

Mum's Life

Vittoria Piovesan (nee Teso)
Born in San Pelaio, Treviso, Italy 31/07/22
Died in Adelaide 7/07/2005

Thank you all for braving this miserable weather to join with us here today in this celebration of Mum's life.

Mum was born in Treviso, a small town in the heart of the Veneto Region approx. 30km N of Venice on the 31st July 1922. The old town centre is circled by the traditional stone wall fortifications and moat of the 13th century and has numerous fast flowing streams flowing through it, giving it much the same feel as Venice. It has been referred to as "Venice's little sister" in travel literature.

Mum was one of 10 children born to Luigi and Amalia Teso (nee Zanatta), however only 6 survived beyond early childhood. Mum's mother died from Septasaemia (spelling?) / blood poisoning on 30 July 1933 on the day before Mum's 11th Birthday and five (5) days after giving birth to her 10th child, Angelo, as a result of a stick injury incurred days before whilst working in the fields and pregnant with her last child. There were 7 surviving children at the time. Mum's other sisters were aged 22, 16, 9, 4 at that time, her other brother Giovanni was then aged 23 months. and Angelo. Angelo had been born on Mum's father's 50th Birthday but only survived for 11 months. It was thought at the time that his blood may also have been infected during the last days of her pregnancy.

Mum's eldest sister married a few years after our Nonna's death, leaving Mum (then 15yrs old) and her older sister Elena (then not quite 21yrs old) to raise the three remaining younger children. The need to band together and work with her sisters in order to survive in tough times are lessons which were very firmly imprinted in her mind at a very early age and are what made Mum the very tough person we all knew. With those sort of experiences behind her, no task was ever too great or discouraged her.

The family owned just half a hectare of land – approx. 5,000 square metres and she worked the fields with her father and sisters. She told us stories of how they had to cart the corn from the neighbouring paddocks, up 2 flights of stairs to the 3rd level Granary. She supplemented the family income by first doing house cleaning duties and later factory work in the nearby mills.

Her particular specialty was raising chickens and turkeys during the late winter / early spring, when the restaurateurs were forced to pay higher prices for "out of season" poultry. This is also when she developed her expertise in castrating young male chooks to turn them into "capponi" (capons), a skill for which she was later to be in great demand here in Adelaide among her Veneto family friends. This was the era before families owned chest freezers and relied on their own supply of fresh, home grown poultry for home meals. The sisters also raised Geese for their "down" feathers (for making wonderfully warm, lightweight doonas), and the lard which was turned into cooking fat. They were so successful that they managed to scrimp and save sufficient money during the 2nd World War to purchase materials for dowries for herself and her two younger sisters.

The family endured the bombings of WW2 and offered shelter to city-based relatives during the war. She often said that her old house (2 storey plus Granary on top) was filled to the rafters with people and their furniture. Having survived that experience, she said nothing could destroy it. Her descriptions of the war damage, the approx. 6,000 dead and the suffering of casualties during the 1944 Good Friday bombing of Treviso formed lasting impressions in our young minds.

Mum was married to Dad by proxy on 15th September 1948

Dad, also from Treviso, was in Belgium at the time, working in a Steel Foundry in Tubize, a short distance from Brussels. Following the Wedding by Proxy, she joined him there and lived there for just over 1 year - during which time she became very fluent in French.

From there, they decided to migrate to either Adelaide / Australia (where Dad's brothers Angelo and Attilio had migrated in the 1927 and 1937), or to Argentina – where Mum's aunts had moved many years earlier after WW1. They were accepted first by Australia and eventually left Genoa by ship for Melbourne, disembarking in Melbourne on the 29th January 1950.

It was not an easy sea passage for Mum because she was 8 months pregnant at the start of her voyage. She spent most of her time sick, below decks. She disguised her pregnancy when they arrived in Melbourne by wearing a heavy winter overcoat (at the height of summer!!), so that she could board a plane to Adelaide's Parafield Airport.

They were up picked from there by truck for a bouncy ride back to what is now Kidman Park. I was born 3 days after their arrival in Australia on the 2nd of February 1950, no doubt the bouncy truck ride had something to do with the timing of the delivery. The French she learnt in Belgium was to be her saviour in Hospital, as she was lucky enough to have a French speaking Doctor Bruce!! Renz was born 16 months later, on 3rd June 1951 and her French language skills were necessary once again.

Her immediate impressions of Adelaide were very negative.

