



Matt Vita playing his harp at home at 120 Cardigan Street, circa 1946.

**A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIFE OF MY GRANDPARENTS:
MATT AND MIMI VITA**

by
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Mimi and Matt Vita's wedding at St Patrick's Cathedral in 1925.

It was a friend who once said to me that a history containing facts and figures, dates, names, and events was not much of a history at all. In fact she'd withheld her valuable recollections of the Western District of Victoria to be published when she could find an historian sympathetic to her point of view. She believed of far more importance was the people, their personalities and their foibles and that by glimpsing these one could gain a much better picture of history. In peering back into my grandparents' life I hope to impart something more of the people than a sequence of chronological facts and figures would impart.

My journeys to Italy have taken me to the village where my grandfather, Matt Vita, was born in 1886, the surviving twin and eldest child of Gennaro Vita and Caterina Miglionico. The pleasure

I had of walking the hills and countryside surrounding Viggiano was immense and it brought to light stories my mother has told me of the festival of the madonna and a country boy's Church duty and chores before he journeyed some distance to school each day, returning home to focus on practising his music.

At around the time Matt was twelve years of age, his father and brother Charlie left Viggiano to make a new life in Australia, based in Carlton, a hub for Italians as well as other migrant groups. His sister Agnes was to join them some years later.

Matt attended Elementary School in Viggiano and studied the harp,



Matt Vita in his army uniform.

becoming an accomplished musician who was to have a distinguished career amongst the Melbourne musical fraternity. Music was his life and he participated fully in the gamut of musical experience from the formation of the musicians union, playing at the vast majority of Melbourne theatres and in concerts and dances at Town Halls, entertaining Military troops and charity groups, to teaching other professional musicians the harp.

To speak of his full musical life, though, in isolation to his home is unpardonable. When he married the twenty-four year old Filomena (Mimi) Evangelista he was already thirty-eight. Though my grandfather died when I was a child, I listened to my grandmother's stories into my young adulthood. Her single-minded devotion to my grandfather could only assist in fortifying his career. Their home was a meeting place for musicians, and non-musicians alike, for students of music, for rehearsals and social gatherings such as after theatre suppers Mimi would lovingly prepare. Mimi's tireless approach to people, her gentle devotion to her eight children, her care and support of her in-laws, relations and friends, extended outward to the community to assist new migrants in establishing themselves in their new country.

My grandparents came from different backgrounds. My grandmother came from a well heeled musical family; her father was Michele Evangelista (from Marsicovetere) and her mother was Giulia Gagliardi, the sister of Felice Gagliardi who ran the violin hospital in Lygon Street, Carlton. My grandfather came from a country background; they were villagers who understood the value of education. Together, my grandparents' union was a successful one which enabled their household harmony to extend into the community. I recall people from all nations equally welcome in my grandparents' home. It is my understanding that my grandfather believed one must participate as completely as possible in the new society one adopts in migrating to another country. His home life, work and groups of friends and colleagues substantiate that thesis.

Often it is easy to focus on people with colourful careers ignoring the social framework from which their accomplishments could flower. Mimi Vita was a woman I knew well for twenty years and loved deeply. Our impromptu chats at the kitchen table

on the days I would wander from school at the Academy of Mary Immaculate, which had been the school she had attended some sixty years beforehand, to her home at 120 Cardigan Street, Carlton, were complete and satisfying and I look back on them with fond recall. My only wish now is that I had paid better attention to the stories she told me and had not delayed the promises to teach me the secrets of her cooking. But from an adolescent's perspective, time is changeless and never ending and we assume that our grandparents will live forever to tell us and show us the mysteries of their world. She died in 1977, fifteen years after the death of her husband.

Just as I wish to know the reasons behind my grandfather's family's move to Australia, so too do I wish to know my grandmother's family's reasons. Both came from different backgrounds and it is this interest along with other details of their lives which will draw me back to Viggiano in the future. People who were a part of that picture have offered me glimpses into my grandparents' life and I look forward to the information others may share with me.



Brothers Charles and Matt Vita standing, with father Gennaro and sister Agnes seated.