



ODYSSEY TO THE NEW WORLD

The story of my immigration by Massimiliano
Aloisi



Katrina Proust and Massimiliano Aloisi

Massimiliano Aloisi kept a running diary in Italian from 1926 to 1970. It gives a wonderful account of his family's migration to Australia and their struggles as they settled into their new country. *Odyssey to the New World* was translated into English by Katrina Proust who presented it to Massimiliano on his 80th birthday. The diary was then published by the family in 1992.

We are indebted to Berta Cunico, Massimiliano's daughter for donating a copy of the diary to Warringah Library Service. The full version of the diary is available through our Local Studies section at Dee Why Library. With Berta's permission we have printed extracts from the diary together with family photographs in this booklet.

The Beginning in Italy

Volano
TRENTO

It was during the year 1926, during the period of Mussolini and his fascist regime. I was still a young man with a family which was growing in number - three little girls from two to six years old.

But what about the future? I could never find a solution to the national state of affairs nor to my own personal affairs.

One day my friend Giuseppe Volani mentioned to me that he was thinking of writing to one of his relatives in Australia to see if it would be possible to be sponsored as an immigrant to Australia. I jokingly said to him "I'm coming too!"

Four months had passed when one day the two sponsorships arrived telling us we were ready for departure.

Realising by now that I would have to face a great and uncertain future, I used to wake up at night with shivers in a cold sweat.

The majority of people still believed that we were emigrating into the darkness of a forest, among natives and wild beasts, a population yet to be civilised!

The Departure for Australia



Massimiliano and Germano Aloisi
with daughters Alina, Mirta and
Berta before leaving for Australia in
1927

The population of Volano came to wish me good luck.

The moment to leave everything had almost come; to leave everything behind to go towards an unknown horizon without my wife, without my family, without my mother, relatives or friends.

I would not even want to remember these last moments of my departure; but I still cannot forget these things which are impressed on my mind and in my heart after so many years, so that to think of them today frightens me when I am alone.

On the 1st September 1927 we left on the ship *Palermo*. When the ship gave a blast on its funnel, signaling the departure about 9pm, my heart felt a blow so I could not stop crying.

On reaching Australia

During the voyage there were those who expressed the idea of remaining in Australia for only three years, while the majority had the idea of staying for five years. I thought it fitting to stay ten years, but no more, and to return to Italy and my hometown with my good fortune. Not one of us migrants on the whole ship contemplated remaining in Australia forever. Not one! How foolish we were to dream this!

Nobody on the whole ship at this time gave a thought to the fact that unemployment was beginning in Australia.

Finally we reached Sydney on the 20th October 1927. A great surprise awaited us. From the ship we could see about 100 waterside workers on the wharf who were shouting out at the top of their voices, insulting us with words like "bastards, traitors". With fury and hate for us immigrants they protested against the authorities, shouting make the ship return to sea and drop us all overboard.

The demonstrators believed that the increase in immigration for them had come to mean a decrease in food and work.

In the third week I luckily met an old migrant from Van Telina, Mr Bertolotti, who seemed to be an experienced businessman with a knowledge of conditions in Australia. He told Beppi and I that he knew a man who had an orchard which he intended to sell. Bertolotti said that this would be a good business for us since he was only asking for a deposit of £100.

Beppi and I explained that we could not participate in the deal as neither of us had any money. Then unexpectedly Bertolotti made a proposal to us; namely that he himself would lay down a loan for us repayable if we made our fortune.



The family, before departure for Australia 1930

Galston

The following day we went to see the orchard about 30 miles from the city at a place called Galston. What a beautiful spot this was, on a plateau and what a beautiful orchard, what trees! On the 11th November 1927 we took over possession.

Since we had never before seen so many fine trees we felt we had already made our fortune.

It took us three weeks to clear the undergrowth which was taller than us. We were lucky the apricots were starting to ripen. We were waiting for the fruit to ripen on the trees, as was the custom in Italy. Several days before there had been some good rain which we believed would be necessary, but when the rain finished the apricots were finished too. So our first crop had been completely ruined. This was all the result of a lack of experience.

Beppi and I were now alone in this foreign land, without language, without work and above all without a single penny in our pockets. We had already written to our families about our crop and had promised to send money. What could we write now? I felt it was not just my ruin but theirs.

In the first week of 1928 many people were still on holidays. The idea came to us of taking several cases of the best fruit to sell to passers-by at whatever price we could get. It was Saturday afternoon and to our surprise we had sold 20 cases by the end of the afternoon and had taken about £3. At that time it seemed a fortune to us. To think it had been more than 2 months since we had seen a single penny.



