

MY FATHER, NAZZARENO GANINO

By Joseph Ganino

Nazzareno Ganino was born 6 February 1916 in a village called Laureana di Borello, in the province of Reggio Calabria in the southern part of Italy. He was the third youngest in a family of eleven children and had six brothers and four sisters.



Nazzareno Ganino as a young soldier in 1939.

Life was hard but his childhood was happy enough as he was one to seek adventure when opportunity came his way. He grew up in the Depression years and on leaving school worked on the family farm until he was called up for national service in the Italian army in 1937. The village had only one taxi, so on the day he went to enlist some of the young men piled into the taxi and the rest stood on the running boards on the outside; the taxi hit a large pothole and all the men on the running boards were thrown off and Dad spent many weeks in hospital with a broken wrist and twenty five stitches in his head.

For his army training he was sent off to Tripoli, North Africa when he was twenty years old and it was his first time away from home. He saw his family only once more before the Second World War started, and was not to see them again until

1945. During the war he was sent to the Sabratha Division of the 86th infantry regiment where he officially held the rank of Corporal and led a squad of 12 men, cutting wire and gathering intelligence behind enemy lines. It was a dangerous job and at times he experienced fear and at other times struggled to make it back to his lines, but he always succeeded. Although he would never risk his men unnecessarily there were nearly always some casualties due to capture and death.

After the outbreak of war, supplies dwindled and it seemed that they were forgotten men in the desert, so at times they would have to shoot camels to supplement their rations. It appeared that the Germans and some Italian forces well known for their strong support of the Fascist regime were receiving preferential treatment, while at the same time the arrogance of some Italian and German commanders cost the imprisonment and lives of thousands of young Italian soldiers.

On 3 January 1941 he was wounded and captured but managed to escape a few days later with some other men; they trekked through the desert and coastal roads for days without food or water and were forced to eat weeds to survive, until found by some Italian officers, when Dad was returned to his division. On 7 December 1941 he was captured once again and after enduring nearly one and a half years of cruelty, suffering thirst and near starvation and malaria, so weak he was nearly blind and could hardly walk, he was shipped to South Africa where conditions did not improve much but at least there was plenty of water. On 13 March 1943 while being shipped from South Africa to England, the *Empress of Canada* was torpedoed by the Italian submarine *Leonardo da Vinci*. All the Italian POWs were kept below decks until all civilians and allied military personnel were evacuated. Dad could not swim and stayed on the ship while it was sinking until he was forced into the water and started to drown, but a second explosion brought him to the surface. It was only because he was wounded that he was pulled on to a raft. After being rescued he was taken to a hospital in Sierra Leone, and after recovery he was shipped to England near London where he experienced an air raid on his first night and thought that 'After going through all this I'm going to die here'. He had a loaf of bread with him and he ate it just in case! Things got better and life in England as a POW was bearable, he had plenty to eat and the people treated him well, and the monotony of camp life was broken with work trips to farms.

In 1945 the war was over and he was sent home, but instead of a happy home-coming he came home to a war-torn Italy of instability — as they got off the planes some people threw stones and called them traitors. (This was the gratitude he got for the years of service to his country). Although he was reunited with his family, life could not be the same, there was no longer any happiness in the village, the gaiety of his youth had gone and there was now sadness and poverty. A lot of the young men never made it home and many of his friends that he grew up with never returned; life continued and he went back to a farming life, but his health had suffered from many years of prison.

In 1946 he was introduced to Concettina Sofra, a beautiful young woman from a nearby village and after the family formalities of the day, he started to court her. Once a week he would walk six kilometres (as a short cut) through a forest which was actually a dangerous practice after the war, because of bandits roaming in the area, but this did not deter Dad because on 4 September 1947 they were married. In 1948 their first son, Carmelo, was born and in the same year Dad decided to come to Australia. He had his own land but he was still unsettled by the war and was in search of a better life although this would mean leaving his wife and son behind to join him at a later date.

On 11 September 1949 Dad arrived in Australia, on the ship *Surriento* at Port Melbourne. His new life was to start with a partnership with his brothers-in-law in the Goulburn Valley, on a property on the banks of the Broken River, in Shepparton East, where my uncles and Dad grew vegetables for the Victoria Market. My father shared a house with my uncle and his family. Work was hard and the hours long and the produce was trucked to Melbourne by the eldest brother-in-law who had migrated to Australia in the early twenties. Within a couple of years he had saved enough money to send for his wife and son who arrived in Australia on the *Toscana* on 10 September 1951. Unfortunately it was a great shock for my mother who arrived at the home-stead in darkness and was greeted by a kerosene lamp and knee-high nettles, but my mother was to endure much more than this with snakes, floods and mosquitos for many years.

