

Rolani Guido: a prisoner of war in gippsland

MARIAN SCARLETT GREW UP ON A DAIRY FARM IN SOUTH GIPPSLAND. SHE COMPLETED HER SECONDARY EDUCATION AT METHODIST LADIES' COLLEGE BEFORE GRADUATING AS A BACHELOR OF MUSIC FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. SHE HAS TAUGHT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, AND TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY, INCLUDING A NUMBER OF VISITS TO ITALY WHERE SHE HAS MET UP WITH ROLANI GUIDO WHO IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS ARTICLE. IN RECENT YEARS MARIAN HAS DEVOTED MUCH TIME TO RAISING FUNDS FOR CO-OPERATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SMALL CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION THAT BUILDS PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN A REMOTE AREA OF BANGLADESH.

by
MARIAN SCARLETT

Rolani Guido arrived at our place as an Italian prisoner of war in March 1943. He lived and worked on our farm until the end of 1946. I was not quite three when he arrived and my sister was six months old. It was to mark the beginning of a beautiful and very special friendship which ended only with his death in Venice last year. Still, the memories and feelings of affection forged over more than half a century linger on.

We lived on a dairy farm in South Gippsland and Guido was billeted at our place to help my father with farm duties. For us it was wonderful, for it meant my mother no longer needed to go to the dairy night and morning to help with the milking of the cows and during the day my father had help with the endless and varied tasks of life on the land. For Guido, however, it must have initially been quite another matter.

He was born in Venice in June 1916 into a comfortably established family. His childhood was a happy one. In 1937 he was conscripted into



the army and posted to Libya, an Italian colony, for military service. Early in the war he was taken prisoner by the English and deported to prisoner of war camps in various parts of North Africa including Egypt, Libya, Algeria and Eritrea. These were uncertain, frightening times - hunger, few comforts and the fear of being killed were ever present challenges. Eventually, he was sent on the *Queen Mary* to Australia where, shortly after landing, he was dispatched to our farm as a labourer.

For a young man of 27, from Venice, to find he was placed on a farm and expected to work with cows, pigs and horses must have indeed been a daunting and fearful prospect. He was alone, amongst strangers and he didn't speak English. Fortunately, my parents were caring, sympathetic and imaginative people and before long a sense of trust, mutual respect and genuine friendship had been formed.

My mother, who was a very good, traditional cook but with no knowledge of Italian food attempted, with sometimes hilarious results, to prepare meals she thought Guido would be more accustomed to. Her first efforts, however, must have been huge disappointments for him, for not only was this before the advent of hundreds of cooking books, but ingredients such as olive oil, garlic and Parmesan cheese were, quite simply, unknown in Kongwak in 1943. Her first interpretation of pasta al pomodoro consisted of spaghetti, Heinz tomato sauce and grated Kraft cheese! Her desserts and pastries, however, were renowned and years later when I would laugh with him about her failures with the pasta, he, too would laugh but then loyally always say 'she was a very good cook, your mother'.

More successful were the times singing around the piano, for my mother had a beautiful voice and so, too, did Guido and often at the end of the day or at weekends they would sing duets together from opera and operetta. And Christmas time was always memorable as our extended family - uncles, aunts and cousins - would gather around the piano to sing the familiar carols, we in English and Guido in Italian. The last time I visited Venice, at my request Guido sang again to me 'Adeste Fideles' ... Such memories it brought back for both of us!

Frequently, on Sundays, my mother would drive Guido, dressed in his maroon POW uniform, to Korumburra - about 13 kilometres away - to attend mass at the Roman Catholic Church. These occasions, I can imagine, were important for him as they were probably the only times he had a chance to talk with other Italians (there were a few other POWs in the town but no public transport linking the two places). Then, in the afternoon, my parents would attend the local Protestant Church while Guido looked after Anita and me.

Occasionally, and not surprisingly, Guido would some days seem a little depressed and then my father would suggest a change to the normal routine - instead of going to the paddocks



OPPOSITE PAGE Guido in Libya
(wearing white)
LEFT Guido with my parents, my
sister Anita and me, 1944-45.
RIGHT Guido with Anita and
Me, 1945.

fencing and cutting bracken with my father he would spend the day around the house – mending, making things and playing with my sister and me. We adored him and specially loved these days and my parents said his spirits were always revived after such a break from the usual chores. One Christmas he made us a small table and two little chairs - possessions we treasured and used long after we'd really outgrown them. Years later, my sister's children were to use them too and hear afresh the story of the man who made them.

Finally, the war ended and word came that Guido was to report to camp and wait there for the ship that would take him back to Venice. It was with very mixed emotions that we all said our goodbyes - after three and a half years Guido was like part of our family and he was uncertain of the work situation in Venice after the war. Tragically, both his parents died while he was waiting for the boat to take him home and then, shortly afterwards, my father unexpectedly also died, so our lives were suddenly and irreparably changed. It was an unsettling time for us all.

Initially we exchanged many letters and I well remember our delight in those he sent us - always with some drawings 'for Anita and Marian' - and our childish attempts to send some drawings back to him. For a number of years, too, my mother used to send over food parcels - tins of delicacies she thought they would not be able to get after the war - all carefully packed into a cardboard box and then sewn up with calico.

Gradually, and understandably, the correspondence lessened; perhaps the last letter we received from Guido was one in 1957

in which he told us that he was getting married 'to a very beautiful girl called Emma'. We sent back our congratulations and good wishes and then, regrettably, the correspondence ceased. But the address, Castello, Venezia had always sounded so musical and romantic to me that I never forgot it and so, twenty years later when I was visiting Europe for the first time I was able to locate the area and find the apartment where he and Emma and their daughter Orietta lived - in the same area in which he had grown up.

And what a welcome I received - from Emma as well as from Guido! And how many questions we asked and answered and how we laughed and reminisced about remembered and half-remembered events. And in his desire to make me feel at home he was at first appalled when Emma offered me tea with lemon - 'in Kongwak you always drank tea with milk' he said, and the next day when we came to lunch he had Emma searching in all the shops of Venice for white, sandwich bread which was the only type he would have been offered all those years ago in Kongwak.

The following year I spent a few memorable days with them all in their apartment. It was a delightful reversal of roles - I was the one who couldn't speak the language and they were the ones who so generously entertained me. Guido took me to the Venice Biennale, we walked through the little calli, stopped at bars for aperitifs, for coffees and pastries and always returned home to the delicious meals Emma prepared.

Being in Venice brought home to me just how lonely and how utterly alien his days in Kongwak must have initially seemed - there were no bars in which to meet friends, no piazzas, no opera house

RIGHT Emma, Marian and Guido
outside their apartment in Venice,
1993. Photographs Courtesy Marian
Scarlett.



or art galleries, in fact, nowhere to go except for our house and the wide open paddocks. It says a lot about him that he adapted to the simplicity of our lifestyle with such grace and good humour.

More recently, my husband and I have twice visited Venice and on each occasion we have shared meals in restaurants and at their apartment - joyous, delightful and very special occasions. It was obvious that Guido and Emma were very happy together and I was heartened

to know that after all the uncertainties of the war years he had found contentment and happiness back in his beloved Venice.

Sadly, last year I received a letter from Emma to say that Guido had died at the age of 86. In that letter she wrote that he always talked of us as though we were another part of his family; certainly he was a very special and much loved member of ours.