Max Aloisi and Beppi Volani on the farm at Galston, 1927



The depression continues

It was still 1928 when the crisis of the depression was in its early stages and no-one could predict the future. Every week we heard of dismissals, especially of Italians who went in search of whatever work they could obtain. Many left for Queensland for the sugar cane cutting; others went to Victoria for tobacco planting; other to the mines of Broken Hill and as far as the mica mines in Central Australia.

Meanwhile winter was approaching for us; the fruit had finished and our income too had finished.



Massimiliano and Germana Aloisi, 1927

We found a piece of ground to rent at Castle Hill. This land was closer to the city and appealed to us in that it was supplied with city water.

Time passed quickly during the day, but at night I could not go to sleep. Many times I woke up with bad dreams, in an almost deathly sweat, wondering whether I would yet be able to make my fortune and see my family again.

The money for the tickets and the families arrive

One Saturday evening we met Beppi's cousin, Cesare Tovazzi. He asked us frankly how we were going financially. It had always been our desire to bring our families to Australia, but we only had £160 in the bank and we needed £20 more for the tickets.

At this point to our surprise Cesare opened his wallet and put £20 on the table. Cesare was not only a friend but a great benefactor.

On the morning of 23rd October 1930 at about 7 o'clock we went to the wharf, though we knew well that they would not be able to disembark until 9am. I can say now and always that these two hours were the longest in my life.

Three years, one month and 24 days had elapsed since our parting and much anxiety and suffering had taken place for both of us. Our love always remained sure and deep during the entire time, although our promise of seeing one another again soon, until recently, seemed quite impossible.

What better luck could there be than this? What fortune could life offer me compared with this after years of separation and such suffering?

St Ives

After some months I was able to find a piece of land on the outskirts of St Ives, where there were other Italians in the same business and it seemed that they were doing quite well.

In August at the end of winter the planting began and altogether we planted 14,400 tomato plants. Now it was October 1936 when my great and beautiful crop looked magnificently promising. In the first week of November the rain came which continued for three days.



Germana planting tomato seedlings at St Ives, 1937

More bad luck

I began to pick the first 20 cases of these tomatoes. Hours after my return from market I noticed coming through my gate the agent to whom I sold them. "I am sorry to tell you that the tomatoes which I bought from you are still at the market impounded by the inspector."

The misfortune was truly from those three days of rain and the ground being newly manured caused the disease of the fruit. The tomatoes had turned black and rotten within a matter of hours. So I had to return the money.

My debts were growing to several hundreds of pounds and now the crop was completely lost. It was only a few weeks before that the bushes looked

like promising enough to turn out thousands of pounds, and now not even a single case could be filled.



Germana with one of her neighbours at St Ives, 1937

Advice from Mr Richard

One Saturday in 1936 I went to see Mr Richard the shop owner in St Ives who had given us credit for the last six months. I knew he was a man of great sincerity and had a good heart and when it was necessary he was always ready with advice and help.

He said to me "My advice and honest opinion is not to lose heart and not to give up but to continue on. If you stop now it will be a mistake more serious than you could ever make. It would amount to cutting off all hope in the future for your whole family"



At St Ives with friends - Joe Zappia on mouth organ and guitar, 1937

The turning point

The next year, April 1937, I prepared the tomato seeds, to try growing them a second time. Just as in the first year I began putting in 14,400 plants until all the ground was covered.

In November we began picking the first cases. The price at this time was good, but above all, we checked the plants and fruit as we always feared the experience of the previous year. I must say that this season was magnificent for us.

No-one could imagine the joy and satisfaction for us all as a result of this crop. With my money in the bank I could pay all my debts. This was thanks mainly to my sincere and fine friends who not only helped me but encouraged me to keep going. It was these people who in my moments of depression and despair gave me courage and urged me not to leave the country.



Berta and Germana with cauliflowers grown at St Ives, 1937

A new start

One day a friend told me that there was a piece of land for sale at Dee Why and it was a good buy. What a beautiful position it was in, but it was

only half dry and half was lagoon. This property was six acres. The house was small but it had all the modern conveniences: water from the city, electric, gas and light. Such conveniences as we had never seen or even used.

The Depression was coming to an end and although work was still limited, there was more money in circulation. When we had completed everything at St Ives, on 11th June 1938 I took all my possessions from the garden and we moved to Dee Why.



Max Aloisi and friends at the new farm in Dee Why, 1938

Dee Why

Germana and the girls were happy with this change.

Immediately I began work on the half of the land that was higher and dry and I planted several types of vegetables. Berta had now finished school and took over work in the kitchen while Germana, Alina and Mirta helped me in the garden. Passers-by who saw a single man with these three women called it a farm of women. As my intention was to have large scale production, this half of the land was insufficient for me, so I had to work out a plan to drain the three acres which was under water.