The partnership lasted until about 1952 when my uncles ventured out on their own; Dad stayed on and share-farmed while holding a permanent job on a nearby orchard. He referred to his boss

as Mr Jones, an English gentleman who worked him hard but was an honest and fair man and treated Dad as one of the family. He referred to Dad as 'Frank' because he had great difficulty pronouncing 'Nazzareno' and Mrs Jones was also fond of him and kept in touch with Dad for many years after he left their employment until she passed away.



Passport photo of Nazzareno Ganino, 1949.

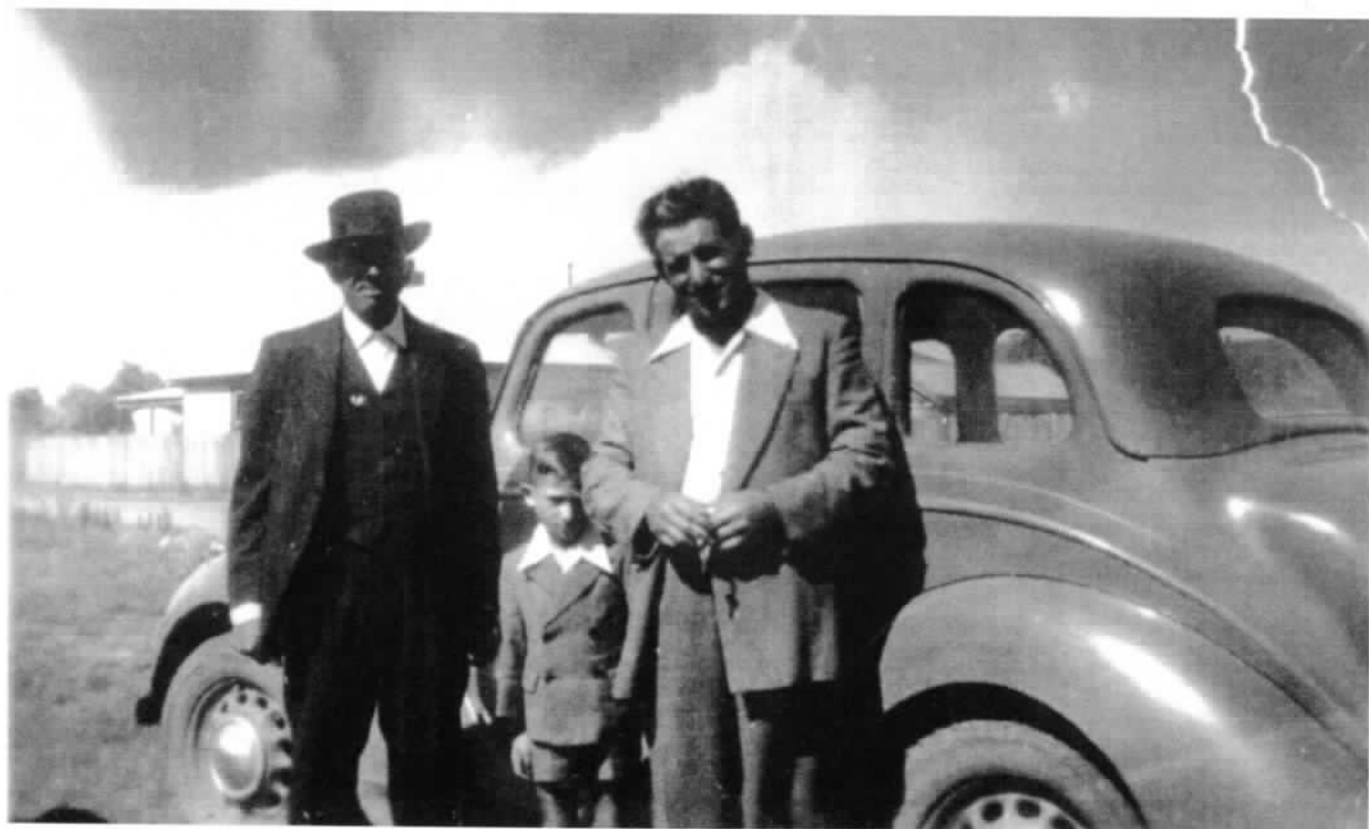


Passport photo of Concettina Ganino, nee Sofra, 1951.

