

'Helping People Has Been My Happiness': The Contribution of Elena Rubeo to the Italian Community in South Australia

DESMOND O'CONNOR

Elena Rubeo, who was born in Rome in 1896, was the first woman in Australia to be appointed to an Italian consular post. This chapter will look at her life, her involvement in the Italian community, and the determination with which she defended Southern Italians. In the 1950s they were applying in large numbers to come to Australia in the very years when in its selection procedures the Australian Government discriminated covertly against Italians from southern Italy.

It was Elena Rubeo's adventurous eldest brother Gaetano (1889-1956) who set in train the eventual settlement in Adelaide of the whole Rubeo family.¹ Gaetano first landed in Adelaide in May 1902 at the age of thirteen, on the same ship as Roman musician and composer Vincenzo De Giorgio, who was returning to Adelaide after a brief trip back home to Italy. De

Giorgio, who first arrived in Adelaide in 1898, established a Classical School of Pianoforte and Classical School of Singing in premises in Hutt Street and directed concerts in the Adelaide Town Hall, before his definitive departure from Australia in December 1903, again in the company of Gaetano Rubeo, who returned to Italy on the same ship.² It seems certain that teenager Gaetano had known De Giorgio in Rome and had accepted an offer to travel with him to South Australia, perhaps as his young assistant, for these eighteen months in 1902-1903. Four years later, in July 1907, Gaetano Rubeo returned to settle in Adelaide. He must have persuaded the rest of his family to follow him from Rome to South Australia, because passenger lists show that his brother Alfredo reached Adelaide in January 1908, followed in October 1908, by parents Luigi and Edvige, their other son Riccardo and their twelve-year-old daughter Elena.

The Rubeos were by no means a family of poor migrants desperate to improve their lot abroad. Elena's father Luigi Rubeo (1863-1936) was a printer and compositor by trade and at the time of his naturalisation in early 1911 had established himself in

THE REGENERATIVE SPIRIT

business in Angas Street.³ For his part, Gaetano soon began to mix with the local educated Anglo-Irish, including South Australian writer and journalist C.). Dennis and bookshop owner John Patrick Hanson, *as a* 1910 photograph of workers at the Catholic Young Men's paper shows.⁴ Less than two years later, in January 1912, Gaetano was living in the Adelaide Club, North Terrace, Adelaide, where he worked *as a* barman.'

By 1913 the family had enough money to open a restaurant, Rubeo Café, in the newly-built Ruthven Mansions in Pulteney Street, where the father Luigi was initially the manager and son Gaetano the proprietor.⁶ By 1919 Rubeo Café had moved to Hindley Street, as a menu of that year, prepared especially for the annual dinner of the Modern Pickwick Club, indicates.' The Italian restaurant, probably the first to be established in Adelaide, did not survive after 1920. During the First world War Gaetano served four years in the Australian Expeditionary Forces, was discharged with the rank of sergeant, and after the war he and his two brothers went their separate ways!⁸ Elena, for her part, on her arrival in 1908, attended the Convent of Mercy School in Angas Street, and during the war was active in the Australian Red Cross Society.⁹

In the early 1920s Elena and her parents left their apartment in Ruthven Mansions and moved to what would be Elena's permanent address, 32 Le Fevre Terrace, North Adelaide. In 1927 she returned to Rome and to the new Fascist Italy for an extended holiday. She renewed her contacts with prominent well-to-do Romans, including her friend Princess Borghese, a member of the famous noble Roman family.¹⁰ On her return to Adelaide Elena dabbled in the importation of Italian goods. As a hobby importer, in 1929 she caught the attention of Customs and Excise at Port Adelaide when she failed to declare on an invoice the delivery of twenty-seven pairs of ladies' Italian silk embroidered bloomers. She had intended to sell them to her society

friends who apparently were always keen to purchase Italian linen and silk from her.