Mum had left Italy in the middle of winter and had come from a large +200yr old 3 storey solid stone home which she loved, to live in a shack / "baracca" which Zio Attilio had bought and which was still located on Eugenio "Marena" Zalunardo's land, about where the Repco and Solver Paint Stores now stand on Grange Road - opposite the Findon Shopping Centre.

It was a small 2 roomed, timber framed home with a lean to – all of which was asbestos clad, metal roofed and had draughty timber floor boards - which wasn't too bad in summer but terrible in winter!!. The house was in the middle of a dry paddock – in the height of a very hot Australian summer when the temperature that season regularly went above the old 100° F mark, forcing Mum to stay up all night to fan me so I could get some sleep!!

After about a year, the house was moved to our Uncle Attilio's land on what is now Hosking Avenue, next door to where Nillo our cousin now lives. We remember Mum telling us that the cattle grazing in the paddock would always scratch their backs on the corner of the house, causing it to shake so much that Mum always feared they would push the house off its stilts. The cattle used to gather outside the front door to drink from the bucket outside the house, which caught the waste water from the Kitchen sink inside. Bathing and Laundry facilities were eventually established in the shed adjoining the home. There were 3 corner jacks growing everywhere on the ground outside and no paths – except for an approx. 1m square concrete slab immediately outside the door, so she just hid our shoes whenever she did not want us to leave the house and go over to zio Attiolo's house.

The daily trip of several hundred metres on the dirt track to Frogmore Road each night and morning, to put out and then collect the billy-can of milk, was fraught with danger because of the snakes which sheltered in the Box Thorn bushes. There were vivid stories of how the bulldozer operator had to abandon his tractor when he disturbed all the snakes on the day he cleaned up the Box Thorn bushes. There were also the foxes that sheltered in the western boundary Box Thorn hedge during the day and were regular visitors to our chicken shed at night.

This was a time when very strong and lasting friendships were formed amongst young Italian families and that community spirit still lives on today. For the most part, they had migrated at about the same time and had similarly left behind families and friends in search of a new life and better opportunities for their children.

Like many others of their generation, Mum and Dad lost their remaining parents and some family members without ever seeing them again.

Mum suffered an Encephalitis attack which nearly killed her during her 3rd Year after arrival

Hers was only one of three rare cases in Australia at that time and the doctors were not as skilled in treating it then. This occurred when Renz and I were just 2 and 3yrs old.

After she had fully recovered, Dad went to Alice Springs to work for about 6 months – the priority being to save enough money to build their own home.

With the help of many fellow “paesani”, Dad built their home at 1 Richard Street, Findon.

It was a time when house sizes were limited by State Law because of the severe shortage of building materials. We moved into the house without floor boards in the 2 front rooms in mid 1954, just before the earthquake struck. It cracked some of the walls and part of that damage can still be seen today.

Mum had moved out of the “comfort zone” of all Italian relatives and neighbours to an area where at first, all the new neighbours were only English speakers. The Keeley, Knowles, Peach, Whitmore, Drummond and Stuchberry households quickly became our new adopted families, before the Italian speaking Crossato and Dalmasso families moved into the street.

Mum was a great homebuilder and worker in those early years

Dad was in great demand as a Panel Beater and regularly worked 6 and 7 days/weeks and plenty of overtime after tea for their first 23 years. Dad seldom took more than a week holiday a year, so Mum was left to raise us children all on her own, along with doing all the housework, tending to a large vegetable garden and raising many chickens and rabbits – helped by her young assistants!!

Mum the Traveller

Our parent’s first ever real holiday came after 23 years here, when in 1973 they returned to Italy with John to visit their families for the first time since leaving Italy on 28/12/1949. This gave Mum the travel bug and from the late 70s, after Dad retired, she managed to squeeze in travel to every State and Territory in Australia, to France where she had cousins, to the USA and Canada where she had girl friends from her younger days back home, had stopovers in India and Pakistan en route to Europe, visited John when he worked in Hong Kong, went on tours with her sisters to the UK and Scotland (from Italy) and went on tours organised by the Veneto Club to New Zealand and Tasmania. The Veneto Club Ladies Committee also had annual trips, which she enjoyed immensely. She has certainly seen more of Australia and the world than we have and her travels gave her richly deserved pleasure

In Mum’s own words, she was a Graduate of the “University of Life”.

