

Italian market gardeners oral history project

Summaries of five interviews recorded with Enrico (Richetto) Rebuli in 2013

(OH 872/26)

The interviews were recorded in the Veneto dialect
in Richetto's home in Kidman Park by Anna Mechis

Also present was Madeleine Regan.

Rosanna, Richetto's daughter was present for some of the interviews.

The following summary is written in third person apart from some direct quotes which have been translated by Anna Mechis.

Richetto's nephew, Giovanni Rebuli, edited the summary in 2018.

Interview 1, 7 June 2013

Richetto explains his background

He was born on 18 June 1921 at Bigolino in the province of Treviso in the Veneto region of Italy.

He was named after an uncle, his father's brother, who died in Russia in World War I.

His father, Giovanni Rebuli was born in Bigolino. His mother Filomena Barbisan was born in Levada – approximately five kilometres from Bigolino. The family members were agricultural workers and grew pasture for four or five cows which were in a stable and they also grew grapes. There were three generations living together in a large house, paternal grandparents, three brothers and wives and children who lived there. The grandparents died when Richetto was a child.

Richetto had three siblings: Maria born 1914, Ginevra born 1916, Teodoro born 1920.

Quote from the interview: *My uncle came to Australia in 1927 well before the War¹ when there was a revolution in Italy with Fascism.*

My wife's name is Maria.² We were married in 1947 and had two children, Bruno and Rosanna and I have grandchildren.

Richetto remembers his mother

He remembers his mother as a sick woman. She died at the age of 37 years when Richetto was six years old. (Richetto became emotional talking about his parents) His father did not remarry. Richetto considered him a very good father. He died when he was 82 years old.

¹ World War II

² Her nickname was "Eti") Dal Toè

Land and fortune

Richetto explained that there was a division of family property when he was about 11 or 12 years old. His father got the stables and some land; another uncle got most of the land. The aunt whose husband had emigrated to Australia in 1927 got most of the land. (Richetto expressed emotion) If his father had kept the land, it would have been worth a lot. His nephew bought the house from the aunt who joined her husband in Australia in the 1930s.

Grapes were grown as well as wheat and beans, it was a mixed farm.

Richetto lived at Bigolino until he was 17 years old. Bigolino is two kilometres from Valdobbianene which is the *comune* for the area. The family only sold wine; everything else was for the use of the family. The only money earned was from the sale of wine and milk.

There were three households together in Bigolino and Richetto explained and another uncle came to live there. In the house there were three bedrooms and three cows in the stable section and they reared veal to sell.

His father had a bike. His two sisters worked in a silk making factory as seasonal employees.

Childhood and school

Richetto explained that he went to school up to Grade 3 in Bigolino. There were four teachers in four classrooms. His brother went to Grade 4. His father could not afford to send his brother to school beyond that. He was not very enthusiastic about going to school and didn't do his homework. He learned how to read and write and left school at aged 11 years.. He clarified that some children did not complete three years of schooling.

Early working life

After finishing at school, he went to work in the fields with his father and brother. He learned how to use the scythe for the corn, strip the wheat and hoed under the vines and he also pruned them. His brother brought his wife to live in the house before Richetto left for Australia.

He attended social gatherings at Bigolino, the *sagre*, *la cucagna* and various festivities. He went to all of them but didn't have money to spend.

His aunts were still at home. While there were religious festivals, there was no money to celebrate. He did not know about celebrating birthdays, not even in Australia, did they celebrate birthdays. Richetto explained, it was the way they were brought up. The only celebrations were those he attended in the village.

When he was 17 he went to Torino and lived with a cousin who was interested in sport, the *tamburino*. He stayed for nine months and did not earn much money at all.

Richetto recalled that he went to Aosta to work in hydro-electricity tunnels. At first he was carrying iron rods and after the authorities saw how hard he worked, they asked him to work with explosives. He worked three shifts tunnelling through mountains. He was able to save money, especially when he was paid more of the mining work. He worked for almost a year.

In 1939, 1940 Richetto had to present himself for military service. Richetto became upset when he remembered that because he did not have much money to take home he felt as if he did not want to return. He got home on a Sunday and his father and aunt were at Mass. He was ashamed and did not want to greet his family. His aunt gave him a great welcome and his father was happy to see him and they did not talk about money.

It was a hard life for a young person. Lots of people from Bigolino were working in Torino at the time.

Meeting his wife

Richetto met his wife before the War. He had always known her because they lived close to each other. There were four in Maria Etti's family. Richetto and Eti courted and then married after the War.

Interview no: 2 - 12 June 2013

Experience of military service

Richetto begins by talking about returning to Bigolino to register for the Army.

He was working in the fields with his father when the police came for him. He was given a week off to be with his family and then he had to go to Belluno which was "very bad", they cut his hair and gave him clothes and he slept in a dormitory. The newest recruits had to do all the work. After a couple of months of army exercises, they had to set up camp in Agordo in the mountains. In the *Alpini* soldiers learned mountaineering skills and they were in camp for a few months. He heard the announcement "We are now at war". They left the campsite, went to Belluno and onto Molfetta when he embarked on a ship that went to somewhere in Greece. The army then moved to Yugoslavia.

Richetto speaks about Montenegro and being sent to work every week on foot. His task was surveillance and cleaning up places that had been bombed. They were attacked by partisans.

From Slovenia, he went to Torino and France and he was not in a combat zone. He was working as a medical orderly looking after the wounded.

He was also involved in building concrete barricades that were put in place in the ocean to prevent the English from landing in France.

