PLOD ESSAY

Between two worlds: An Italian Childhood in Wonthaggi

Although there had been Italians and Swiss Italians in Wonthaggi almost from the beginning of the State Mine project in November 1909, it was in the 1920s and 1930s that the first big wave took place. Most of the men who came worked either at the State mine or the Kilcunda mine, where they soon gained the respect of their fellow miners. By the middle of the 1930s it was estimated that there were over 800 people of Italian culture living in the Wonthaggi district. Many had brought their families here and had settled into the community. Most lived in the South Wonthaggi part of the town, where they bought houses and tended their large vegetable gardens. Apart from the rare incident, the law-abiding Italian community was not the target of systematic racial discrimination or abuse.

The Italian community's social life centred on church and family. Traditional village feast days were celebrated at St Joseph's Church. Italian missionary priests regularly visited the town as did Italian consular officials. In the middle 1930s an organization similar to the RSL was set up. Reunions with similar bodies in Victoria were held both in Kilcunda and at Nesci's wine café in Wonthaggi. An Italian school was held on Saturday mornings at the St Joseph's School rooms. The Italian Fascist government encouraged the establishment of such bodies so that the Italian diaspora could maintain their cultural connections with their mother land. Many subscribed to Il Giornale Italiano, published in Sydney. I have found no evidence that the rest of the Wonthaggi community did not respect the right of the Italian community to live their lives as they saw fit. The outbreak of World War 2, in 1939, in particular when Italy joined the war on the side of the Axis powers in June1940, put this tolerance to the test.

A snapshot of the Italian Community at a religious festival, late 1930s

What follows is an account by Adelino 'Lino' Cuman, first of his family's journey as Italian immigrants from the 1920s and 1930s, followed by his memories of how he coped as a child during the World War 2 years.

Lino's Story

When my father arrived in Melbourne in 1925, his first job was working at a construction site at the Maroondah reservoir. His co-worker was a Scotchman. Dad had very little knowledge of the English language and therefore found it very difficult to communicate with his workmate. The only other friend he talked to was a horse used to cart cement to the construction site. So, most of the time he spoke to the horse. And that horse was possibly the first horse in Australia to speak Italian.

After a few months he received word that miners were wanted for employment in Wonthaggi, at the State Coal Mine, where other Italian migrants from Marostica[1] (Gheller, Omizzolo, Caile) were working, so dad decided to move here. He started work at the Mine on 13th of August 1925. He worked here all his working life, until 1956, when he retired.

Like many of his fellow Italians he lived in a boarding house with other miners. Five years later he had saved enough money to bring his wife and two children here. At the beginning he rented a house at 39 Cameron Street. He later purchased the house and lived there all his life until 1980.

A big day arrived in our house in Cameron Street, on July 30th, 1931, when I was born. There was no public maternity hospital like there is now. Back in 1931, there were only special houses, private maternity hospitals where people who could afford it could go to give birth. Or they had their babies at home attended by a mid-wife, which was certainly my case. I only found out where I was born a few years ago, when 'Dabba' Taafe told me that his grandmother, Mrs Byrne, the future State Coal Mine General Manager's mother, delivered me.

The Cuman Family, circa 1935. Left to right: Bruno, Luigia (mother), Lino, Pietro (father) and Giulia. A photo to send back home.

When I was growing up, we spoke Italian at home, ate Italian food and I played mostly with other Italian children. I didn't have many Australian friends, apart from the Hasson children, Roma and John, our very good Australian neighbours, who lived next door. My friendship with Roma lasted for over 90 years until she died a short time ago. Roma was a faithful member of the Wonthaggi Italian Senior Citizens Club, an honorary Australian-Italian. The whole family welcomed us into their lives. When Roma's father, Peter Hasson, would see my mother he would always say, 'Buon giorno, Signora,' nice and loudly, very warmly even during the war years. On the other side of our house lived the Caile family. Mr Caile was Italian, but his wife was Australian. They were also good neighbours. On

[1] Most Italians who came to Wonthaggi were from the Veneto region in northern Italy, within a fifty-kilometre radius of Marostica. Another substantial group came from Calabria in southern Italy.

both of our side fences there was a gate, which we would regularly use to visit each other and exchange vegetables, eggs, and other things.

When it was time to start school, I as a matter of course, since I was Italian and Catholic, attended St Joseph's primary school, which was then situated in Baillieu Street. The school was part of the church. Both the classrooms and the classes were big. At school, in the playground, I mixed mainly with other Italian boys. We generally stuck together. Somehow, we felt safer when we were together.

Outside of school, I was a typical bush country boy. We played a lot in the bush, hunting, fishing, rabbiting with dogs and then with guns. We always made sure that when we fired at rabbits it was a true shot as we had no money to buy bullets.

My father always worked in the mine. One memory that remains etched in my mind was when I was perhaps 6 or 7 years of age, and the miners were on strike for a long period. On a Saturday morning, I would go with my father to the back entrance of the old Union Theatre where the miners would receive their weekly rations consisting of a shovelful of potatoes, a few onions, a tin of jam and a loaf of bread. But my father, like almost all other Italians, had his own vegetable garden. We were fortunate, as Dad always provided for his family. We had chooks and a cow and always had plenty to eat, plus a few rabbits on which most miners lived.

In the mid-thirties, the Wonthaggi Ex-Combattenti branch, the Italian equivalent of the RSL, was set up. My father as an ex Alpino[2] in the First World War, became a member and he participated in all the reunions that were organized here in Wonthaggi and in Kilcunda. I don't know much about the political side of the association, but I don't think that my father was ever involved politically. For him it was just an opportunity to meet with other Italian ex-soldiers.

Photo published in "Il giornale italiano" on the occasion of the formation of the "Sezione Combattenti" Wonthaggi-Kilcunda, 1934.

Italians had their own social life, too. As far as I can remember, there was an Italian dance once a month in the Buffalo Hall in Murray Street. A lot of money was raised and donated to the local hospital and to other organizations such as the Italian Red Cross. Then the Second World War started, and everything stopped.

The Italian School picnic at Cape Paterson, circa 1935. Lino is in the second row, second from left. The teacher, Signora Sartori, is in the middle back row. Photo courtesy of Vic Benetti (front row in front of Lino. Some Saturdays, over 60 students attended the Italian school.

[2] Special mountain infantry in the Italian army, which became legendary due to its distinguished service in the First World War

We children of the first wave of Italian immigrants all spoke Italian at home, and from when I started school until the Italian school closed down with the outbreak of the war, I attended the Italian school in Wonthaggi on Saturday mornings. I remember that we had Italian language lessons, but mostly I remember the patriotic songs that we sang, the picnics that we went on and how we were taught to be proud of our Italian heritage.

I remember that sometimes we boys wore a special uniform – a black shirt, black trousers and a white collar. The girls also had a special uniform, a black apron with a white collar and a white ribbon in their hair. I can't remember wearing a typical Balilla hat. I had no idea that this way of dressing up was part of the Fascist youth movement in Italy. For me it was just dressing up. I never knew what a Fascist was.

Lino in his special uniform. The "figli della lupa", the sons of the she-wolf, was the organisation for children aged 8-11, who a more military type uniform. This was a version for children under years of age. Lino must have been about 6.

So much changed when war broke out in 1939, especially when Italy joined Hitler. It took me a long time to understand what the war was about. As a child, I was only nine years old, I knew that something had changed. The Buffalo Hall dances stopped, the Italian picnic at Inverloch stopped, the Italian feast day celebration at church stopped, the Italian school lessons stopped. We Italian children felt more outsiders than before. We stuck together more. We were teased, mocked and taunted by some Australian children. We were called 'dagos. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it wasn't nice. But all in all, we here in Wonthaggi were lucky. The majority of people here were fair and tolerant. We had good Australian neighbours. We were on our best behaviour during the war. We did everything we could not to cause any trouble. We were always worried that our houses might be raided by the Federal police as they had been in June 1940.[3] Quite a few Italian homes were raided but, as far as I know, only two men were taken away and interned. We, however, were allowed to keep our guns in the house, and we were allowed to keep our radio. My father was by then officially a naturalised British subject and was not considered an Enemy Alien by State authorities. He did not have to report to the local police regularly like many others had to. He just carried on working hard at the mine and looking after his young family, as did the other Italian miners. In fact, quite a few Italian men came to work at the mine when more miners were needed for the war effort.[4]

[3] On Saturday evening June 15, a special squad of detectives from Melbourne raided many Italian homes in Wonthaggi and Kilcunda, arrested several men suspected of being Fascists and took them to Melbourne for questioning. Only three men, well under one percent of Italians resident in Wonthaggi and district were interned. Just over 20% of all Italian residents in Australia, some naturalised British subjects, suffered the same fate.

[4] Immediately after Italy joined the Axis powers and officially became the enemy, on June 10, some miners at two pits refused to go down the mine and work with Italians. At a special Union meeting it was decided by a large majority to allow Italian miners to continue working at the mine and to leave it to the authorities to deal with security matters. The Italian miners of their own accord swore allegiance to the British Empire and contributed generously to the funds being raised towards buying an ambulance for the A.I.F.

At school we children prayed for the safety of soldiers every morning. Australians prayed for Australian soldiers; under their breaths some Italians prayed for Italian soldiers; most, like me, prayed for both Australian and Italian soldiers. In the school playground we Italian boys stuck together, we formed little gangs and walked to school and back home together. We avoided going past the State School. I usually walked home with the Moresco boys; they were good fighters.

As well as the usual cowboys and Indians, when in the bush, we played war games, Australians against the Italians, with shanghaies [slingshots] and sticks for guns. We dug holes in the ground and pretended they were tunnels. In the underground huts we smoked anything other than tobacco. There was one opposition gang that I remember, Manning's Gang, they would attack us, and we would chase them away. Strangely enough, I remember that there were also one or two Australian boys who were part of our gang. A member of our gang was a German boy. I shall call him called Schultz. He took the games much more seriously than me. He hatched a plan to sabotage the Rifle Range by destroying the targets and cutting down the flagpole, which we didn't carry out. We did paint swastikas on a couple of buildings in the centre of town. The most dangerous plan Schultz hatched was to blow up the railway bridge at Dalyston. He was dead serious about this, and one or two of our gang would have gone along with him. He knew where he could get the gelignite to carry out the plot. It would be done at night when there was nobody around. Fortunately, one of the more sensible members of our gang talked him out of it. I don't know what I would have done if the plan had gone ahead. My parents of course had no idea of what we children were getting up to, and they would have 'killed' me if they had found out.

All through the war period we Italian children went to the Saturday matinee pictures at the Union Theatre with all the other kids. I can't remember any of us getting into any fights. We shouted, cheered and booed as loudly as all the other kids, and when it was our birthday, we received birthday presents just like all the other children.

Things changed a little when Italy signed an armistice with the Allies in September 1943, and we Italians were technically no longer the enemy, but I was not very much aware of the change.[5] Life seemed to go on as usual. At the end of sixth grade, I went to the Technical School for two years. The atmosphere there was very different from the Catholic school. I enjoyed the lessons, learnt a lot, played up and got the cuts [corporal punishment], just like every other boy. At the end of 1945, with my Merit Certificate in hand, I left school and got a job as a garage boy at Richardson's Garage, in McBride Avenue, just opposite Taberner's hotel. In time I qualified as a motor mechanic. I have lived almost all my life here in Wonthaggi, where I have brought up my family. This is my home. I am a proud Australian who is also proud of his Italian heritage.

(Introduction, footnotes and editing by S.J. 'Sam' Gatto)

[5] As a result of the invasion of Italy by the Allies, after September 1943 Italy was roughly divided into two states, the area south of Rome governed by the Badoglio government, at peace with the Allies, and the fascist puppet government of the Republic of Salò in the northern part of Italy still at war with the Allies.