

Background

Our city of origin, Fiume, was located in the far north east of Italy, in territory Italy had to cede to Yugoslavia in the peace accord following the Second World War. As a result we became displaced persons, or refugees.

As refugees we were entitled to apply to the *United Nations International Refugee Organisation* (IRO) for resettlement in another country, which my father did. Once we had gone through the documentation and approval process we were assigned to one of the many ships IRO had contracted to carry millions of Europe's displaced people to their new homes.

Departure

We boarded our ship for Australia at the port of Naples on the third of December 1950. It was a tiny vessel, the *Hellenic Prince*. When she first saw it, my mother could not believe we would safely cross half the world in such a small ship. Her fear only added to the intense distress she was experiencing that day.

She did not want to leave Italy, Europe, family. She did not want to go to the other side of the world to a foreign country, an unknown destination. As was often the case in her marriage, her wishes and instincts had clashed with those of her husband. She had failed to dissuade him from this life changing decision and so she faced a stark choice, follow him where she did not want to go or stay behind alone with me, her three-year-old daughter. Given the mores of the times and her circumstances, she really had no option but to go with her husband. It was the day of departure, the die had been cast and the distress that she had kept somewhat under control during the previous months in the forlorn hope my father might change his mind, now completely overtook her.

In stark contrast to her mood, my father was excited and happy. It was the start of the adventure he had dreamed of for so long, an escape from a devastated Europe, from the constraints, hardships and turmoils that he had chafed against all the years of his youth. Beyond lay a new country, not quite the America he wanted, but a new world of freedom and opportunity just the same.

My father's two sisters and his brother-in-law were the only relatives who came to see us off. There were mixed feelings among them as they stood on the dock looking up at us leaning on the deck rails of our ship. The older sister could not hold back her tears and cried uncontrollably. The younger one, carefree and dry-eyed, had not yet fully realised she was losing her adored older brother. The brother-in-law was probably relieved my father was taking the final step to leave the land where he felt so much of a misfit.

The photos taken from the dock that day show a telling picture of us looking down from the *Hellenic Prince*; my mother struggling to put on a brave face, her face swollen from hours, probably days of crying; my father happy, confident in his choice of destiny; me a three-year-old child located between these two emotionally opposed adults, unaware of the significance of what was happening. As photos often do, the pictures of the three of us about to sail away, capture some of the underlying dynamics in our family relationships, in this case the conflict that had evolved in my parents' marriage, and that would continue to operate well into our future. Many decades later at the unveiling of a commemorative sculpture at the South Australian Migration Museum I saw, with a start and tears in my eyes, the same conflicted dynamics reflected in the bronze figures of the sculpture; a father striding forward, straining to pull his family towards a new future; a mother resisting, looking back with trepidation at all that they are leaving behind; a child caught between them, oblivious to the magnitude of the steps they are taking.

My paternal grandparents did not make the journey to the docks at Naples that day. They stayed home in the family apartment in Caserta that we had shared with them in the previous few months while undergoing all the pre-departure checks and procedures at the refugee centre in nearby Bagnoli. Perhaps the short train trip to Naples was too much for their age. But more likely, I think, they were struggling with their own distress. Their only son was leaving and they feared, quite rightly as it turned out, that they would not see him again in their lifetime. I imagine they preferred to face the emotional wrench of that last goodbye alone, in the privacy of their home.

As for my mother's family, they were hundreds of miles away in northern Italy and Fiume, now in Yugoslavia. Even if my maternal grandparents had the means to make the long journey to Naples they could not get visas from the Yugoslav authorities to exit Fiume at the time. So my mother was departing her homeland with none of her people near her for the painful, last farewell.

There were many telegrams sent from northern Italy and Fiume that day. One whose eloquence, I think, spoke perfectly to the moment, reads:

'Nel dolorissimo distacco dai vostri cari dalla patria vi siamo vicini col pensiero col cuore.'

'In your very painful separation from loved ones from homeland we are near you with our thoughts with our heart.'

Giuliana Smaila-Otmarich

January 2009