1943 he returned to Italy and along the way he met some French cyclists who told him that Mussolini had surrendered. The army group dispersed, surrendered their arms and were free to go their own way. They escaped from the partisans and he went home, part was by foot and some of the way, by train. It took about a month to return home.

Spring 1944, he was at home with his father, sister and brother. However, German soldiers arrested him outside his home. Richetto stated that someone had reported that he was a Communist. Five or six men were arrested and taken to Valdobbiadene in a truck.

Interview no: 3 – 7 June 2013

War service, arrest by the German army and imprisonment in Dachau

In this interview Richetto continued to speak about his war service for the Italian Army. After the assassination of a local fascist leader in Bigolino, the Germans forcibly seized him and four or five other locals in reprisal, and they were sent to Dachau Camp in Bavaria, Germany.

Ricchetto was put to work in various places and then finally a local sawmill until the end of the war when the country was liberated by the Americans.

He then made his way home to Bigolino.

Interview no: 4, 28 June 2013

Working life after marriage

Richetto explained that he worked in Belgium for a year after he and Etti married. He had also worked with his brother in coalmines near Asolo-Cornuda for one and a half years (with his brother and they walked and cycled there and back. However the work dried up.

There was not enough land in his father's plot. He was by now married with two children and yet his father was head of the household and Richetto gave him his pay packet. Bruno was born in 1947 and Rosanna, in 1948.

Emigrating to Australia - 1951

His uncle Bruno who had emigrated to Australia in 1927 had died in Adelaide before the birth of Richetto's son, Bruno. His aunt, the widow of his uncle sponsored him and they paid for the trip. He took the boat, *Achille Lauro*, a cargo ship. He was 30 years old. His brother (Teodoro) had gone first in 1949 and was followed by his wife Amabile Dal Toè (Eti's sister) and son Giovanni (Johnny) in April 1950. Richetto disembarked at Melbourne and some people from Bigolino met him and took him to the train which went to Adelaide.

When he arrived in Adelaide, his brother met him and he began life in Adelaide on Torrens Road at Croydon in a shed alongside the house in which he lived and which belonged to an old man (Mr Cook). They lived there for almost four years before he bought a house at Croydon.

Six months after his arrival in Adelaide Richetto called his wife Maria (Eti) and children and they came with Richetto's sister Ginevra.

Working life in Adelaide

Richetto first worked at Holden's for a year and then worked overtime at Finsbury in a factory, ROH. He worked two shifts at two factories.

He had bought a block of land behind the Catholic church at Seaton.

The children stayed at Oscar Mattiazzo's before school because both and he and Eti left early for work.

He returned to work as a cleaner at Holden's Woodville and also had some work as a machinist in the packing area. He enjoyed work. When he went to the Elizabeth plant, he became a leading hand.

He was not quite 65 years old when he decided to leave work. He was quite happy. He already had a business at home. He had taught himself to repair watches. He got a package and he bought four flats at Kilkenny as an investment.

Other work with the veneti

Quote from the interview: *At the beginning I worked in the market gardens, went with Peter Mattiazzo on our old bikes to a flower farm at Marion. We worked on weekends, weeding. I used to live on that weekend money.*

When I finished with the flower gardens, I started working on the market gardens for the Santin brothers. We were weeding for them. A few times, we went to the Santin's for bocce.

The Santin's had lots of people working for them. They all lived in houses off Frogmore Road, I knew them all, the Tonellato. We also socialised with those people. They grew potatoes, bought land at Virginia.³

After a while I didn't work for the Santin's because of the distance. I was still friends with them. They've all died now.

Memories of social life

I only worked, painted the house. I never went out. We would visit family and friends and go to weddings.

His sister, Ginevra, married a Caon and they lived at Gilles Plains.

Richetto remembered the Tonellato wagon on Frogmore Road. He remembered the people gathering there for social occasions. He went there to make wine because they had equipment.

Return visits to Italy

Quote from the interview: *There was no life, it was a real misery there.*

Richetto returned five times. The first time was in 1972.

Quote from the interview about his first visit home: *It was a peaceful time. I did not meet anyone who caused me trouble during the War. For me it was all gone, finished with. I heard lots of things about the partisans but I didn't know what they were actually up to.*

I was able to postpone holidays for two years and take extended time, I liked being in Italy but not enough to go back there to live. People had employment but also worked the land.

I was very unhappy because I did not get to see my father who lived with his daughter and who passed away in 1970.

³ The land the Santin's bought was at Bolivar

Johnny Rebuli, my nephew, was born in 1948. My nephew's parents were worried about their son being called up to serve in the Vietnam War. He was going to be a school teacher. He went to the university of Venice. He had to do military service and was a specialist in languages.

I went back to Dachau, everything was different, I bought a beautiful picture book about it. Only three buildings were left. I also saw the ovens... Richetto explained the process of sending people to the ovens.

I was heartbroken when I saw these things and felt gratitude that I had survived.

I was very happy on my first visit and all the visits to Italy.

Interview no: 5 – 28 June 2013

Richetto summarises his life

Richetto describes his work in market gardens, working at odd hours, weekends and whenever help was needed in the market gardens of the Santin Brothers on Frogmore Road at Kidman Park. He weeded and picked vegetables with many others and also socialized with other Veneti in the area.

Richetto and Eti bought a new home in Kidman Park in about 1978 and have never regretted their decision to settle in Australia.

Richetto explains that his working life started when he was about eight years old, gathering stones from the *Piave* riverbed. He is still busy gardening, doing his housework, washing, cooking and visits his wife in a nursing home every day. He is now 92 years old.