The Aloisi family digging stumps to prepare the farm at Dee Why, 1938

Work begins to drain the land

My plan was to construct a big channel along my boundary about 4 metres wide, 2 metres deep and 200 metres long. This channel would serve as a dam from where I could water all my land. After working 18 months and at a cost of £750 we had finished. With the centrifugal pump and my great dam of water the whole garden had been transformed. In the end it was magnificent.

In the first crop on the new land, I recovered the cost of all the expenses incurred when reclaiming the land as well as the cost of the plants. From this moment I could truly say it was the beginning of my fortune. After 13 years as a migrant in Australia, I could now make my first deposit of £5 in the bank at Dee Why.



Max and Beppi digging the channel at Dee Why, 1938

The second world war

Towards the end of 1939 war with Germany was being rumoured.

At this point I should mention that I had been refused naturalisation in 1938.

One day in June 1940, I arrived at the market with my truck load of cauliflowers when I heard the bad news that Italy had declared war on England and consequently on Australia. I was told that the police had already been working all night arresting Italians.

For the first time ever, we realised how important naturalisation was, as now we would still be regarded Italian subjects. On account of this, Germana had packed a suit-case for me, not knowing what might happen to me at any moment.

After four days like this at about sunset, there was a knock at the door. Four big policemen in plain clothes were standing before me and they asked if they could come in. We said to ourselves, "The time has come!". At this moment I no longer knew what to do; Germana and the girls were trembling. I invited them in. The senior officer asked us to sit down. Berta at once asked them if they would like to have some coffee. The senior officer said: "You have no reason to be so white and frightened."

They told me that during the week they had been going through my whole record of 13 years in Australia. They referred to the day I arrived in Australia on the ship and my beginning at Galston, then Castle Hill, St Ives and now at Dee Why. Then the senior officer said that we had one person to thank at

St Ives whose name did not have to be mentioned, for this person was none other than Mr Richard, the shopkeeper at St Ives. One word from him saved us.



Germana and Max loading cauliflowers for market at their farm in Dee Why, c.1940



The Aloisi family in 1936 - the girls got new hats for the Royal Easter Show

The war continues and our family grows

In May 1942, Germana told me that she thought she was pregnant but at the moment we could not believe it. Eighteen years had passed without any news of more family and so it was difficult to believe. After several weeks she went to the doctor who confirmed she was pregnant.

Our son was born on 6th January 1943, and on the 15th May 1943 Aldo was baptised in the Catholic Church at Dee Why performed by Father Parker.



Aldo Aloisi, c.1948

Peace

On 15th August 1945, we heard the first news that the war had ended.

It was 1946, and Berta had become engaged to a young Italian from Vincenza called Antonio Cunico.

In the meantime I had cut down the work in the garden since only Aldo remained. Our intention now was to no longer work on the land, so I sold the property to become involved in other business. I already owned three properties but by now we were thinking of making a trip to Italy.



Mirta and Nita (Berta's oldest daughter) at the bocce alley on the farm at Dee Why, 1948

Trip to Italy

We left for Italy on 15th March 1950. Now there were our three new families which had grown and we already had six grandchildren.

We reached Rovereto at about 3pm on 18th April. Germana's sister was waiting for us at the station with her five daughters.

Twenty three years had passed since we had seen one another and this was truly a moment of great satisfaction.

Our greatest satisfaction was seeing our home-town with our relatives and friends, visiting the places of our youth, our church, our schools and above all the cemetery where we found the headstones of our parents.

Before our departure for Italy, we had decided to stay at least a year or two, but having seen everything after four months we returned to Australia.



Massimiliano & Germana on arrival in Italy in 1950

A New Business

Some days after our return I turned my thoughts to some new type of work. Now that there was only Germana, Aldo and I, we intended to buy a shop so as to make a life for ourselves.

At this time, I knew Dee Why well and all the estate agents. One day an agent offered me a shop with a mixed business. The location was excellent, right in the business centre, and besides this it had living quarters on the first floor. The price was reasonable so I decided to buy it.

At this time many European migrants began to buy and settle here so we gave our shop the name the "Continental Delicatessen". After a few days we started work but for better management we took on a young local girl who could speak English for the telephone orders.

Over the next few years we became involved in buying and selling real estate and building factories. We retired in 1965.



Germana, Massimiliano and staff at the Continental Delicatessen, 547 Pittwater Rd, Dee Why, c.1950

Retirement

Now Germana and I were alone; alone in our house.

The work and sacrifices in our early years as migrants was only a material issue, but thanks to our good health we have been able to trace out a life for ourselves to give us an independent future.

Today, in 1970, Germana and I can close the pages of the story of our immigration with pride and satisfaction.



Germana and Massimiliano in their retirement

Acknowledgements

If you would like further information about the services provided by Local Studies, or have photographs of Warringah you think we may be interested in, please contact Tina Graham or Margaret Roberts on 9942 2610. Original photographs are returned to the donor once copies have been made.