

Multicultural Heritage Workshop
National Library of Australia, Canberra
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THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY- CO.AS.IT

In my talk I will present the history and work of the Italian Historical Society which is located in the heart of Italian Carlton, in Melbourne.

The story of Italian migration to Australia is very much part of Australian history and the heritage of migrants is also the heritage of all Australians. It is important that their stories be handed down and recorded in the way the migrants themselves want them to be told and preserved.

The narration of personal experiences, the photographs treasured by the migrants or their descendants, the documents stored in a drawer for many years, household items and trade tools brought out to Australia are all valuable testimonials of a migrant's story which we must preserve.

It was the need to foster pride in our Italian heritage and in an Italian-Australian identity that led to the creation of the Italian Historical Society by Sir James Gobbo and a group of young graduates of Italian background.

Located in the heart of Italian Carlton, the Italian Historical Society was formed in 1980 at the AGM of CO.AS.IT Italian Assistance Association, the official welfare agency of the Italian community in Victoria. We are an integral part of CO.AS.IT and this was instrumental to the success of the Society. It gave us credibility and most importantly the financial support to develop into the most important collecting body of material on the history of Italians in Australia.

The first project undertaken was a survey of the resources held in public libraries and archives on the Italian presence in Australia. Conducted by a student undertaking archival studies, this study found that the main resources available were only a wide range of government records.

Limited records on the migration and the settlement experience or on the various contributions of Italian immigrants in Australia were then available in public repositories.

Not long afterwards the Society began an oral history project of immigrants who had arrived before the Second World War. Most of them were already quite elderly, therefore we could not waste any time. The interviews were conducted by young bi-lingual Italians under a training and employment program funded by the Federal Government.

At these interviews some important photographs and documents emerged. It was soon realised that unless this evidence was collected, documented and preserved, it would be lost forever. Thus the Society also began to collect this material.

In the process of collecting, an important factor is that the Society never puts any pressure on the migrant or the descendants to donate the originals. Unless they voluntarily donate their records, we only borrow the material for copying. Most consent to the material being copied. A print and a negative is made and included in the collection. The original is then returned to the donor.

This does not diminish the social and historical value of our collection. On the contrary, it ensures that as much material as possible is collected and preserved, without permanently removing it from the context and history of the community.

During the first ten years of operation, a limited quantity of material was deposited spontaneously by the community. A good degree of time and resources was spent informing and educating the community as to the importance of recording their experiences and contribution to the development of Australia.

At the beginning our knowledge in conservation was quite limited, however the State Library of Victoria with whom we have maintained a long collaboration, taught us some basic principles, such as the use of acid free bags for storing originals, negatives and copy prints, archival storage boxes, etc.

For each image we gather information as to the donor's name, the names of the people depicted, the place and date and the context. A time-consuming but extremely important effort. The hardest work is to identify the names of people in large groups. It takes years to complete, it is almost a generational exercise!

An oral history or extensive notes on the story of the migrant and his family in Australia always accompanies the family photos and documents.

The culmination of the Society's initial work was the exhibition *Victoria's Italians 1900-194'* presented in collaboration with the State Library of Victoria in 1985, as part of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the State of Victoria.

Over the years, as the collection grew and the work of the Society was publicly endorsed by the Italian community and by Australian public institutions, the Society's material on the heritage and history of Italian migration to Australia became the base for other successful and important exhibitions, including the bicentennial exhibition *Australia's Italians 1788-1988* held in collaboration with the State Library of Victoria.

In 1992 in a unique partnership with the Jewish Museum of Australia and Museum Victoria another successful exhibition was presented by the title: *Bridging Two Worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton*. It was so successful that the initial plan to hold for six months was extended to almost two years.

The great success of these exhibitions was reflected in the large number of visitors and in the abundance of material they generated not only for the Society's collection but also for mainstream repositories.

The appreciation of our immigrants, the enhancement of the recognition of their contribution to the Australian society and the awareness of their past, values and traditions reflected in the photographs and objects on display, engaged the interest of the Australian born generations in preserving our heritage and transmitting aspects of our distinct culture to future generations.

Collaborative agreements with mainstream repositories such as local or state libraries and museums are essential to the success of an exhibition. They provide the venue and their expertise.

In 1983 the Society established a project which has become a model for other similar organizations of non-English speaking background.

Believing that the holdings of public institutions did not adequately reflect the contribution to the wider Australian community of those of non Anglo-Celtic origin, the Society instituted the policy of depositing copy prints or, when available, the originals of the material it collected in the State Library of Victoria.

We have thus pioneered the building of a collection in a large public institution, where it is available for posterity, for scholars and the public at large and, most importantly for the descendants of the immigrants. This collaboration continues today.