In the 1930s, Adelaide's Consular Agent for Italy, Giuseppe Amerio, on instructions from Rome, had the task of promoting the new Fascist Italy among the Italian communities in Adelaide and Port Pirie. In the early part of the decade, Luigi Rubeo and Elena openly supported the local *fascio* (Fascist branch) established by Amerio, to which they made some small financial contributions.¹² In 1934 Elena agreed to Amerio's request to teach Italian free of charge to children of Italian fishermen at the Adelaide Fascist sub-branch at Glanville (Port Adelaide) where the *fascio* had established a Saturday morning school, but the classes lasted only a year owing to few enrolments. In February 1938, as a respected member of the local Italian community, Elena was invited on board the visiting Italian warship the *Raimondo Montecuccoli* to meet Captain Alberto Da Zara.¹³ Despite this occasional visible engagement with Fascism, Elena was never a rabid promoter of Mussolini's Italy and was never actively involved in the local committee of the *fascio* or in the women's group. She seems to have detached herself from Amerio's circle of influence and from the local *fascio* after 1936, the year her father died, and as relations between Great Britain and Italy became increasingly strained on the eve of hostilities. She was now more content to be an advisor to Italian migrants who sought her assistance, as a 1940 police report notes.'

During the war years Elena kept a very low profile, knowing that as an educated and influential Italian she was being observed by the Australian Security Service. She and her mother Edvige managed to obtain some income from boarders to whom they offered rooms in their two-storey Le Fevre Terrace house in North Adelaide. In 1943 these boarders included journalist and author Mary Ernestine Hill and Hill's nineteen-year-old son Robert, who reportedly spent much of his time typing work for his mother.¹⁵

THE REGENERATIVE SPIRIT

After the war, as Italian migrants began to arrive in South Australia in increasing numbers, Elena responded to the need to provide the new arrivals with services that were otherwise not available.¹⁶ In March 1950 she opened a business agency for Italians from her home in North Adelaide and, for a small fee, offered assistance to the Italian community in such matters as the translation of Italian documents, the preparation of powers of attorney and wills, applications for landing and re-entry permits, and arrangement of passage by sea or air to and from Australia.

In the immediate post-war period the Italian Government had no consular representation in South Australia. From 1950 the newly-appointed Italian consul for Victoria, Luca Dainelli, was required to serve the needs of Italian nationals in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. However, because of the large increase in Italian arrivals, it was decided at the beginning of 1952 to establish a consular office in South Australia. On the advice of Consul Dainelli, and with the approval of the Australian Government, Elena Rubeo was appointed Acting Consular Agent for Italy in Adelaide in February 1952. A year later she became Honorary Vice Consul, a position she would hold for more than ten years, until 1962, when she was replaced by an Italian career diplomat, Dr Raffaele Gesini.

Miss Rubeo, as everyone referred to her, was Australia's first woman Vice-Consul for Italy. She initially set up her consular agency at 35 Gilbert Place, where she had transferred her Italian business agency, but later decided to move her consular office to her own home in North Adelaide. At the time of her appointment as Consular Agent in 1952 she observed that she was already seeing about 150 Italians a week in her city office and in her North Adelaide home. 'Sometimes they call at 6.30 a.m. on their way to the market', she said, 'but I see them just the same, because I can't refuse them'. She told the *Mail* that she was 'the self-appointed mother to them all and every problem received her personal attention'.¹⁷

She visited Italians in hospital when they were ill and went down to the port to greet them when they first landed in Adelaide. She was very compassionate, but she was also very strong-willed. Her secretary in the consulate between 1958 and 1961, Augusta Guido, relates an incident when a big, violent man, who had been pestering Miss Rubeo every day, came into her office wielding a hammer and demanding to be repatriated. Elena immediately picked up a chair and challenged him, at which the man backed off and fled. Elena immediately slammed and locked the door and called the police.¹⁸

