

(An excerpt from a memoir Sam Gatto has been writing on and off for 20 years)

## **Our First Day in Australia**

After what must have seemed an eternity to Mum, but the blink of an eye to us kids, we finally arrived in Australia, at the Port of Fremantle. There we said good-bye to one of the families that Mum had so solicitously looked after. The final part, the most gruelling part of the voyage for some, but the most exciting for Peter, was about to begin. We had been through rough seas before, but when we sailed into Bass Strait, we discovered what rough seas were. The ship was buffeted by strong, howling winds and pounded by giant waves. The forty-year-old *Cyrenia* rolled and pitched with such violence that dishes and cutlery flew around the almost empty dining room. It was here that our brother Peter thought that the time had finally come to use the life-jackets that we had practised putting on during the emergency drill exercises. I still remember Peter running to our cabin on hearing the blasting of the siren for another emergency exercise and emerging through the doorway loaded with all our jackets. He was bitterly disappointed when the ship did not sink, and we did not have to use the life jackets. And then, as if by magic, the sea was calm, and the ship was still. We had reached our destination.

It was the evening of Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1951 when we arrived at the Port of Melbourne. I still remember the cool breeze, the city lights in the distance as Mum put us to bed early so we would be among the first to disembark the next day. How did Mum feel as she put us to bed? What conflicting thoughts, hopes and fears went through her head as she tossed and turned, not daring to fall asleep in case she slept in? What did she imagine her reunion with Dad would be like? Did she see the arrival in Australia as the opening of a new door and the closing of an old one? Or was she too busy, too numb to think of anything at all? The only thing that I'm almost sure of is that, in her mind, the stay in Australia would be a temporary one.

Very early in the morning of Monday, January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1951, in the still semi darkness of the early morning light, Mum and we four children left our cabin with our two suitcases of belongings. There were very few people on deck at this early hour. Mum asked from which gate we would be disembarking, and we made our way there. We were the first in the queue. Some hours later we were the last to disembark. Our arrival had begun on a dramatic note.

### **Peter's Escapade**

In the cool, brightening morning light I looked over Station Pier to the faint city lights behind it. I remember the glimmer of light in the sky, the outline of buildings in the distance and what I imagine were palm trees. Was I excited and looking forward to the new life that was awaiting us or was I as

anxious as Mum was, as we waited for the gate to open? I cannot remember, but whatever state of mind I was in was soon replaced by panic.

'Where's Peter?' Mum asked me. As the big brother, I should have known. I didn't. Mary didn't know, either. None of us knew. Mum looked around again. Peter was nowhere to be seen. With an angry but concerned look on her face, she told me to look after the girls and our things while she went back to our cabin to look for him. I did as I was told. Mary and little Tina did not stray.

A short time later Mum came back with an angrier and more concerned look on her face. We knew that Peter was going to get it when she found him. When she had woken us up that morning, Peter had announced that he was not going to come with us. He didn't want to go to Australia. He didn't want to see Dad. He wanted to stay on the ship. He wanted to become a sailor. He wanted to stay with his friends. I understood him. He was having too much fun on the ship. In many ways, he had become the ship's mascot. Almost everybody knew him: from the ordinary passengers to those in first class; from the captain and chief engineer to the ordinary seamen. He was cocksure of himself, with his 'petto d'uomo', the chest of a man. He talked to anybody who spoke to him and always had an answer when somebody playfully tried to tease him. And if somebody was doing something and looked as if he or she needed a hand, Peter was there to come to the rescue. Mum had had her hands full with him from the time we got on the ship. And now this.

Seeing Mum's distress other passengers and sailors reassured her that Peter would be found, and some joined in the search for our missing brother. While I was waiting, visions of him trying to jump overboard to 'run away' crossed my mind. As more and more passengers came on deck preparing to disembark, the search became more desperate. The possibility that he had fallen overboard was soon dismissed. Nobody had seen any sign of this. 'Where could he have hidden?' I was asked. 'I don't know. Anywhere,' I answered. To my mind, Peter knew every nook and cranny of the ship, including places that I had never been allowed to enter. The cabins on the ship were systematically searched, as was the engine room, as were the lifeboats. Nothing. Peter was nowhere to be found.

The time to disembark soon came, and most of the passengers made their way to the gate, which was not the one in front of which we were standing. In the confusion, I kept a close eye on my sisters and on our suitcases. Somehow, I lost sight of the suitcase in which all our hand-made shoes were in. Mum came back at regular intervals to check on us. She did not notice the missing case, either. Panic and desperation was now etched into her face. Her eyes were red, her plaited hair slightly dishevelled, a clear sign that she had slapped herself and pulled at her hair as she blamed herself for Peter's disappearance and despaired that Peter would ever be found.

Towards the end of the morning, Mum came back with a stranger who immediately ran to us and tried to hug us. It was her cousin, Sam Golotta. He had somehow obtained permission to come on board to help her. How the news of the missing Peter and Mum's distress reached Dad and Sam I do not know. Perhaps, they had asked for news from other disembarking migrants; perhaps Sam had sought explanation from officials as to why we had not yet disembarked. Sam, who spoke English, was given permission to go on board. I often wonder how hurt Dad must have felt that Sam and not he, the husband and father, had been allowed to board the ship to help Mum.

