

CLORINDA FANTASIA

Good morning. My name is Elvira Fantasia Ubaldi.

Today is the 11th May. On the 11th May 1921, Clorinda Izzo was born in the village of Squillani set on the high slopes of the Apennine mountain range in the Campania Region of Italy. Today would have been her 97th birthday.

She was the youngest child and only daughter of seven brothers born to Antonio and Carmelina Izzo, She grew up on an agricultural and chestnut farm.

She was by all means an ordinary woman, who migrated to Adelaide South Australia in 1954 to begin a new life because the one she faced in Italy could not, after the second world war was over, offer her, her husband and newborns twins the means with which to provide adequately for themselves.

Clorinda Fantasia is my mother and this is her story. It is a similar story to that of most migrant women. Similar and particular to her experience, her trials and struggles to adapt to a life in a new country.

Clorinda's background

Growing up in Italy.

Because of the remoteness of my mother's village, she had to walk miles to get to school and as was the necessity of the time, being female meant she had to stay home and help her mother take care of her brothers. She took on the role of surrogate mother to her seven brothers and helped her parents in the home and on the farm, first to her family, then later as a young woman to her brother's children.

Her learning continued through my grandfather, who wrote and kept many dairies. He read to the family from newspapers and the bible, the only book my mother had time to read.

Farm life and the land taught her many things, cycles, elements, change: when and where to plant when to sow and reap and when to rest the soil. These observations of plant life cycles she related to her own life and she became very intuitive and attuned to the small world around her.

She married in her late twenties to Ernesto Fantasia, a man from the village in the valley below. Once married her duties were no lighter than those that had been at home.

She gave birth to her first child, still born due to lack of medical care and then later gave birth to twins: myself and my twin brother Michael.

Her husband had wanted to migrate, like so many Italians after the war. He was told that Australia was the land of opportunity and so made plans to come to here. My mother knew she would follow her husband.

A year after the twins were born, Ernesto left his family to come to Adelaide with a promise that as soon as he could he would ask his wife to join him. It took two years and much heartache before Clorinda was able to leave from Naples aboard the ship *Surriento*, that would bring her and her babies to Australia.

When my mother would speak about this time in her life, I knew it held great sadness and anguish for her.

Clorinda was 4 feet, 11 inches. A small woman in stature, but not in spirit. She was strong, both physically and mentally. She was devout, not only in her faith, but in her obligation and commitment to family. She embraced her fears courageously and knew her place was to join her husband.

She suffered seasickness on the ship, for the duration of the trip in a cramped cabin shared with others and her twins. Her practical resolve, however, took charge and she, as was her nature, made the best of the situation.

When the ship finally docked into Port Melbourne, she disembarked and was greeted by a reporter who was there doing a story on the new arrivals. When he saw this tiny woman carrying a child in each arm he took a photo that was published in the newspapers. For Mama, this as a special omen that Australia was welcoming and she had made the right decision to come here.

Adaptation

Although I described my mother as an ordinary woman, she lived an extraordinary life, not because she was famous, although to all who knew her in the Maylands area she was by no means seen as ordinary, all her neighbours marvelled at her strength and vitality, her ability to carry on during periods of her life that were most challenging, and there were many of those.

For a good part of the first decade she endured rejection and ridicule that was directed at migrants during the early 50's and 60's. In the early years, people exhibited more hostility which was compounded by the fact that she did not speak English, and which made her and many others feel like outsiders.

She gave birth to her first born in Australia, Mario my brother, then Lucy my sister, and later to her second set of twins, John and Louisa.

I will not dwell on the difficulties of those times; they were part of a common experience amongst immigrants.

Migration in the 50's is not the same as migration today. Today migrants are mostly enthusiastically received, accepted and embraced and their differences celebrated. That is not to say they do also have their own struggles, but are now more supported by the Government systems and networks in place to help them.

There was a policy in the late fifties and sixties toward migrants and Aboriginals that the Government termed *The Integration and Assimilation Policy*. It didn't work, for all the obvious reasons.