Both her compassion and her inner strength become even more evident if one considers an episode in the early 1950s when she discovered, almost by accident, what the Australian Government was doing to reduce the number of Southern Italians coming to Australia. In 1951, following the signing of the Assisted Immigration Agreement between Italy and Australia, the Australian Government decided to tighten visa applications and require all intending Italian migrants (whether government assisted or privately sponsored) to submit to an interview as well as undergo the usual medical examination. In this way—so the Italian Legation in Sydney was advised—the Australian Government could conduct more adequate 'physical, political and

moral checks'.¹⁹ The truth was, however, that the Australian Government had no intention of offering assisted passages to the many thousands of Calabrians and Sicilians who were lining up to come to Australia. First and foremost it wanted to offer passages to Northern Italians and, at the same time, to apply strict screening procedures to the more 'swarthy' Southern Italians, which would restrict the number of the latter who might otherwise obtain entry into assimilationist and fair-skinned Australia. The evidence for this is overwhelming, despite the fact that the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act* (White Australia policy) was never intended to prevent any Europeans from coming to Australia. As an illustration of the covert way that the government was manipulating the Act in order to maintain Australia's status as one of the whitest countries in the world, one case, unknown to Elena Rubeo, will suffice, among many that today can be found in the National Archives.²⁰

In 1953 an Italian living in South Australia applied to bring out his twenty-three-year old sister from Calabria. The unmarried sister supplied all the required documentation, including the written guarantee that her brother would support her when she migrated to Adelaide. She was interviewed in Rome and underwent a medical examination, which proved satisfactory. Shortly after, the brother was advised by the Commonwealth Migration Office in Adelaide that his sister's application had been rejected because 'your nominee has been unable to meet the requirements of this department'. On seeking an explanation, the brother received the written response that 'it is contrary to the established practice of this Department to disclose the reasons for the rejection of intending migrants, and it is therefore regretted that the reasons for your sister's rejection may not be made available to you'. Today the reasons are included in the brother's file in the National Archives. It is likely that the family never discovered the real reason for the rejection. The memorandum, compiled by the Chief Migration Officer in the Australian Legation in Rome, contains the following Selection Report:

Unmarried sister. Not previously processed. Of definite Non-Caucasian Race appearance. Colour of skin, position of eyes, type of nose, high cheek-bones, broad based jaw bones, type and texture of hair are bases of this conclusion.
Is illiterate and has poor carriage and deportment. Could not assimilate for lack of social and intellectual standards.
No fiancé. Special conditions can be fulfilled. REJECT. There is no medical objection to the nominee.²¹

The Calabrian girl (who, incidentally, was interviewed in mid-summer), was deemed to have features and skin colour that, in the on-the-spot estimation of the Migration Officer, exceeded the arbitrarily-determined twenty-five per cent non-European colour bar.

In 1954, when she began to be approached by local Italians from southern Italy whose relatives were being refused visas, Elena Rubeo first realised that very odd grounds for exclusion were being applied to them in Italy by Australian Immigration Department officers. Italians in South Australia reported to her that their relatives in Italy were being asked questions such as: What is the population of Australia? What is the area of Australia? How many seas surround Australia? What are the principal

products of Australia? Elena Rubeo immediately wrote a letter to the Department of Immigration in Canberra asking that the Department be 'more liberal in [its] educational examinations' in Italy.²²

