

Eulogy for Italia Tonellato, 3 August 1924 – 18 September 2022 (Eric Leo)

My name is Eric Leo and I am a grandson of Italia Tonellato.

My *Nonna* was born Italia Bergamin in the village of Monastiero, San Martino di Lupari in the province of Padova, Veneto region of Italy on 3 August 1924 more than 98 years ago.

Nonna's parents gave her the name Italia because an aunt had recently become a Catholic Nun and as this was considered a great honour for the family, so too did the family want to honour the nation which had made this possible.

Throughout her life, *nonna* prayed to and supported the activities of the patron Saint of her provincial capital, Padua – which is, of course, Saint Anthony of Padua.

Nonna's father's name was Napoleone and her mother's name was Amabile. *Nonna* also had 2 brothers (Giuseppe or Bepe and Virginio or Nino) and 2 sisters (Giuseppina or as she was always known to us growing up – Zia Pina and Elsa). Together, a family of 7.

In 1928, *nonna's* father ventured to South Australia to support his family and worked for 10 years breaking boulders by hand and mallet to build roads. The family spent the following 10 years living apart. During these formative years, *nonna* enjoyed travelling on her bicycle through the countryside and feeding ducks in the pond.

In 1938, *nonna* was 14 years old. Her father returned to Italy that year and shortly thereafter the family permanently emigrated to Australia.

Early times for *nonna's* family were not for want of tribulation. The family lived under a tent in Karoonda in rural South Australia. *Nonna* Italia took on work in Jervois outside of Taillem Bend as a farmhand working with an Australian woman and her Italian husband – one of the few times in *nonna's* life when she had the opportunity to learn English.

After several years of toil, *nonna's* family took up lodging in a single bedroom of a house owned by their paesani in Chief Street, Brompton. *Nonna* took up full time work with her sister Pina processing mica (which is basically a mineral insulator which was used in electrical equipment such as heaters) at a small factory owned by other paesani just off Hindley Street.

The family all worked hard, pooled their resources and within a few years, had saved enough to acquire the entire house in Chief Street.

Working in the factory, *nonna* first came to hear chatter amongst her female co-workers about the handsome eligible bachelor who would later become my grandfather – Luigi Tonellato.

Luigi and Italia's fathers, both members of the small but growing Italian community, had become friends and Luigi would accompany his father from their market garden on Frogmore Road to visit his friend in Chief Street to enjoy a glass of wine and a game of cards. This, of course, is where *nonna* first met *nonno*.

Italia and Luigi were married in the very Church where we gather today in 1947. *Nonna* was 23 and *nonno* was 25. Luigi was the love of Italia's life. A feast was held on the morning of the wedding in the barn owned by my Great Grandfather just off Frogmore Road and a reception was held after the Church service in Hindmarsh Town Hall.

Shortly after being married, the young couple took up residence in a train carriage which had been transported to Frogmore Road by my Great Grandfather, having been originally commissioned for King George V.

In 1948 Italia and Luigi were blessed with the arrival of a son – my uncle, Adriano Tonellato. *Nonna* would affectionately refer to my uncle as her *tosso soio* (her only son) and truth be known, Adrian was very much the apple of her eye. To her, he could do no wrong and I am quite sure that her heart skipped a beat at the very thought of any harm coming to pass on him.

By the late 1940's, Italia, Luigi and Adriano had moved out of the train carriage and into a *baracca* (or shed in Veneto) roughly assembled of corrugated iron at the rear of the train carriage. *Nonno* and *nonna* worked the land to support their young family.

In 1953 Italia and Luigi were again blessed – this time with the arrival of a daughter, my mother, Luciana. So commenced a beautiful friendship between mother and daughter that would sustain *nonna* more than any other. Even as a young child, it was obvious to me that these two could chat for hours. In later years it was not uncommon to find them out and about in West Lakes or Fulham Gardens Shopping Centre just picking up two things. My

mother's relationship with *nonna* was very strong. The fact that my *nonna* lived such a long, engaged and meaningful life is truly a testament to my mum who cared so selflessly for her.

Nonno and *nonna* established their own market garden, glass houses and built their family a home. My grandparents were a power couple and what they achieved during these years and the working decades that followed is remarkable even by today's standards – especially when you consider that their fruits were born of toil, sweat and old-fashioned hard work.