She was a gifted young student with a very keen mind, but like many of her era - she was limited to only 4yrs of “formal” education because of their family circumstances. She was a very good Maths student and shone in Essay writing, often winning her class’s Essay Competition.

She would have excelled in today’s world, with the educational opportunities now available to young people – particularly girls. She was a great observer and student of life in general.

She believed in making the most of one’s God given talents and opportunities and was always telling us we should be prepared to learn from other people’s mistakes – rather than repeat them and only learn from our own!! **Better to avoid the pain and learn fast!!**

Mum appreciated the benefits of a sound education from her early discussions and association with her mistress in Italy, whose husband was a Judge. She was determined we would all have the opportunities denied to her and her generation. She would have us do Italian lessons in the middle of the day during the long summer holidays, from books sent to her by her former mistress. She took great interest in our school Progress Reports and I can remember getting extra tutoring during Term 2 whilst in Grade 7 (way back in 1961), to ensure I obtained my PC / Primary Certificate to allow me to progress to 1st year of High School at St Michaels College, Beverley.

Mum particularly spent a lot of time with John in his early years of schooling, when a Paediatrician recommended taking him for 3 short, 10 minute reading sessions a day to overcome a concentration problem. She was so successful that John went on to achieve the best school academic results of all 3 of us. She even packed herself off to English classes in the mid 80s, to improve her English so she could communicate more easily with her grandchildren who spoke no Italian.

Mum passionately disliked waste – especially when so many in the world went without the basics in life!!

She was very critical of our “consumer” based culture and it pained her to throw away anything which was still useful. This particularly applied to clothing items which she refused to throw out until they had been patched many times over – and then had to be used as gardening clothes before throwing them out. She would rather recycle an item and give her money to needy Charities – to benefit the poor and less well off in society.

She believed there was no excuse for walking around with holes in one’s clothes and never came to grips with today’s modern “holey” fashions. She spent many winter nights by the wood stove, lovingly mending socks and jumpers, not to mention rips in trousers and shirts.

During a trip to Italy in the mid 90s when she met up with Andrew and Mark, both of whom had been working overseas for a while, she stayed up nearly all night to mend Andrew’s good trousers - which he had ripped the night before and needed to visit relatives the next day.

Mum had learnt to knit and sew as a young child – by necessity. She made most of her own clothes and ours when we were young. She had a good eye for copying patterns and could make her own clothes without a pattern. She was always available to take-up, take-in, let-out or otherwise adjust clothes that were purchased as bargains from city stores but were ill fitting.

She was a regular visitor to the Onkaparinga Factory outlets, purchasing material for her own dresses and suits, or simply to buy blankets. Legend has it she handled herself pretty well in the scrums for a bargain, on occasions embarrassing her less aggressive daughters-in-law.

Mum was a very keen gardener and loved her flowers, fruit trees and vegetables

She was forever potting out new flowers and this, combined with her “no waste” policy, meant she utilised all makes, shapes and sizes of pots – which looked a bit of a mess. She had them dotted everywhere around the yard, which made summer hand watering a real chore.

We had always enjoyed a great variety of fruit at home, a legacy from old Mr Whitmore who had planted them on the block before Dad and Mum purchased it. There was an endless supply of Grapes and Figs in season and Mum always ensured that dying trees were replaced and grafted with both early and late season varieties.

Summer holidays in our youth always involved picking early and late season apricots and peaches and the preserving sessions seemed never ending, but the benefits were that we had a continuous supply throughout the year.

Mum was a wonderful chef and loved to cook for her family

Nothing gave her greater pleasure to see us all around her table together, enjoying her lassagna, her home raised roasted chicken or rabbit with polenta and the very special way she made her peas.

Many of our friends have also enjoyed Mum's cooking over the years, especially her spaghetti sauce and risottos. Some enjoyed the spaghetti so much they had several bowls, only to be told there was a Main Course to follow.

The extensive vegetable garden contained everything imaginable and Renz noted recently that on one occasion we all sat down to a family meal that contained 12 food items consisting of 2 meat and 10 vegetable or salad dishes, of which only the potato chips were not home grown.

It was impossible to visit Mum and go home empty handed, she always was prepared to share whatever she had with you - be that fruit, vegetables or some form of cooked meal.

Mum was a diligent and wise manager of the family funds

Dad went out and earned the money, but it was Mum's management of those funds which saw all us boys get a head start in life in owning our own homes. She always argued that a woman could make just as great a contribution to the wealth and overall well-being of a household by being a wise manager of the household funds - rather than to be out working and having to pay for childcare.

