

# PLOD ESSAY:

## Sam Scimonello's Sewing Machine

When interviewing some Wonthaggians, who were born in Italy and remembered coming on the long boat ride to Australia, we asked them what kinds of things they or their parents brought with them that they thought they could not live without in the new country. For most, it was their espresso coffee pot. Women brought hand-embroidered linen from their dowries, sewing implements and, of course, certain essential cooking implements: Yolanda Luna brought her ravioli press and her beautiful copper polenta pan. If they had a trade, men brought their tools. Always someone in the family brought an instrument: Lucy Caile brought her accordion, the Coldabellas their guitars, the Scimonello brothers their brass instruments.

Sam Scimonello brought his coveted sewing machine for he was a tailor trained in Milan, the city of design. Everyone knows that, while Paris is the capital of couture, the Italians are the best tailors and the people they sew for the best dressed people in the world.

"I was trained in Milan. My brothers became carpenters – builders – like my father, but I wanted to sew. All my life, I wanted to sew. My father agreed to send me to Milan where I could learn from the best teachers. My sewing machine comes from Milan.

"I was 22 years old when I came to Australia. We came because after the war – during the war, really - my father went broke. I remember the war. I remember living under Mussolini. At first he was good because he seemed to be for the workers and made things better, but when he got in with Hitler things went bad. We had no food, there was hardly anything to eat, and no one had any money. So you did work for goods. When My father did a job he never got paid except with food. We were builders and needed to barter for food. He would make some furniture, a table maybe, and exchange it for food.

After the war things still went wrong and so our father sent all of his children to Australia with the intention that we would stay for about two years, earn the money to pay off all the debts and then go home. We did send a lot of money home, but when we saw the difference in life style and the opportunities that were available here, we started mixing with people and learned the language (which is a killer), we thought oh, well, we will stay. None of us – there was four brothers – none of us went back. Imagine my poor mother...

"Frank came in '52, Paul in '54 and John and I in '56 together. My mother never saw us again. After my mother passed away, our father came in 1976 and stayed with us for six months and he enjoyed it but he regretted that he hadn't made a decision to come when he was younger. We got a brother in Italy, Thirteen years younger than me. He's still there.

"We come from Sicilia. Only a few of us here in Wonthaggi are from Sicilia, many from Calabria, but not so many from Sicilia. My brother, Frank was named after my father and my grandfather. My brother, Paul, was named after an uncle who lived in America. We have another Uncle Frank, who was a famous musician in America. Really it is Franco and Paulo and Giovanni and I am Salvatore. In Sicilian dialect my name is Torido. When I came here, I changed it to Sam. There was a little bit of discrimination and it was easier to have an Australian sounding name. We all changed our name. We tried hard to fit into Australian culture. We were lucky we were in a small town.

"To come to Australia in the 1950s we had to make an application to come, and once that is accepted, we had to go to local doctor for medical check up then to provincial doctor and then another one in Messina. They gave us the works; fitness, blood test, water works and lots of other things. Then we apply for the passport and visa, then buy the ticket which was £240 a single. Altogether we had to get about £1000 together. Lot of Money. We were not sponsored by the government, which means we never ended up in a camp when we came to Australia. The sponsored migrants who only paid £22 had to go where the government put them and stay contracted to the government for two years. None of us four boys were sponsored by the government.

"The reason we ended up in Wonthaggi was because when Frank came to Australia, he met some people who came from Calabria on the boat who were coming to Wonthaggi so he joined them. Four fellows from Italy got on the train in Melbourne to head for Wonthaggi, but they didn't speak a word of English so every time the train stopped they got off the train. Until a young girl understood the situation and would yell at them, SIT DOWN, DON'T MOVE! Finally she yelled, TRAIN STOP! OFF! And that's why we were in Wonthaggi.

"When I came to Wonthaggi, there was promised a job in a factory here, but I never got it.

