

EULOGY FOR ELSA (LORENZINA) INNOCENTE (12.2.1928 – 17.1.2017)

When my father was 19 he was told of a small ritual that if carried out each night for six nights would result in his dreaming, on the seventh night, of the girl he would marry.

On the seventh night Angelo woke up in a sweat and with a sense of disbelief and denial. No way, there was no way he was going to marry that scrawny little highly spirited 12 year old nuisance, whose older siblings Rina, Giulia and Emilio were his friends. No way. When Elsa was 19, the spirited little girl was still a big part of her character. She was now grown up and working at the silk mills in a local town. A war had since intervened. Angelo had served in the Italian army. Angelo married the 19 year old Elsa. And they lived happily ever after.

Elsa was the fourth living child of Antonio and Maria Pivatto. When she was six, the family went to live in Caselle, Angelo's home town. According to mum and dad, there was no town quite like Caselle and they returned to Caselle many times from Australia. The town and its people were a big part of their formative lives and always held a special place for them both. Elsa was 24 and Angelo 29 when they migrated to Australia so they actually lived here almost three times the number years they had ever lived in Caselle. But Caselle was Caselle.

When mum was 10 she travelled from Caselle (near Venice) to Rome to work for a public servant and his dressmaker wife as nanny to their three year old daughter. The young family lived in an apartment near Campo Dei Fiori where Elsa would run shopping errands. Fear of war surrounded the city. Eventually this military build-up became so terrifying to Elsa that the young family sent her back home. Mum always remembered the address of this Rome apartment and remembered how much she loved going roller-skating with other nanny-girls from her apartment block on Sundays, their day off. Even as a 10 year old, so far away from family Elsa found something she loved doing for herself and overwhelmed as she may have been with all the great fear that surrounded life in Italy and Rome in 1938, the child in her still played and learned to roller-skate.

In 1952 Elsa arrived in Australia with her small daughter Mirella to be reunited with my father after a separation of two years. My father arranged for Gino Berno to drive his truck to the Adelaide railway station to pick them up. My future godparents Angelina and Vittorio Marchioro, my Zio and Zia Pietro and Angelina Compostella accompanied him. Mirella remembers that she and mum sat in the cabin; the others travelled in the truck's back. They stopped at the Mile End Hotel for a beer. It was November 1st.

My dad had given Zia Angelina money to buy homewares for his young wife. Home was a shack on White Avenue. The landlord was Harold, a Chinese-Australian gentleman who owned the box factory on White Avenue. Her new neighbours in the adjoining shack was a group of young Chinese students and workers who grew to love Elsa; they would come borrowing groceries from her daily. No exaggeration. Little rats scurried across the shelving but mum's concrete floor was always waxed within an inch of its life.

She was 24, had no parents, siblings or childhood friends in Australia; was rekindling her relationship with Angelo and building a new life in an arid, dry, sparsely populated town. Mirella says that mum never looked back and brought to her new life the vigour and hard-work, enthusiasm and joy that she brought to everything she undertook.

She went to work at Lasscocks Nursery within months of arriving. She spoke no English but quickly befriended Anna, a Lithuanian refugee who would come home for coffee after work and who looked out for mum. Like the time Elsa sheltered from a storm in one of the potting sheds. A compassionate Mr Lasscock saw her and mimed to Elsa to get on her bike and go home as the storm was settling in. Elsa didn't return to work the next day as she told my father she had been fired. A few days later Mr Lasscock and Anna went looking for Elsa around the streets where they thought she lived. They wanted her to come back and of course had never meant to send her away! Elsa was a cover girl of Gardening Magazine; in the new TV age she demonstrated potting plants technique on Channel 9!

Throughout her life Elsa surrounded herself with a wide and varied and ever-growing number of people. She had a strong capacity to trust and to be open. Her connection with people enriched her life with the things we need – the love and care and thoughtfulness of other people. People mattered to Elsa and I think she mattered to them.

At 27 at the behest of Evelina's worried mother, Elsa chaperoned her young Friend on dates with smitten young men. She was very close to the women in Adelaide from Caselle – Rosina and Clara Santin, Lina Oliviero with whom she loved going to the railway station, (their moniker for the casino) Italia Tonellato who travelled with us and her family for a memorable trip to Italy in 1964. When we also met Girogio and Norma Smania. She connected with other young women in Adelaide like Maria Gazzola and Gina Perin and Maria Altoe who too had migrated post war who had little family in Adelaide. She and Bruna Tiepo went to the Lockleys Haberdashery when they were both pregnant and bought baby clothes together. She worked hard and with gusto with my father for many years and for a period Sila Bottin joined them. They would deliver boxes in the evening stopping for a steak sandwich at the food truck at the Cavan Hotel on the way home.

