

## **PLOD ESSAY**

### **Zita Dalla Rosa**

It was 1927 and I was six years old when my mother and I left our Italian home forever to join my father in far off Australia. We left Villa Vella, Province of Vicenza, Northern Italy where generations of my mother's and father's families lived and headed into the unknown. My father's family name was Madelina. My name was Elizabetta Madelina before I married, but I was called Eliza (*pronounced Eleesa*) by everyone in our village. And then, when I came to Australia, I was called all sorts of names before I settled on Zita.

It had taken my father two years in the new country to get established well enough to be able to care for us before my mother and I came to him. My father was a craftsman, a cabinetmaker. He had his diploma from Milano where he had earned a gold medal. (Our family was proud of his accomplishment and, much later, I gave my father's framed certificate to my young son for his office. It was large and beautiful. Handwritten.) My father was employed with six other men at the workshop in Italy. But then he got the idea of Australia. He heard different ones talk about Australia and they liked to do everything together and so they thought, well, if we don't try, we won't conquer. They went with a few others, but when they got to Australia there wasn't much work. So, my father – a crowd of them together – ended up going out to the farms looking for jobs. Sometimes farmers would let the dogs loose to chase them away because there were no jobs in those years. Things were hard.

It took my father two years of hard work cutting wood to save enough money to get Mum and I from Italy. By that time, he had found work in Wonthaggi at the State Coal Mine, which he loved. He did not work *in* the mine, but *for* the mine. There was a workshop there where the mine was and he worked there on carpentry, but he never went down below. For the mine manager he made the most beautiful writing desk. I'd like to know where it ended up. However, after he made that desk, his reputation as a carpenter/cabinetmaker spread through the community and soon he was asked by the church to make the confession box. He did not want to forfeit his job at the mine, but the priests got the Sartoris to go and shift his workbench from the mine offices down to the Catholic Church. So, he had to go and do it. Not that he didn't want to, but he had his job at the mine, and he had family to look after. Nevertheless, the cabinet he made was beautiful. It is still there in the church. Because he was a master cabinetmaker, he returned to the mine where they kept him on, but he still did a lot of work for the church. He also used to work at home. He had a workshop out the back. He used to make everything: beautiful furniture. I remember I'd be out there watching him work and he would have the plane smoothing the timber and as the planed-off pieces fell, they would all be curly, and I would pick them up and pretend I had curly hair. You know, just as a kid. And then he'd say, "Tell your mum I'm ready for the glue pot." And Mum would have it on the stove. You have the water in this container and the glue thing on top of that like a *bain marie*, and when it was ready then she'd take it out. The furniture he used to make wasn't like today. All this pressed cardboard and god knows what, but it was all wood and the joints were dove tailed. He was a tradesman. There was a great deal of pride in his work.

But, back to my own story...

I will never forget the trip to Australia with my mother: I remember that we had to go to this town where we got the train to Milano and that took us to Genoa where the shipping port is. Before we were allowed on the ship, the women had to go into one room – I remember it vividly because my mother said to me ... "they undressed us in the one room and they had like a screen" and she said, "you watch my clothes and don't lose my garters." In those days they had garters for their stockings and – well, this was the usual medical routine – they had to go and have a shower and they had to be examined. I remember when it was my turn, they put me in a bath with a little boy and, oh! I was horrified. On the ship we were in a cabin of four. In

the dormitories there were about ten, but we were in a cabin of four. I remember it wasn't an Italian ship because the food was strange. We ate what they gave us, but Mum just couldn't stand the jelly wobbling. We children made friends on the ship. Oh, gosh, they had to practically tie us down because you know what children are like. We just liked to go off and play. We tried to go up to the top of the ship but weren't allowed to. But there were plenty of children to play with. I remember when we got to Columbo, people all came around in their little boats selling their wares, and, they had at their side something like an egg and then they had a smaller one all wrapped up nicely and they called, "Chocolate! Chocolate!"

When my mother and I finally arrived in Wonthaggi, we went to live in Merrin Crescent – two doors up from Mrs Luna. And then from there we shifted next-door to Mrs Caile in Broome Crescent. These families were also from Province Vincenza. In the meantime, my father was building his own – our – home, which is still there out on 29 White Road; a beautiful home that he furnished himself. Of course, when that house was finished – well it wasn't quite finished – we went to live there, and I lived there with my mother and father until I married.

Life should have been wonderful, but back in the 1920's, when we arrived in Australia, there was the language barrier that our parents couldn't get past. In those days there was no one else to turn to not like late in 1950's when the new arrivals, many of whom came from Calabria in the Southern part of Italy after the war, could come to us and ask for help with the language. But, in our day, Italians more or less mingled together because otherwise they couldn't speak. And that was bad for my father because, unlike the miners who worked in groups, he worked alone on building/carpentry projects at the mine and so he never had a chance to learn much of the new language. When my mother and I arrived, there was only Mrs Garbellini here who could speak a little bit of English, enough to make herself understood to the Australians. Apart from her, there were only a handful of us here. And I don't recall any children that I could go and play with because, well, there were none.