In a blur, I remember Peter being brought to us by some sailors. He still had a defiant look on his face, but he did not put up any resistance. Mum rushed to embrace him. She kissed him over and over on his forehead as she said 'Figghiu meu, figghiu meu', 'My son, my son'. I waited for what I thought would be an inevitable whack behind the ears, but Peter got away with one of Mum's finger biting threatening looks.

After much searching, I think I remember being told that Peter had been found perching high up on a sort of ledge in the corner of one of the First Class ladies' toilets. As we walked towards the now empty gangway to disembark, with her cousin carrying her suitcase, Mum held onto Tina's and Peter's hands and walked decidedly towards the gate. With a surly look on my face the result of exhaustion but also of the dirty threatening look Mum had given me, Mary and I followed them. I was in disgrace. Not only had I not looked after my younger brother, but I had lost the suitcase with all our shoes in it.

### **The Mattress Problem**

The headline in the January 23 edition of *The Argus* reflects the memories that I have of our entry into Australia. The headline reads: 'Chaos greets migrants on wharves'. According to the article the 'complete chaos', as a customs officer described it, was due to 'more than 5,000 migrants of every creed and nationality arriving on six ships'. 'And the same crazy-mix-up can be seen at almost every migrant ship that arrives in Melbourne,' the article continues. 'A frantic mass of shouting men and women and weeping children jam the ship's deck and gangway, and make the work of customs men, ships' officers and Harbour Trust officials almost impossible. On each ship hundreds of tired children, anxious sweethearts and worried parents go through the same maddening delay – caused almost entirely by having only one gangway to carry up to 2,000 people. ... The first passengers to come off were lucky indeed to get a customs clearance within an hour of berthing. Most were forced to wait up to eight hours before they were at last at liberty in their new homeland.' The article then refers to the *Cyrenia* as being typical of conditions at 15 North Wharf. 'With one winch unloading heavy trunks and only one gangway for passengers, migrants lowered bags over the side on ropes. Many precious possessions fell into the water between ship and the wharf.'

With Dad frantically waving to us from behind the barrier, we made our way down the now empty gangway into the customs house to go through formalities and to collect all our luggage: suitcases, two big trunks and a big bundle, wrapped up in thick red and white linen sheets. Here were Mum's prized possessions – two mattresses that she had made herself from the wool shorn from the merino sheep that Dad had bought some time before his departure for Australia, wool that she had skirted, carefully washed in such a way as to prevent it from felting, and then manually puffed up before sewing it together to form the mattresses. In the confusion reigning in the customs house, Mum, through her cousin Sam, was told that she could not bring the mattresses into Australia with her. It was illegal to bring vegetable and animal products into Australia. In vain, through Sam, she appealed to the customs officer. He would not be moved. The law was the law. But Mum, with her cousin's help, was able to convince the customs officer to empty the wool out of the casings and allow her to keep the red and white striped casings that she had spun the thread for, weaved and then sewn together. Mum later used the casings as mattress protectors, to guard the mattresses from the bed springs in the base of the bed. Even after twenty years in Australia, I remember parts of the coverings being used as cleaning cloths.

While Mum and her cousin were negotiating with the customs officers, we children waited, holding on tightly to one another. It must have been around lunch time because, not far away, in the corner of the customs house, I think I remember, some men were sitting down having lunch or a late morning tea. What follows is based on a vague memory, or perhaps it is the fruit of my creative imagination. Whatever it is, it is inspired with poetic truth. We had not had anything substantial to eat since the evening before. I was starving. I must have been looking enviously at the men eating, because from the corner of my eye, as I tried to look away, I saw one of the men crook his finger and beckon me to go to him. In my perhaps unreliable memory of the day, I see myself turning my head away from the men and then, hearing encouraging noises coming from where the men were, I turned my head towards them again. I immediately looked down and away from them. But I could not help looking at them again when the encouraging noises were repeated. Looking up and down in his direction I saw one of the men wave me to go to him. Whether it was hunger or curiosity that drove me, I do not know, but still looking down at the floor with a desperate disgruntled look on my face, I abandoned my brother and sisters and obeyed his gentle call. When I got to him, he took my hand opened it and put a small piece of cake in it. Amid soft laughter, other pieces of food were handed to me. I didn't understand what he said to me, but I understood the gesture. I looked around to see if my mother was watching. She wasn't. She was too busy haggling with the customs officer who was going through the trunks. I looked at the strange morsels in my hand, and my recollection or my imagination tells me that I chose the pink looking one with grated, cheese-like white stuff on it. It tasted funny, but it was sweet and I was too hungry to care. This was my first taste of what might have been a

lamington. My brother and sisters didn't want anything, so I quickly ate the rest.