So I was forced to go to Melbourne. I didn't like city life, but I finally got a job in a Jewish factory pressing children's overcoats and that was the day before Melbourne Cup, which I didn't know what it was, and when my boss came up to me at quarter past four on my first day to tell not to come in the next day, I didn't understand what he say. I thought I got the sack. I was wondering how I am going to tell my brothers, how was I going to tell my friends, how as I going to tell the family that was accommodating me for nothing. They gave me a bed and meals for nothing. The agreement was they would put me up, but when I got a job, I was to look for board.

"When the boss spoke to me, the only word I understood was *friend, friend, friend*. I began to put two-and-two together that he wanted to talk to my friend, Paul, who got me the job in the first place. What he wanted to do to explain to Paul that I could come to work the next day but he didn't want to pay me double-time holiday pay since I was on trial. Anyway, next day I ran to work from Brunswick to North Carlton and got there at 7:30 instead of quarter to eight.

"In 1957, when they shut the Suez Canal they put a lot of out of work on a temporary basis because they couldn't bring the material from Europe. There was one Italian ship that got through just before they closed the Suez and had lots of material for making wedding suits in the Wonthaggi factory and so I started working in Wonthaggi. It snowballed from there. I had my own business, It was good. I had about three or four girls working for me. I am the last tailor. You won't find a good tailer anymore. There are some dressmakers.

"We did everything. We did the uniforms for the police and all the gowns for the priests and the band uniforms. Did the suits for the Deb balls... they were funny because when I was making them the boys wanted those tight, thin legs.

"I will keep sewing as long as my fingers aren't shaking. If they are start shaking then I can't thread the needle. It's something I love. I want to do it all my life. I closed the tailor shop in the early seventies. Once the jeans came into fashion, I couldn't compete. Before that we dressed all the bank managers, all the doctors, the principals of the schools. All the people, who had to wear a suit to work. They couldn't go to work in a pair of jeans. In those days they had to wear collar and tie. We used to get customers from as far away as Cobram. Businessmen bought tailored suits in the old days. Even the Archie's

Creek manager, Joe Wilson, he used to go to the city and pay big money to get his tailored suits made, but then he asked me to make one suit for him to see how we go and after that he never went back to Melbourne again. Dr Harrison, Dr Brooks. They were all our regulars. But when the heaters and air conditioners came in, people didn't need to wear jackets anymore to keep warm, so they only had to replace the pants each and slowly things changed. Then the jeans were a killer.

"It took us three days to make a suit. How much can you charge a man to make him a suit, once you get the material and all the trimmings and three days labour? You get a suit for three or four hundred dollars. Not the top quality, but good enough for people to wear. Now a handmade suit is a couple of thousand dollars. I love to see somebody wearing a beautiful tailor made suit. You know the shoulders and the sleeves and everything.

"My suits were made of Australian merino wool. We used to use exclusive material for our suits. Zenia were the top cloth makers. They make the best material in the world. Come from Italy. That's partly why my suits were so good. But there is no such a thing as 100% pure wool. It would be impossible. It must have some synthetic blend in it so it would hold its shape. Because if you have all pure wool, it loses it's shape very easily. The fine wool has some silk in it.

"I met the Duke and Duchess of Italy, the Count and Contessa. I made myself a beautiful suit out of the best material money could buy. I am proud of that suit. When they were in Australia, they gave out special invitations to tailors who were using their material and so I had to look good. Their material used only Australia Merino wool. We got to spend an evening with them at the Windsor Hotel.

"I was the citizen of the year, in 1997. This was the Rotary one. Inaugural citizenship award. We became citizens four years after we arrived in Australia.

"I even translated the words of the song, 'There's a Part of my Heart in Wonthaggi', into Italian so we could all sing it. I got the whole words to the song. It's a long song. It was written in 1932.

"I started the Italian Club. I was the very first person. Frank and I started the Club. I was the president for 16 years.

"I am a citizen of Australia and I love this country, but I will always be an Australian from Italy."

Sam died on 14 July 2012. He will be missed.