In 1955 their second son Giuseppe was born. In 1956 Dad left the Jones' employment and purchased his own property on the outskirts of Shepparton. The property had once been a dairy and chicken farm; it had an old house and was quite comfortable, but it had no implements to speak of so he had to start from scratch. He planted tomatoes with the help of his wife and son who worked long and hard, and in winter he went contract pruning to supplement his income, but at least he was heading in the direction of working for himself. In 1958 disaster struck when the family home was destroyed by an electrical storm; fortunately everyone was in the kitchen due to a late dinner and this was the only room which was not destroyed by the storm. If the family had been in any other part of the house at the time they would have surely been killed. However, the rest of the house was completely destroyed, everything was lost — crops, possessions, sheds and even the family car was pinned down by a tree which had fallen across the garage. My mother was pregnant at that time. My parents carried us across the paddocks to my uncle's property in the dark, for shelter. We stayed there for a few months until Dad could afford to shift to another old house on the property in 1959, when they had their third child, Mary.

Dad struggled for years after this as he had to start all over again and my mother never recovered emotionally and was always afraid of storms. Relatives offered to help but Dad was a proud man and refused charity. Unfortunately at this stage my father's health started to deteriorate due to a recurring illness from the POW camps and my mother and brother kept the farm going while Dad was in Melbourne seeking medical attention. At 14 my brother left school and got a job to help support the family.

By 1962 my parent's fourth child, Anna was born. By 1963 Dad had made a decision to sell a portion of his land (against my mother's wishes) in order to relieve the burden on his family. Life finally started to become better and Dad started his orchard and after a while devoted all his time to the orchard. In 1971 he went back to Italy to see his family, but unfortunately he could not fulfil his promise to see his parents again, as they had passed away. By this stage the orchard was paying for itself and Dad supplied the local cannery and also supplied fruit to the Melbourne market. In 1982 he retired from running the orchard and his sons took over; he never interfered with the running of the orchard except when his beloved grapes were about to be pulled out to plant a more productive



From left: Antonio Sofra (father-in-law), Carmelo Ganino (son) and Nazzareno Ganino. Nazzareno was very proud of his first good car, c.1954

fruit; he promptly advised otherwise! Retirement did not stop Mum and Dad and they still helped to pick the fruit.

Dad always wanted to go back to Italy but Mum hated travelling so he spent his time around the orchard growing his vegetables and helping with the fruit. By the 1980s all his children were married and they had started to enjoy their grandchildren. In August, 1991 my mother passed away suddenly; she had been his partner for nearly forty-four years, she was by his side since the day they were married; through good and bad times, they worked hard and raised a family. Dad was devastated by this. He was not in good health and for a time we thought we would lose him. It took him nearly a year to recover from major surgery and a minor stroke, and he stayed with his daughter in Melbourne while recovering, but the city was not for him. He suffered a great deal not only emotionally but physically, and returned to live at home on the orchard.

My Dad was a survivor and although he lived alone for nearly eight years and at times was lonely, he was an excellent cook and looked after himself very well, and was always a little vain about his appearance. Life went on for a very proud man who refused to be a burden on any of his children

and although he was not well and at times in much pain, he rarely worried anyone. He still drove his car much to the protest of all his children; he couldn't see or hear well but managed to pass his assessments for his driving licence and claimed that his car was his freedom. Dad had a good sense of humour, he had many friends and loved a good chat and at 82 years old he still liked to help out, but sadly his tough spirit and mind were not enough to keep his old body going. He spent his 83rd birthday in hospital much to his annoyance and one week after he saw his eldest grandson go off to university. On 3 March 1999 Dad passed away, with his children by his side. He was courageous and dignified to the end, and even though he was on his deathbed he still had time for a joke and a smile.

He loved his wife and family and adored his 10 grandchildren. We can never repay Dad for what he has done for us, but the last honour we paid him was to drape his coffin with a WWII Italian flag and a bugler played 'Il Silenzio' by his graveside. Sadly he never got to see the year 2000.

We are eternally grateful to both of my parents for their love, their sacrifices, guidance and devotion. They will never be forgotten.



The Ganino Family, c.1988