### **Reunion with Dad**

I have often wondered how our father must have felt that morning among all that chaos. He had not seen his family for over a year and a half. He had been waiting since before daybreak hoping to be able to catch a glimpse of us waving to him from the deck of the ship as he waved back. He must have fretted as time passed and other passengers came down the gangway and there was no sign of his family. And then after Sam Golotta was given permission to go on board, he was left behind, with vague news of what the problem was, unsure of the reassurances that everything would be OK. What thoughts went through his head? Fortunately for him his cousin Lino was with him, and Lino, though quite a few years younger than Dad, was one of the few people who had a way of calming him down.

And then, finally, his family also came through the doorway. Did he expect his wife and children to run towards his open arms? If he did, he must have been very disappointed. We children did not run towards him. We clung to our mother for dear life. Dad was basically a stranger to us. Yes, I still knew who he was and so did Mary, but for Peter and especially for Tina, who was only a year old when he left, he was almost a total stranger, and we all knew how Mum really felt about coming to Australia.

After Mum and Dad had embraced, Dad turned to Tina and was welcomed by kicking feet and a loud wail of fear and protest. Then Peter turned his head and held on tightly to Mum's legs, a clear sign of his rejection. Mary looked at him with her big brown eyes and allowed herself to be hugged. I just stood there, head down, and waited for Dad to hug me too. He did, in his usual warm ceremonious way, but I did not reciprocate. I did not know how to. Dad continued to fuss over me, and in vain waited for some spontaneous sign of affection from me as he said my name over and over again. Then I too retreated to the safety of my mother's legs. Dad tried again to prise Tina from Mum. She held on for dear life, screaming and kicking her legs even more furiously. The circle of rejection remained firm. Peter would not let go of Mum's legs and cried at the top of his voice when Dad tried to take his hand. Dad must have been advised by Lino and Sam to give us time. He relented. It must have been consoling to him that Mary allowed him to hold her hand as we walked towards a taxi.

### **Towards Our New Home in Wonthaggi**

Our train to Wonthaggi was to leave later that day, in the early evening. I cannot remember in detail how we filled the day, but I do remember going by taxi to the terraced house of 'paesani', fellow villagers, somewhere in one of Melbourne's inner suburbs, while Sam Golotta and Lino took the trunks and suitcases to the station. At our paesani's house a feast of familiar food awaited us. Fortunately, it was a nice summer's day, warm and pleasant.

The day before, a cool change had brought relief from an oppressive heat wave that had lasted over 14 days. While the adults sought news of loved ones back in Caridà, we children looked on and listened. By the late afternoon we had become more familiar with our father's presence, with his role in our family, with his voice, with his attempts to arouse love and recognition from us. We shyly and diffidently allowed him to approach us, to touch us, but only to retreat to the safety of our mother's skirt.

It was soon time to find our way to Flinders Street Station. We must have been exhausted by then. The steam train to Wonthaggi left after 6pm. Our father dreaded being late, so we almost certainly got to the station very early and waited on the old station platform with its imposing dark granite columns. Many years later, Florence Fraser/Crawford, with whom I had worked at the Melbourne Furnishing Company as a teenager, told me that she and her family were also at the station and on the train back to Wonthaggi that evening. She told me that she remembers all the chattering between the men and us children huddled closely together around our mother.

The old steam train slowly made its way out of the city. We children stayed glued to our mother. How she felt as we left the city into the empty sunburnt countryside we will never know, but I can imagine that a sense of doom, of going once again into the unknown, must have been among her feelings. When we reached Nyora, we had to change trains. Dad, I remember, went into the station and returned with some cakes and cups of tea. We huddled even closer to Mum. None of us was hungry. We had never eaten sliced cake and the smell of what might have been cinnamon was foreign to us. Dad desperately tried to get us to at least try the cake and tea, but to no avail. I, of course, would have been tempted, but out of solidarity, I also refused.

It was getting dark as we left Nyora for the final part of the trip. The train clattered its way through flat empty countryside, so unlike the countryside that surrounded Caridà. Where were the people? The villages? Why was it taking so long? Huddled beside Mum, exhausted and anxious, my brother and sisters were soon rocked to sleep, comforted by Mum's warmth and by the regular sounds and rhythm of the train. Mum, however, was wide awake, staring in front of her. I too could not sleep, as I listened to what the men were saying, answered their questions about the life that I had left behind, warmed to Dad and dutifully repeated the English words that Sam tried to teach me.

Very late that evening, from the Anderson hills, we saw the sparse faint street lights of what we were told was Wonthaggi. Too tired to notice the pounding surf, we went over the trestle bridge, and then past the mine workings. In the summer darkness, after almost five hours in the train, we arrived at the Wonthaggi station. There we were welcomed by Sam Golotta's wife and children, who Mum did not know, and by Mr Nesci, whom she knew by hearsay. While Mr Nesci and Lino waited for our luggage to be unloaded, we were led to a waiting taxi and taken to our new home at 96

Broome Crescent. It was going on midnight when we entered the small miner's cottage. We exhausted children were put to bed in the second bedroom and I presume that Mum and Dad followed some time later. How Mum reacted when she saw the state of the frail wooden house that night, she never said. Perhaps she was too tired to notice anything. It had been a long and exhausting day.

The next day a new chapter in our lives would begin.

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