Migrants, because of this policy, tended to huddle together in self-imposed segregation, pockets of Italian clusters grew and spread up in local suburbia. It was safer to stay in your clan, hide the very essence of your identity, your language, culture, even the very food you ate. Imagine today without pasta, pizza or olive oil.

For my mother this closeness to the familiar was both a help and a hindrance. Living so close to other Italians gave her some comfort but it also limited her from extending herself in her new community.

We bought and moved to our own house at Frederick Street Maylands two years later.

It was a big corner house on almost an acre of land, and she was surrounded mostly by English speaking neighbours. Through the produce in her garden that she cultivated until the day she died, she befriended her neighbours and she shared the bounty and produce with all around her. Scones and lamingtons were exchanged for tomatoes, beans, broccoli and whatever else was in season in my mother's garden. Cups of tea shared with cups of coffee.

In truth it wasn't just my mother's garden, my father also played a big part in the maintenance. He did it because of economy; it was just cheaper to grow our own vegetables, especially those particular to the Italian cuisine.

Clorinda although always practical and frugal, tilled, planted and produced out of love and for the bounty that the earth brought forth. She was a true "Contadina", a peasant as some would call her in a derogatory way in the early years. In later years the same neighbours would pass by our long fence and marvel at the industry of this woman who would always stop to say hello and share of her bounty.

The most amazing thing about my mother is that no matter how little we had, if anyone came to our door, be it friend or foe, she always managed to find food to feed us all. There was no such thing as measured food in our place: she cooked, and it seemed to grow to feed whoever was there. There was always enough for everyone, probably because she went without.

However large her generosity and her skills, it was still obvious she needed to find work. Mamma started looking after first one then many of other people's children at her home.

She was so loved by all in her care that one little boy, I remember, was so upset at having to go home when his parents came to get him, that one night we found him huddled outside our gate hours after he had been collected by his parents. He was just five years old and had walked all the way from Gage Street, Glynde to Frederick Street on his own, that is the equivalent of 2.8 kilometres, crossing Portrush Road. Lucky his father thought to come to our place to look for his son and found him safe and lucky for the young boy that Portrush Road was not the busy road it is today.

After this incident and when the last set of twins were a little older, at the age of 43 she got her first job cleaning offices in the evening. This not only helped the household income but gave her time to herself. She could think, feel, express herself, find her own voice. In those night housecleaning at the Teachers College building she was free.

She learned so much working here: she learned to speak her broken English more fluently; she interacted with other women, in ways that women do when they share a common bond that brings them together. For those few moments at work she was the young woman she had never been in her youth. Happy, gay and a woman aside from being wife and mother.

It was lovely to see her like this. When Mamma was happy the rest of us fed from her joy.

From this job she went on to work at Burnside Hospital in the kitchen where she excelled at cooking and extended herself by learning to cook traditional Australian dishes, meat and three veggies that were the norm in the hospital kitchens at the time and slowly, over time influencing the kitchen with her own dishes.

The sadness she felt at having to retire when she still had so much to offer was heartbreaking. The day she left Burnside Hospital was as sad as the day she left Italy.

The Latter Years

Her life was never idle. From her retirement until the day she died Clorinda's time was taken up by caring for her grandchildren: all 13 have been either raised by her. She helped raise four grandchildren who were without their mother, or been cared for by her or others who just spent time with her.

The house at 55 Frederick Street, Maylands, became for all of them the refuge and magical place where they could come to find sustenance, solace, wise advice or just plain acceptance.

So loved was Mamma by all her grandchildren they wrote poetry, stories, music, sang songs about their times in her home and in her garden.

Her ordinary life, like that of so many other migrant women's has contributed to the blending of our multicultural identity, forging the real integration that the Government had wanted all those years ago, an integration and assimilation, not of migrants being forced to become Australians but that of redefined what being Australian means.

Many, many women like my Mamma, in spite of the rejection they encountered on their arrival, have, by going on about their daily lives, through interaction, participation and exchange with their new environment have unknowingly helped the redefinition of Australian identity. They are to me the unsung heroes of our immigration story.

Thank you for allowing me to share and celebrate my mother's birthday with you today. I now ask my daughter, Jordana Ubaldi, to share her story.