

## FACT SHEET

### PROXY BRIDES

*'I was married in church. The priest said the name of my husband but it was not my husband (standing beside me). I was dressed simply in a blue dress, who thought of clothes! We had invited people to come to my mother's home in the evening. That night I had to return to work.'* Angela, who married by proxy in 1939. From *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia* (IHS—COASIT, 1996).

*'From his early letters I became very fond of him. I liked his character and how he wrote the letters. We came to love each other as though we were physically close.'* Aurora, who came to Australia as a proxy bride in 1962. From *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia*.

Marriage by proxy was common among Italians in Australia from the 1920s, peaking during the mass migrations of the 1950s and 1960s. Until the early 1960s, Australian immigration policy had ensured that single men of Italian origin greatly outnumbered women. Proxy marriage was therefore a practical solution to local conditions. Couples who chose this option usually came from the same village or district and often knew or were known to one another.

When a migrant had saved enough money to buy a home, he would ask relatives or friends in Italy to help him find a wife. If the woman was interested, a courtship by correspondence would begin. Couples who decided to marry were required to submit documents to the authorities in Italy and Australia. Once the documents were approved, the woman married by proxy in Italy, with a family member standing in—as proxy—for the groom. In some cases, photographs were taken at the church and the reception. Soon after the bride's arrival in Australia, the match would be celebrated in the home of the newlyweds and perhaps a studio photograph taken.

Marriage by proxy had the advantage of ensuring that the honour of the woman and of her family was preserved. It was felt that there were too many risks associated with sending a single, unescorted young woman to Australia; there was also the danger that the marriage would not go ahead and she would find herself stranded in a new country.

For many parents, proxy marriage promised a better future for their daughters. This was particularly the case in the aftermath of the Second World War, when Italy was in a state of economic and social collapse. For many girls, marriage represented escape from poverty and the restrictions of village life.

In 1953, the Capuchin Order opened an office in Melbourne to help migrant men find partners and to assist with the endless paperwork required by both the Australian and Italian governments. By the early 1960s, Australia's assimilation policy began to favour the settlement of migrants in family units. This opened the door to the sponsorship of fiancées, wives and other family members.

#### **Proxy brides in the Italian Historical Society Collection**

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to proxy brides in the following collections:

- Bonollo Collection
- Library
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Italian Migration: 1945-1970
- Italian Migration: 1900-1945
- Statistics on Italians in Australia

### **Further reading**

The resources listed below can be accessed, by appointment, at the Italian Historical Society.

### **Publications**

Bella Wardrop, S 1996, *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia*, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

Castles, S et al. (eds) 1992, *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales.

———1992, *Italo-australiani: la popolazione di origine italiana in Australia*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Turin, Italy.

Church, J 2005, *Per l'Australia: the story of Italian migration*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

Dell'oso, AM 1998, *Songs of the suitcase*, Harper Collins, Pymble, New South Wales.

Loh, M (ed.) 1984, *With courage in their cases: the experiences of thirty-five Italian immigrant workers and their families in Australia*, Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their families, Coburg, Victoria.

### **Periodicals**

*Italian Historical Society Journal* 1993-, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

### **Internet sites**

AustraliaDonna Working Group 2006, *home page*, South Australia, [http://www.australiadonna.on.net/english/whats\\_new.htm](http://www.australiadonna.on.net/english/whats_new.htm)

Martinuzzi-O'Brien, I 2002, *Italian Australia Records Project (IARP)*, Victoria University, Melbourne, <http://w2.vu.edu.au/iarp/Default.asp>

### **Audio-visual**

*Australia's Italians: 5 interviews* [interview with Marina Rusin] 1988, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

*Love's brother* 2004, video recording, Film Finance Corporation Australia, distributed by Palace Films.

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