She kept it simple and always invested in real estate, moving between land and investment properties. She taught us to save at an early age by making us pay off a block of land each. By the time we needed funds for a deposit on our homes, not only had we accumulated additional funds but the original value of the land had sky-rocketed and we were a long way down the path of paying off our homes.

Mum lived for and loved her family very much

"Home" was always wherever Mum happened to be - as Mark experienced when he fell ill whilst overseas and was staying "at home with Nonna", at our Aunty's house in Italy a few years ago.

She always had the knack of knowing what had to be done under the circumstances, making you feel safe in her presence.

Mum escorted Renz's family back to Italy in 1987 and with Dad, accompanied our family over in 1988, to introduce us all to our relatives for the very first time. These were very special moments for all of us, but particularly Mum because of the great value she placed on family values and the feeling of belonging to a wider family group.

She has taken great pride in all her grandchildren and was deeply touched by their return to Adelaide from overseas and interstate, to visit her before her death. She understood the tyranny of distance only too well, having missed the deaths of her own family members during her lifetime, but by the same token - she did not want anybody to put their lives "on hold" for her sake. She was a firm believer that we all need to get on with our own lives for now and hopefully would all be re-united one day in Heaven.

Mum was a very outgoing person, loved socialising and was a contributor to her community, wherever possible.

She involved herself in:-

- The Mother's Club at St Josephs at Flinders Park;
- The Flinders Park Church – raising funds by running the very profitable "Italian Cakes Stall";
- The Veneto Club Women's Committee and work in the Kitchen for many years; and
- Italian Community events in general and was an eager supporter of the Trevisani Nel Mondo – an organisation which brings together the many thousands of emigrants from the Veneto region who are now dispersed all over the world.

Mum's strengths were:-

- **Her courage** to tackle any task and go anywhere, no matter her possible lack of experience. She had what we commonly refer to today as a positive, "can do" attitude to life.
- **Her mental strength and determination** to see any task completed, no matter what the odds.
- **Her genuine love of people**, coupled with an ability to listen and empathise with them.
- **Her patience**, in her roles as a wife, mother and nonna.
- **Her great memory** for details and the ability to process that information - the accumulation of which accounted for much of her wisdom.
- **Knowing her own strengths and limitations** and working within these limits.
- **Always having her feet firmly on the ground**, never getting carried away with herself.
- **Keeping things as simple** as possible.
- **Her compassion** for the poor and less well off in life.
- **Most importantly her deep faith in God**, from which she drew her inner strength and sense of purpose in life, especially in times of illness – and there were several along her journey.

FINAL GOODBYE

Mum was very philosophical when first diagnosed with the lymphoma in her Spleen in August last year (2004). She was determined to give the operation and follow-up Chemotherapy a try, but equally happy and resigned to go if that was God's wish. She had drawn strength on that occasion from the fact that her older sister had survived three breast cancer operations over about a 20 year period and was still alive at 89 years of age.

The diagnosis last month on the 7th June came as a bit of a shock, coming so soon after the "all clear" report she received for her Quarterly Check-up at the end of May 2005. Despite this set-back, she was again very philosophical about the good life she had enjoyed and expressed that she had no regrets and would not change anything about her life if given the opportunity to relive it all over again. She was at peace with herself and happy to face her Creator in the knowledge she had always given her best.

She greatly valued the loving care she received from the doctors and hospital staff at our own local Western Hospital - where she had her initial operation and Oncology treatment, St Margaret's where she went for her recovery, the QEH where she was briefly and we celebrated dad's 91st Birthday on the 9th of June, St Andrews where she spent the greater part of her last month and of course, the very special love and treatment in her last week at the Mary Potter Hospice at Calvary.

She drew strength from all your visits and your prayers for her and she would want us to thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

She will be very deeply missed by her family and friends, both here and overseas.
We will miss her love, compassion, encouragement, strength and seemingly infinite wisdom.

We especially will miss her whenever we sit down for family dinners, because no-one cooks like she used to – no matter how hard we have tried to copy her recipes.

On behalf of the Dad and the family, we thank each one of you for being her friend and the many joys your friendship gave her during her life.

Angelo Piovesan,
Saturday 16th July 2005.

Read by Angelo, Renz and John Piovesan.