A similar agreement for the collection of three-dimensional objects was formulated in 1993 with Museum Victoria. Many members of the community who had lent objects for the exhibitions felt that their heritage and migration story would in the future be better told if these objects were permanently housed in the museum. Some of these items are today on display the Immigration Museum in Melbourne.

Our collection has grown considerably since the Society's establishment 24 years ago. It now consists of 350 oral history tapes, more than 8,000 photographs, many rare documents, a unique collection of archival records from Italy in microfilm format, and an important specialised library with a number of rare books.

The migration story often begins with a studio portrait of a mother with her children usually photographed close to their departure to join the husband and father in the foreign land, whom they had not seen for years. It was quite common to send a photograph to help him recognize his family when they disembarked.

The voyage, the arrival, the first home in the new homeland, the espresso bar, a soccer match with gum trees in the background, men working on important projects such as the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, cutting cane in north Queensland or staying at Bonegilla or Rushworth migrants centres ... these important moments in the life of a migrant are well featured in our collection. Material only within the migration context is collected.

Today most of the material is collected spontaneously from members of the community, many of them Australia-born second and third or fourth generation Australians, who call into the Society with photo albums, eager to tell and record the story of their family. As a result of this change, a series of important holdings of photographs, documents and objects feature prominently in the main collection.

A significant holding of original documents is the Santospirito Collection consisting of a large number of original letters and documents dating from 1940-1970. It contains rare evidence of the experience of post-war migration, from the perspective of the protagonists themselves.

This collection was the subject of a collaborative agreement with the University of Melbourne. A grant by the Australian Research Council funded the archival arrangement and the compilation of a detailed description of the collection.

The outcome of this project conducted over three years was a definitive guide to the Santospirito collection, an electronic finding aid posted on to our website and a PhD thesis.

If we accept that knowledge of the present and the future presupposes knowledge of the past, it is of the utmost importance that the stories such as those handed down by Italian migrants do not fade. But fade away they might, if the custodians entrusted with the care of these records were not prepared to protect them from the ravages of time itself: from environmental changes, disasters and excessive handling.

It is for this reason that the Italian Historical Society has embarked on a program of preservation, including the creation of a computer data-base for the photographic collection. This program has been put in place to run parallel with the cataloguing process.

Hence details of each photograph are entered on the database and the image scanned. This project has been recently completed, after four years of hard work scanning and cataloguing 8000 images.

We have recently received funding under the Community Heritage Grants administered by the Australian National Library for the digitisation of over 2,500 documents in the Santospirito Collection which will enhance the preservation of the collection and improve access for future research and study.

We make extensive use of the search tools of the Australian National Archives and the Public Record Office of Victoria. Correct spelling of names, arrival dates, names of ships, naturalization's dates, names of next of kin ... these records contain vital information for the cataloguer. However, we have in place a policy to not duplicate any records held in Australian public institutions or in other collections. We perceive duplication as a waste of time and resources.

Since 1990 the Society also publishes a bi-annual Journal which is very well received by academics, researchers and the wider community. It gives the opportunity to scholars to publish articles and to individuals to write about their family experience. However it is purely a public relations exercise considering that it is quite expensive to produce in terms of staff 's time to chase the articles, write some sections, printing and distribution cost. Only a small amount is recouped via the subscriptions.

We are open to the public and we have in place access conditions and fees.

We do sell prints of our photographs mainly to illustrate educational and history books. We are very protective of our collection, sometime to the point where we are criticized for not making the collection more open and accessible to all industries especially food and hospitality, advertising and others.

We have the moral duty to protect our material from abuses or stereotyping such as to decorate the walls of restaurants or shops with images of Italians eating pizza or spaghetti. There is much more behind an image of this type: the migration story, the culture and the traditions which are not conveyed by a photograph adorning the walls of a restaurant.

In the last couple of years our public program has been quite limited to a few public lectures and displays of images in regional centres, the reason being that we directed all our energies

towards the computer cataloguing of the photographic collection. We also conduct guided tours of Italian Carlton to selected group of people, mainly from the university of the third age.

We serve the schools providing material in Italian and in English to secondary students and teachers on issues such as immigration, contribution and social changes. Many tertiary students from Australia and from Italy use our collections and archives for research purposes.

We have a family history section. However we only provide limited assistance by advising on how to obtain records from the country of origin of their ancestors. Most of the people who come to the Society for family history are descendants of Italian and Swiss-Italian Gold-Rush pioneers.

We are now working towards the publication of a quality coffee table book that will be published by Melbourne University Publishing in 2005. This is another exciting and demanding project!

The Italian Historical Society enjoys credibility as a collecting body because it is firmly anchored in the Italian community. It is essentially a community organization and that is its special strength.

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