.

Other associations provide a cultural participation, whereby they showcase a piece of culture from their region. For example, there has been photo exhibitions, art exhibitions, and costumes. Each year the various regions also talk to their region in Italy and we have been fortunate enough to receive a cultural participation from Italy. For example, we have had a master ceramist from Gubbio, who provided workshops and demonstrations as well as an exhibition of his works, we also have had gli sbandieratori from Umbria and Faenza come and perform. Each year there is at least one singer from Italy who comes and sings classic Italian songs. We also have many local artists who perform Italian Australian comedy, music, theatrical performance, and dance.

Being involved in the organisation of Carnevale in Adelaide, to me, is a way of celebrating my Italian culture and heritage. It is also about promoting the Italian culture to the wider community, allowing them to enjoy a taste of Italy, as well as providing homage to the migrants who are now elderly and require a range of services and assistance, which the profits go towards providing.

Once getting involved with the Co-ordinating Italian Committee and Carnevale in Adelaide, I began to get involved in other associations. I became a member of Australia Donna, an association that celebrates the contribution of Italian and Italian Australian women in Australia, be it through art, literature, health, community services, etc. Australia Donna essentially run a website that promotes I soon became involved in

Giovani Campani in SA and Giovani SA, both Italian Australian youth associations that aim to promote and maintain the Italian language and culture as well as providing a mode of social interaction with people of similar background, culture, ideas and beliefs.

These various associations provided an outlet for me to learn more about the Italian community and culture while pursuing issues which I was passionate about. As I became more and more involved I became more passionate about these issues. However, through my involvement in the Italian community, it was the encounters of various persons, the stories I heard and the experiences that I hold most dear. Each person I met, each story I have listened to, each experience that I have had have all had an impact on me and shaped me to be the person I am today.

I started out wanting to practice the Italian language and found an appreciation for the Italian community, the migrants and their stories. As a result, I gave more of myself, volunteering and working more in the Italian community to eventually paying homage to our forefathers. As I became more involved, I received more back and am truly grateful for each person I encountered, for each story that I had the privilege of listening to and each experience has helped shape my Identity as an Italian Australian.