The Department of Immigration in Canberra took seven months to respond, and only after constant lobbying by Miss Rubeo. In his letter of reply to her, the Department Secretary, T.H.E. Heyes, reported that only 'very infrequently' did Australian Migration Officers ask applicants about the geography of Australia. If nominees have been refused visas, he said, it was on such grounds as 'illiteracy, uncouth appearance, or unlikely to be assimilated into the Australian community'.²³ The truth was out, at least partially, since there was no mention of what we know now, that the Australian Government was excluding those Southern Italians who, in the opinion of a migration officer, had non-Caucasian features. On receipt of the letter, Elena Rubeo promptly raised the issue of suitability with the Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, when he visited Adelaide, and then wrote him a strong letter of protest that defended the integrity of the Italian relatives who had already settled in South Australia. She said that she was 'more than dissatisfied' at the tone of Heyes' letter. Apart from rejection on the ground of illiteracy, which she deemed valid, she considered the other alleged grounds 'not only childish because of their vagueness, but disgraceful as casting a slur on Italian Nationals'. On what grounds, she asked, would Italians be deemed unsuitable for settlement, or 'uncouth in appearance' or 'unlikely to be assimilated'? She pointed out that the 'standard of character and mentality' of Italian relatives already in South Australia compared favourably with that of immigrants from other countries. She challengingly reminded the minister that 'the Italian Nation and press would take a very unfavourable view of any suggestion that Italian Nationals [were] unsuited for settlement ... because they were "uncouth in appearance" or "unlikely to be assimilated"'.²⁴

Since she felt very strongly about it, she was 'prepared to carry this matter very much further' and, if need be, go to Rome to have the question settled.²⁴

The reply from the Minister for Immigration was predictable: 'There has been no discrimination against Italian migrants', wrote Holt, and this has been 'amply demonstrated by the large numbers who have been accepted for settlement in the post-war period'. Using the standard rhetoric of ministers for immigration, he pointed out that 'it is a fundamental right of every country to determine the numbers and types of migrants which it is prepared to admit', and concluded that 'our own Australian selection teams in the countries concerned are in the best position, after interviewing applicants, to judge whether or not they should be accepted'.²⁵ Elena Rubeo made one last attempt to help the Southern Italians who were coming to her office concerned that their relatives had not been granted an entry visa. She wrote once more to Holt, asking that, since there had been, in his words, no discrimination against Italian migrants, the department might consider a further application from those who had already been refused visas.²⁶ Holt advised her that there was no likelihood that a previous decision would be overturned because the department's interviewing officers had reported 'fairly and accurately' and 'on the basis of existing policy'.²⁷

O'CONNOR

This case underscores the tenacity and passion with which Elena Rubeo went about her task as Adelaide's Italian Vice Consul in defending the hard-working Italians who approached her daily seeking her help. Those who knew her remember her as compassionate, strong in character, and one who would never let people make a fool of her. She was a generous person who gave money to women in need, visited Italians in hospital, in the psychiatric wards of Glenside and in Yatala Prison, and who helped migrants to find employment. She socialised with both Australians and Italians, including well-known lawyer Dame Roma Mitchell who was the godmother of one of Elena's nieces. She was well spoken, well mannered, distinguished in appearance, a good storyteller, a fine cook and an excellent linguist.²⁸

In 1977 she was awarded the Order of Australia for services to the welfare of Italian migrants'.²⁹ In the *Advertiser* it was noted that she would drive from factory to factory trying to get jobs for newly arrived Italians. She was acknowledged as the interpreter, the confidante and the friend of Adelaide's Italians. She modestly told the reporter that 'helping people has been my happiness. I like to do what I can.'³⁰ When, two years later, the *Advertiser* announced her death at eighty-two, she was described as 'the introduction to Adelaide' for the thousands of Italians who came to South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s.³¹

An undated poem survives that reveals her natural charm and wit:

*I dreamed that I died and to Heaven did I go,
I rang the bell gently and bowed very low.
I said 'I'm from Australia',
My word—how they did stare.
'Come right in' said Peter,
'You're the first one from there'.³²*