Although my *nonni* both had an exceptional working discipline, they also travelled widely and enjoyed themselves immensely. In terms of social outlook, my *nonna* was very much the introverted ying to my *nonno's* extroverted yang. That said, following a healthy amount of encouragement, in 1964, Luigi, Italia and Luciana headed off to Italy and France for a family holiday travelling by cruise ship. The family stopped off in India to visit the Taj Mahal and in Egypt, to visit the Pyramids and the Sphynx. In later years, with even more encouragement from my *nonno*, *nonna* also visited Canada, New Zealand, Italy and France (for a second time) and every Australian mainland State.

The late 1950's, 1960's and early 1970's were a time of prosperity and happiness for *nonna* and *nonno*. Working hard planting and picking potatoes and cultivating tomatoes and beans in their glass houses, all to be sold at their stand in the Adelaide Produce Market. My *nonni* enjoyed working and did it because they loved to. They flourished whilst surrounded and supported by family and friends - their home on Frogmore Road stood as a large part of the beating heart of a 'little Italian village' in Adelaide's Western suburbs.

Being subjected to the chemicals that were used to cleanse glasshouses at the time caused *nonna* to suffer serious respiratory issues and repeat hospitalisations for many years. But with the sale of the market garden in the late 1970's and early 1980's, her symptoms soon dissipated. Life has a remarkable way of evening out and we would choose to consider that God gifted her a long life as means of compensating her for those lost times she spent struggling with her breathing.

As many of you here in this room may know, my childhood family home stands next door to the house which our *nonni* built for their retirement. Our homes were only separated by a gate but for all intents and purposes we effectively resided under the one roof. We were all particularly close to *nonno* and *nonna* Tonellato and we basically saw them close to every day

for all of our young and formative years. *Nonna* was always there – she would never disturb or intrude but if we needed her, her door was always open for us.

To us, *nonna* Italia was the epitome of a grandmother and she was the coolest – so much so that we would proudly introduce all our visiting friends to *nonna*. It was from this home that *nonna* would perform all the tasks for which we knew her – she would:

- Cook enormous bowls of pasta for me, my sisters and our cousins,
- *Nonna* would run coffee and grappa to the back shed where *nonno* would be selling homemade wine and salami. The wine would be crushed from grapes which my *nonni* had picked by hand,
- *Nonna* would hatch, grow and slaughter a lot of chickens,
- *Nonna's* house would constantly be filled with visiting friends – both old friends from when they ran the market garden and glasshouses but also new friends from involvement with the Veneto Club,
- *Nonna* was extremely house proud. She would diligently pick up leaves from her front lawn (sometimes it felt like she would catch them before they hit the ground),
- *Nonna* encouraged a love of Church in all her grandchildren – proudly beaming on Christenings, First Holy Communions and Weddings, and
- She did all of this (and a lot more) with grace and style – just the way that many of you would remember, dressed elegantly with her pearls, and her hair looking immaculate.

My *nonno* loved my *nonna* dearly and he was forever proud of her. His friends would remark to him – where did you find a woman like that? To which he would boast '*chi cerca trova*' ('if you seek you will find' in English)

Although our hearts are heavy with sadness, today we celebrate a woman who was one of a kind. *Nonna* Italia lived a phenomenal 98 years through some challenging circumstances. She will live on in our hearts and experience an eternity in heaven. Standing proudly in her home, with her handsewn apron. Running to make coffee for Yiyo. All with a smile *perche e cusita... e proprio cusita* (or, in Veneto, 'that's the way it is').

In planning for today, I asked myself what do you say to a woman who has been one of your biggest supporters?

And the answer is as simple as it is short - you say, "Thank you and we love you."

The family would like to thank the wonderful staff at Mary Potter Hospice who cared for *nonna* during her last days. We would also like to pay tribute to my sisters, Malissa and Luisa who tirelessly kept 24-hour vigil over *nonna* Italia's side and tended to her so thoughtfully.

I would like to end with an extract from Proverbs that has always resonated with me when I have thought of *nonna* Italia:

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.

She shops around for the best yarns and cottons, and enjoys knitting and sewing. She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.

She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day. She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.

First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started. She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.

She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking. She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.

She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended and ready to wear. She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colourful linens and silks.

She designs gowns and sells them; brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops. Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.

When she speaks, she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly. She keeps an eye on everyone in her household, and keeps them all busy and productive.

Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise: "Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"

The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD.

Ripose in pace adesso nonna. L'hai fatto il tuo dovere. E tanto, tanto di piu.