She was invited to be *comare*, or godmother by many. One of my favourites was our Neapolitan comare from Salisbury who would always greet mum by saying '*è arrivata la bellezza della comare*'. She loved her comare Nair and Bruna but was especially close to her White Avenue comare, Comare Angelina Marchioro and Comare Maria Rizzardo. These friendships endured for close to 5 decades and continued with her friendships with their children. She loved her loyal *compari* Scutella and their entire family, especially comare Catuccia's young sisters newly migrated from Italy who still remember my mother to me and their early meeting with the young woman who rode her bike to drop me off to the care of their sister before riding off to work. Elsa was a role model!

She loved White Avenue where she lived for 60 years. She was as proud of White Ave as she was of Caselle. Elsa was always there for all her neighbours and everyone loved her dropping in and they in turn knew that Elsa would always be welcoming. And like her first Chinese neighbours, Elsa would share with them whatever she had to give. My dad always said that if he had \$1 for everything mum gave away – eggs, vegetables, bread and salami, lemons – he would have been a millionaire! You never left Elsa's without something.

Mum liked to look good, to keep a spotless and ordered house, believed in always having something put away (*'e robe de canton no'e perde mai stagion'*). She liked and valued lovely things. She was a memorable cook who could make so many Veneto dishes that reminded people of home. Things like polenta and *'sciosi'*, *'fortaia' col zucchero*, *zuppa de trippa* and her world famous zuppa inglese that honestly had more alcohol than sponge! In the mid-seventies she and Sila, Franca Boin and Maria Ballestrin helped out at the Casa D'Italia kitchen for several months when their cook unexpectedly left. These four women catered for weddings, big Sunday night dinner crowds and a New Years Eve Ball with no large-scale catering experience. It was something else to see mum put in an order for industrial quantities of produce, for someone who had only cooked for family and family gatherings. She loved her Saturday lunch table of *'veci'* Australiani – mainly Italians who had migrated before the war - and would cook for them all sorts of dishes that they remembered from their mothers. She also shared these recipes with her young sister in law and later in life with the children of her departed friends.

Elsa was passionate and giving, generous and fair. She never spoke unkindly about others. She was no saint, mind you. At his speech for their Golden Wedding Anniversary Angelo said he had three things to say about Elsa. The first one was being that *'only sugar is sweet'*. (*solo lo zucchero è dolce*). She was tough to please at times, and demanding. But she was great fun, beautiful, feisty and very funny.

My mother was generous with my sister and me; her and dad gave us so much. She would help out our dressmaker and friend Mariucci at home so that Mirella could have her clothes made for her; she didn't blink when I needed to find a new school and chose one that required a complete uniform overhaul and with fees higher than maybe she and dad had anticipated. For their unbounded generosity and love Mirella and I give thanks. My mother also cared for my father's younger brother Gino who came to Australia as a 17 year kid and who lived with us for 8 years before his marriage to Zia Mary. Elsa cared for Gino in a selfless way and was a special part of his life and his family's life.

In 1976 Angelo and Elsa travelled to Brazil to see my mother's two brothers. Our Brazilian cousins remind us often that Zia Elsa was the only member of their father's family who ever went to visit them, to check that they were well, to see how they lived. Her visit showed them that they were never forgotten and always close to her heart.

We went to see mum yesterday for the last time. She looked beautiful. She wore her favourite outfit, the one she wore when she and dad renewed their marriage vows in this church on their 60th wedding anniversary.

At the end of his life my father was deeply saddened by my mother's memory loss. Mirella and I want to thank the staff at Saint Hilarion who cared for her and embraced Elsa's personality so beautifully during the five years she lived at the home. Carers, nursing staff, cleaners so many established their own rapport with her. For this we are so grateful and also for the pastoral care offered warmly by the sisters. We also thank the support of the home's families who have come in and out of our lives over the last five years. The presence of these families made our journey with mum so much better. We thank you.

And Mirella and I would also like to thank the Adelaide Fringe especially past director Greg Clarke and present director Heather Croall who allowed Mirella and me to take the time we needed, always, to look after Elsa. We are truly thankful.

Elsa was the most precious thing in Angelo's life. Mirella and I looked after her as best we could during the five years since his death. We now consign Elsa back to his care. She has gone home.

AIDA INNOCENTE 23 January 2017