Notes

- 1 I am greatly indebted to Carmel Floreani for allowing me to consult her files and notes on Elena Rubeo, which she used to compile her entry on Rubeo in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 16 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002) 146-47.
- 2 For Vincenzo De Giorgio see: Desmond O'Connor, *No need to be afraid. Italian settlers in South Australia between 1839 and the second world war* (Kent Town SA: Wakefield Press, 1996) 53; Andrea Faulkner, 'The Italian contribution to South Australian music-making', in Andrew D. McCredie, *From Colonel Light into the footlights. The performing arts in South Australia from 1836 to the present* (Norwood, SA: Pagel Books, 1988) 358-59; Adelaide Register, 1 Oct., 1898, 2.
- 3 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A1/15, 11/5516.
- 4 I am grateful to the State Library of South Australia (SLSA) for providing me with a copy of this photograph taken in Adelaide in 1910 (photograph B 61934) and also of a photograph of Elena Rubeo taken in ca. 1950 (SLSA: B 56876).
- 5 NAA: A659/1, 39/1/15842.
- 6 *Sands and McDougalls Directory* (Adelaide: Sands and McDougall, 1913 and 1914). The Adelaide City Council Assessment Books show that Luigi Rubeo was the occupier of the restaurant and premises in the basement of Ruthven Mansions in 1914 and 1915 and that between 1916 and 1920 Elena Rubeo rented an apartment there.
- 7 The SLSA kindly supplied me with a copy of the 1919 menu (SLSA: SA Menu Collection: 1919. The Modern Pickwick Club Dinner, Rubeo Café, Hindley Street, 13 September

THE REGENERATIVE SPIRIT

- 1919'). The Modern Pickwick Club was founded in 1890 by several young men from Hackney (Adelaide) who decided to meet together for 'the intellectual and social improvement of members'. Their number included lawyers, solicitors, ex-mayors, journalists, doctors, business men and public servants. They restricted their membership to a maximum of 30 and met in the homes of the members, originally every Saturday evening but later once a month. The evenings were divided between debate, music and elocution. Initially an annual ball was organised but this was substituted later by an annual dinner. They also organised occasional walking expeditions, camping holidays and shooting and fishing outings. They had an unwritten law that made it compulsory for members to resign when they joined the ranks of the 'benedicts' (newly married). It was doubtless felt that good husbands would remain with their wives, and that attendances at meetings would suffer in consequence. See Register, 15 Sept. 1919, 4.
- 8 NAA: A659/1, 39/1/15842.
- 9 Carmel Floreani, 'Elena Rubeo', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 16 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002) 147.
- 10 I am grateful to Lida and Sergio Sallustio for kindly allowing me access to a photograph of Elena and 'princess Borghese', on the back of which is written in Elena's own hand: 'Elena e la principessa Borghese, 4.9.1927'. The noble Roman Borghese family dates back to the sixteenth century. Camillo Borghese was Pope Paul V (1605-1621) and his nephew Cardinal Scipione Borghese established the famous Borghese Gardens in Rome. The sister of Napoleon, Paolina, married into the wealthy Borghese family. In more recent times Prince Scipione Borghese was the initiator of the much publicised car race in 1907 from Peking to Paris. During her visit to Rome in 1927 Elena Rubeo was reportedly proposed to by a member of the noble Borghese family, but the engagement was apparently broken off. This fiancé may have been Virginio Borghese who was a prisoner of war in India from 1941 and to whom Elena sent a telegram in 1943: 'Hope you are in good health. I think of you often. Best wishes' (NAA: D1915 SA14581). A Borghese who made a name for himself during and after the war years was Prince Iunio Valerio Borghese. Conspicuous in the Fascist puppet Republic of Saló in Northern Italy, in 1944 he commanded the 'X Mas', the 10th torpedo-boat squadron. In 1970, still a right-wing extremist, he attempted a feeble coup d'état by occupying Rome's Ministry of the Interior for a few hours before withdrawing.
- 11 NAA: D596 1929/9662 and D1915 SA14581, police report on Elena Rubeo, 28 May 1940.
- 12 NAA: D1915 SA14581. For Giuseppe Amerio and the Adelaide fascio, see O'Connor, *No need to be afraid* ch. 6.
- 13 Lida and Sergio Sallustio kindly provided me with a photograph of the meeting between Elena Rubeo and the captain of the *Raimondo Montecuccoli*, Alberto Da Zara. The arrival at Port Adelaide of the Italian warship in February 1938 did not result in the kind of angry anti-fascist demonstration that occurred when the ship docked in Melbourne earlier that month. See O'Connor, *No need to be afraid* 151, and Adelaide *Advertiser*, 18 Feb. 1938, 23. See also Gianfranco Cresciani, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980) 109.
- 14 Since the death of her father very few Italians visit her home and they are generally Italians seeking her advice in regard to their troubles or business dealings' (NAA: D1915 SA 14581, Report from North Adelaide Police Station, 28 May 1940).
- 15 NAA: D1915 SA 14581, Report prepared for the Security Service, Adelaide, 9 Sept., 1943. At this time Hill was a travelling feature-writer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and gave radio-talks about her journeys. She was fearful that her son Robert would be conscripted into the army and struggled to have him exempted on the grounds that he was a pacifist, was in poor health and was needed as her research assistant. For Mary Ernestine Hill (1899-1972) see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 14 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996) 451-3.
- 16 In the period 1947 to 1954 the number of Italians in South Australia increased from 2,428 to 11,833. See Desmond O'Connor and Antonio Comin, *The First Conference on The Impact of Italians in South Australia*. Proceedings (Adelaide: Italian Discipline, Flinders University of SA, 1993) 37.