We tried to learn the hard way and it toughened us. That's how I look at it. We weren't molly coddled. I remember the Amazolas – they were a few brothers batching near our place – and they went to this place wanting eggs and they couldn't speak and so what did they do? They started acting like a chook, cackling and squatting. The woman was petrified, but eventually she picked it up and gave them the eggs. I spoke Italian at home, but after I started school and had to learn the new language or perish, I spoke English at school. Of course, Mum never did learn English since she was at home. Her inability to learn the language gave her an inferiority complex. It had been so hard for my mother to leave all her family behind. Very homesick she was, very homesick. She never ever saw her family again.

I found it hard, very hard, when they sent me to school. I was still only six years old. I was sent at first to the State School in King Street. Of course, knowing nobody, not being able to speak the language, and being by myself, I was petrified... you know what I mean? They refused to call me by my name. They couldn't understand me when I pronounced my name. It was too big a mouthful for them. They gave me an English name: Betty! They called me Betty! I have a close friend whose name is Vestiglia, but they called her Lena. Even the Italian people here call me Zita, rather than Elizabetta. That was okay, but I hated being called Betty. Whenever anything bad happened in the classroom at the State School, the teachers, who called me Betty, would look at me and would talk to one another. I was so young and didn't understand. Oh, goodness! I got the impression they were going to kill me. So, the first chance I got at playtime, I ran home and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. I wasn't going to go back. Dad went and saw Mrs Garbellini and, anyway, then I went to St Joseph's after that. And then my dad's sisters arrived after that and a few others and so we were right because, at last, there were some people of our own nationality and we could converse together, you know what I mean? It's hard when you're young. In those days, there was no one around to teach us English. We had to start from scratch and learn the best we could.

I remember when I was about 10 or 11 years old and my English was pretty good by then, there were families that had arrived and were very close to us: there was Mrs Maresco and Mrs

Annear, Mrs Kimonello, maybe six or seven families. Well, every time anyone had to go to the doctor or out to buy something, they would come for me. I would go to Dr. Sleeman with them and what they would tell me I didn't know what they meant, but I would tell the doctor the best I could. That sort of thing made me grow up before my time. My childhood wasn't a childhood at all.

I used to have to walk on a little bush track from North Wonthaggi and come into town to buy clothes for Mum and take them home and if they didn't suit – Mr Bond was very good – he would take them back. I would go forwards and backwards buying clothes for Mum. I would go into the shop and buy Mum a pair of shoes. I knew the size, and then take them home to her to see if they were right. If they weren't, I would walk back to the shop again. Oh, my goodness! I was old before my time.

And when I was at St Joseph's – especially during Lent – I would have to come in from North Wonthaggi along that muddy path to go to Mass, and in those days, you had to *fast* for Communion, then go home to have a bit of breakfast and walk back again to go to school, which was right next to the church. And, of course, in the rain and that, you'd get soaking. And so, the nuns took pity on me and also on the Annear's boy. They would invite us over to the convent and would give us a cup of hot tea. And we would take our sandwiches or whatever. Today, there's progress all over the place with a car to take you here and to there or the school bus. But, in those days there weren't the things there are today. People walked more then. All you had was a bicycle or a horse-and-cart. Dad made our jinker cart and we bought this horse and we had that to come in and out on later on, but that wasn't until I was almost grown up. When I was young, I didn't possess a bike; I had to walk.

I kept on at St Josephs until I got my Merit Certificate when I was fourteen. In those days you got your Merit and I was lucky to get it. I went to the Tech School for cooking and sewing. One afternoon a week for sewing and Friday for cooking, but the rest was at St Joseph's. I didn't go on from St Josephs. My mother and father said, "If you get your Merit we will buy you a gold watch." Well, you can be sure I put my heart and soul into it for that watch, which I still have, by the way.

Since I was the youngest "chicken" child, my parents wouldn't let me train for nursing after I got my Merit. They were over-protective. Course, not knowing the language much and one thing and another they were against it. Of course, you did what you were told those days. If it was, "No", it was "No!" I would never have done that with my children and I never did. It was my parents' protectiveness that was frustrating, but I understood it. Eventually, after I got married and had my family, I did home nursing, then first aid. I thought, it's in me, and so I did! I was a State Enrolled Nurse. I wasn't a sister. I was a grandmother by then, but I proved myself. I was still a link in the chain. I was there for 22 years

Anyway, after I got my Merit, I worked for a little while at the fish shop here just on the weekend with Edna Keuper. She had the job there and she got me to help her on the weekend.

Then I met my better half, Emilio Dalla Rosa, whom everyone except me called Skippy, but that is another story. We courted for about a year and then we got engaged and stayed engaged for nearly a year before we got married. I remember Emilio wanted to get married at Christmas. But my father said, "You won't get married at Christmas because I have written to everybody in Italy and told them you were engaged, and I am not gonna just say she's gonna get married. You can marry at Easter!" And that was it. We married at Easter in 1937. 16 April 1937. Then sixteen months later our daughter arrived and then a few years after the boy arrived and a few after the other one arrived and that was life.

**This has been an edited version of Zita's story, and it is only the beginning. There is much more to tell. Before she died, she was interviewed at length three times, twice by the Chambers and once by Irene Williams with me recording and listening. Her story about Pea Picking is in the *Memories of Wonthaggi* book. Stay tuned for the next instalment of this remarkable woman's story.**

Carolyn Landon, ed.  
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