O'CONNOR

- 17 *The Adelaide Mail*, 23 Feb. 1952.
- 18 Augusta Guido interviewed c. 1999 by Cannel Floreani, whose interview notes are gratefully acknowledged.
- 19 Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), Ministero del Lavoro e della Previdenza Sociale, Busta 473, Circolo, Italian Legation in Australia to the Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE), Sydney, 2 Nov. 1951.
- 20 James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 9.
- 21 For the sake of confidentiality, the reference is not given.
- 22 NAA: A446 60/66030, Rubeo to the Secretary, Department of Immigration, Canberra, 27 Oct. 1954.
- 23 NAA: A446 60/66030, Heyes to Rubeo, 26 May 1955.
- 24 NAA: A446 60/66030, Rubeo to Hon. Minister for Immigration, Canberra, 2 July 1955.
- 25 NAA: A446 60/66030, Holt to Rubeo, 22 July 1955.
- 26 NAA: A446 60/66030, Rubeo to Holt, 8 Aug. 1955.
- 27 NAA: A446 60/66030, Holt to Rubeo, 1955 (undated).
- 28 I am grateful to Carmel Floreani for this information derived from the interviews that she conducted with people who knew Elena Rubeo.
- 29 *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 11 June 1977, 4.
- 30 *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 11 June 1977, 4.
- 31 *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 6 June 1979, 4.
- 32 Typewritten poem by Elena Rubeo supplied by Lida and Sergio Sallustio.

Works cited

- Bonnin, Margriet and Nancy. 'Mary Ernestine Hill'. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 14. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- Cresciani, Gianfranco. *Fascism and Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980.
- Faulkner, Andrea. The Italian contribution to South Australian music-making'. *From Colonel Light into the footlights. The performing arts in South Australia from 1836 to the present*. Ed. Andrew D. McCredie. Norwood, SA: Pagel Books, 1988. 358-9.
- Floreani, Carmel. 'Elena Rubeo'. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 16. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002.
- Jupp, James. *From White Australia to Woomera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- O'Connor, Desmond and Antonio Comin. *The First Conference on The Impact of Italians in South Australia. Proceedings*. Adelaide: Italian Discipline, Flinders University of SA, 1993.
- O'Connor, Desmond. *No need to be afraid. Italian settlers in South Australia between 1839 and the second world war*. Kent Town SA: Wakefield Press, 1996.

DESMOND O'CONNOR
FLINDERS UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA