

## Italian Proxy Brides in Australia

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On January 9, 1954, sixteen-year-old Lucia married Filippo, a man she hardly knew who had migrated to Australia in 1949 and had not been back to Italy since<sup>1</sup>. Thinking of Australia as a mirage, Lucia boarded a ship to Melbourne from the Sicilian port of Messina on July 31, 1954. In 1956, seventeen-year-old Giovanna received an offer of marriage from the parents of Salvatore, a young man who had left their village in Sicily three years earlier. Vaguely remembering her brief acquaintance with him, and believing that she was responding to a call from fate (*il destino*), Giovanna agreed to marry Salvatore and arrived in Melbourne on Christmas day in 1957. On 1 September 1957, sixteen-year-old Carmela from Calabria walked to the altar of her local church to marry by proxy Vincenzo, a neighbor she had barely known as a child and who had migrated to Australia in 1953. Three months later she travelled alone to Australia to join him in Melbourne. Lucia, Giovanna and Carmela were among the 300,000 Italians who migrated to Australia between 1945 and 1976, and among the estimated 12,000 Italian women who married by proxy and made Australia their home (Iuliano, 1999, p. 321)<sup>2</sup>.

A proxy marriage takes place when one party at the marriage ceremony is represented by a substitute known as a proxy. In the case of Italian migrants, the ceremony was typically performed in Italy where a male relative of either partner was nominated to represent the groom. These marriages were registered in Italy. In many cases, bride and groom had either not previously met, or barely knew each other. But in most cases, they knew each other through family and kin networks. As in most marriages in rural Italy, extended family as well as neighbours and other associates played an important role in negotiating proxy marriages, vetting potential spouses and mediating courtship and engagement rituals (Kertzer and Seller, 1991; Cronin, 1970). Partners married

by proxy almost invariably came from the same areas or even villages of Italy, thus reinforcing strong ties of loyalty and attachment to place (Iuliano, 1999, p. 323). Engagement rings were exchanged, gold trinkets were usually bought with money sent by the groom prior to the wedding, and wedding celebrations were held in Italy while the groom waited in Australia for the bride to join him. Usually it took about one year, from the date of the marriage, for the paperwork to be finalised and for the bride to make the long journey to Australia to be united with her husband.

These marriages were organised in three distinct ways:

1. The couple knew each other (but not very well) through family and kin networks: groom's parents or other relatives organised the match.

The pattern for this group is that the man migrated (almost always) either on his own or with brothers or cousins, leaving behind parents and other siblings. They often had other family members such as uncles already in Australia. These men usually intended to stay in Australia for five years and save enough money to go back to build a house, buy land or start a small business in their home country. After a few years in Australia, however, they or their families in Italy, decided they would stay longer in Australia and it would be beneficial for them to find a wife. Usually, since the families knew each other and lived in the same village, the men's relatives would first consult the parents and then leave them to discuss the proposal of marriage and migration to Australia with their daughters. In most, if not all, cases, the men living in Australia were still expecting to return to Italy and the bride left Italy with similar expectations. Often, once it became clear that the hope of returning could not be fulfilled, proxy brides became catalysts for the migration to Australia of their parents and siblings. In these cases, marriage by proxy allowed women to initiate and sponsor the migration of fellow family members.

2. The couple did not know each other: groom's family organised the match.

The pattern for this group is similar: the groom had migrated to Australia, usually on his own or with brothers or cousins and the members of his family organised the match but the difference is that the bride and groom had not previously met and had at most only corresponded with each other. In this group, the bride and groom did not necessarily come from the same village but from a nearby village. Most women in this group came from impoverished backgrounds, or had lost one or two parents.

3. Bride and groom knew each other well and were either engaged or had a relationship prior to the man's migration to Australia.

Within this scenario, we have two *modus operandi*. First, given the popularity of proxy marriage at the time, young couples deliberately decided that the man would migrate first (so as to minimise the financial risks of failure migration)

and the woman would follow as a proxy bride. This strategy seems to have been used mainly by assisted migrants from Trieste. Second, the young man migrated following members of his family and had little option but to leave a grieving girlfriend behind. In this case, the couple would resort to marrying by proxy in order to be together. Usually, but not always, the marriage would take place once the groom had saved enough money to pay for the bride's fare, had bought at least the furniture for their bedroom and had found accommodation, usually sharing with his family.

Who were these women who agreed to marry by proxy, leaving their families and villages behind? What motivated them to embark on a long journey to join a husband they hardly knew? Were they passively following the old tradition of arranged marriages, and thus obeying their parents' orders? Did they marry in order to migrate or did they migrate in order to marry? All these questions have yet to be fully explored<sup>3</sup>.

### **The historical context**

The practice of Italian proxy marriage in Australia is inextricably linked to the Australian post-war immigration policies as well as to the economic situation in Italy, particularly in the rural South in the late 1940s and 1950s. The large scale migration of Italians to Australia and the Australian government's sanctioning of migration of Italian women through proxy marriage were made possible by changes in the ways in which Australia perceived itself less as a British outpost in the Pacific and more as a fully fledged nation. In August 1945, the newly appointed first Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, introduced a policy for mass migration that created a «watershed in Australia's history» (Zubrzycki, 1994, p. 1). As one commentator puts it: «This grand plan, unveiled to the Australian Parliament just four days before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, was directly related to Australia's war experience which had highlighted our limited capacity to produce manufactured goods. It had also renewed in us a fear of invasion, and a larger population was seen as a form of national defense» (Conybeare, 1994, p. iii).

Calwell aimed for a population increase of two per cent per year. Ideally, this would have been achieved by encouraging Australians to have more children, but since this was not a realistic option, assisted migrants from Britain were seen as the preferred option. However, failing to attract enough migrants from Britain, Calwell's major innovation was the introduction of mass migration schemes for non-British migrants, initially from the Baltic states. In about four years the Australia government invited over 170,000 displaced persons to enter Australia, exceeding the number of British immigrants who arrived in Australia at the same time (Appleyard, 1971, p. 7). Calwell had aimed for

a target of a 10 to 1 ratio: that is, 10 Britons for every one person from other than British sources, but during the 1950s only about 25,000 assisted migrants for Britain arrived in Australia, well below the number necessary to meet Calwell's desired quota (Appleyard, 1971, p. 8). Despite the failure to attract more British migrants and the desire to increase Australia's annual population, «Calwell's new immigration program did not envisage recruiting south of the Alps» (Bosworth, 2001, p. 505). Nonetheless, as the intake of migrants from the Baltic and Poland was also declining, in 1948-49 Australians began to consider the possibility that «Northern Italians might be admitted» and «it was thought that some "southern" Italians could be utilised for menial jobs in the tropics» (Bosworth, 2001, p. 506).

By 1951 «there was considerable dissatisfaction with the migration program», primarily because none «of the assisted or full-paying British migrants could be directed into specific industries and the supply of refugees on contract was coming to an end» (Jordens, 2001, p. 66). Hence, the government restructured the immigration program to gain more freedom to select migrants who could be used to meet the demands of Australian primary and secondary industry. To this end, the Australian government signed migration agreements with a number of European countries, «beginning with the Netherlands in February and with Italy in March 1951» (Jordens, 2001, p. 66). From 1947 to 1950, however, 33,280 Italians had already arrived in Australia through sponsorship by relatives or friends (Bosworth, 2001, p. 506).

Between 1945 and 1969, a total of 346,165 nationals Italian migrated to Australia, with a peak of 31,603 arrivals in 1955/56. This number is considerably higher than that for Dutch (151,551), German (119,311), Greek (184,715), Yugoslav (90,705), Polish (84,617) and Hungarian nationals (29,444), the other main groups of non-British migrants at the time (Appleyard, 1971, p. 15).

But the influx of Italian migrants to Australia was not always welcomed. Many Australians resented the large number of Italian migrants coming to Australia. A 1958 letter to then Prime Minister Robert Menzies systematically outlines the concerns shared by many with regards to «the number and type of the Italian Migrants coming into this Country». Reasons for concern included the fear of cultural difference: «[t]he Southern Italian is so different to us that he will not mix and will therefore constitute a racial minority, and racial minorities have always meant trouble.»; the risk of Italian (as Catholics) intermarrying with Australian Catholics of Irish extraction, which «would result in an unstable and excitable cross»; the «high breeding propensity» of Italians, which «means that the Immigration Department's figures are no comfort really»; and the suspicious disinterest of Italian migrants to participate in leisure activities, such as hobbies, gardening and sports: «[t]he Italian is a hard worker but the Australian is a better worker because he [*sic*] has more varied interests»<sup>4</sup>.

Many of those who complained about Italian immigrants to the Australian government at the time did not doubt that Australia needed migrants, but nearly all of them asked that more migrants of British stock be brought out; some also suggested they would be happy with Northern European migrants. In some correspondence, the migrants are spoken about as though they were animals. Other writers protest because – they claim – Italians were criminals, Catholics or communists. An Australian living in England at the time of writing to his government claimed that «the Italians are trying to turn Australia into an Italian dumping ground» and suggested that «they should send their excess population to Latin America»<sup>5</sup>.

A letter dated 21 October 1955, signed a «concerned mother» appeals to the Prime Minister to «stop bringing any more of these murdering Italians into our country» since «the number already here is terrifying to Australian mothers». Why, she asks, «should we, or our children, be forced to tolerate these horrible un-British people in such vast numbers?». Apart from their lack of British-ness (whatever that was meant to be), the Italians feared by this terrified mother supposedly engaged in brutal practices, such as «horrible knifing» which was «becoming a daily, or should I say, nightly, occurrence in and around Melbourne». On account of such dangers, the «concerned mother» explained, «women and girls are afraid to go out at night in their own country, and every mother is fearful for her girls when they are out at night, lest they meet up one of these gangsters»<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that these letter writers thought of Italian migrants as men is not coincidental. Fuelled by the Australian migration policy which in the early post-war years favoured single males in the intake from Southern Europe, the general pattern of Italian migration was that «a young man would leave his home and family to come to Australia in search of a better life» (Wardrop, 1996, p. 15). These men were either single or had left wives and children behind, and many came in the hope of returning home and establish themselves with their Australian savings, or to establish themselves in Australia and then return home to find a bride. Despite the signing of an Assisted Migration Agreement between Italy and Australia in 1951, the great majority of Italians who arrived in Australia after 1947 were unassisted by the Australian government (Appleyard, 1971, p. 13), and came as individual links in a chain migration. The majority of Italians who received no government assistance were forced to borrow money from relatives, friends or credit companies in order to pay for their fares. Upon arrival in Australia, they had little earning power but carried heavy financial burdens. They sent money back to Italy to support their families or to cover for their travel costs to join them in Australia (Price, 1975, p. 311). This explains their «tendency to take second and third jobs at night or at weekends» and to «live in cheap accommodation near their place of work»

(Price, 1975 p. 311-12). The negative views that Australians had of Italians and the conditions under which Italian men lived, made it extremely difficult for single men to find women to marry in Australia.

The disproportionate number of Italian men was perceived to be a problem as the public feared that «migrant men would become an unruly force without the tempering influence of women» (Vasta, 1992, p. 144). Confirming this anxiety, in a letter to the Minister for Immigration dated 11 June 1958 and titled «Proposal for Commonwealth to contribute towards the maintenance of newly arrived Italian and Dutch migrants», Sir Tasman Heyes, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration at that time, described the prevalence of men as «[o]ne of the problems confronting our migration programme» since «it has always been difficult to devise means for introducing groups of single women of marriageable age»<sup>7</sup>. In line with a well-established assumption concerning the ideal female migrant, the Australian government expected her to be «single, aged between eighteen and thirty-five, trained in domestic service, preferably with a knowledge of farm life, of sound physical health and, most importantly, of a moral character beyond reproach» (Martin, 1984, p. 109)<sup>8</sup>.

Following these expectations concerning female migrants, the Australian authorities attempted to increase the intake of female migrants from Italy by establishing schemes such as a training centre in Italy «where girls desiring to migrate as domestics» were to attend a three-months training course<sup>9</sup>. However, as Heyes acknowledged, the main difficulty associated with this project was the «reluctance on the part of the Italian authorities to allow single girls to travel to Australia in their own right, for employment as domestics»<sup>10</sup>. The Italian authorities were mainly concerned about the «moral dangers» to which the women «could be exposed on the initial settling-in period in a new country»<sup>11</sup>. It is clear from the correspondence (between the Department of Immigration, the Australian Chief Migration Officer in Rome, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, ICEM, and the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee) that despite all efforts, the migration to Australia of Italian single women from Italy as domestics was not a success. During 1956-57 they had managed to recruit only 60 women for 200 places set aside for domestics<sup>12</sup>, and in 1959 a figure of 100 had been approved for Italian domestics, but had not been achieved<sup>13</sup>.

The Australian government's sustained effort to increase the intake of «suitable» Italian young women was motivated more by economic necessity than a desire to appease public fears. Indeed, the Australian government wanted to increase its intake of female migrants in response to the recession of 1951-52. As Srebrenka Kunek argues, «[f]or the first time immigration selection policy, with a bias for female migrants as dependants, was used to act as a boost to the economy through increasing consumption» (1993, p. 95). This view is

confirmed by Harold Holt, then Minister for Immigration who explained the selection policy in these terms:

While we were experiencing strong inflationary pressures, our situation dictated that a large proportion of migrants entering this country should be breadwinners, few or no dependants accompanying them [...] A consequence of the new plan will be that, instead of intensifying competition for employment, the tendency will be for the new migrants to increase the demand for goods and services and thus stimulate work opportunities [as quoted in Kunek, p. 95]<sup>14</sup>.

But the Australian government regarded the imbalance of the sexes not only as an economic problem, but also as a barrier to successful «assimilation». The sanctioning of proxy marriages was one way in which it attempted to appease fears for the safety of Australian women, and to placate community concerns regarding the dangers of having too many unattached men. As Iuliano claims, these marriages were accepted as legal by the Australian authorities in an attempt to «help contain the alleged “rampant sexual proclivities” of single Italian bachelors» and to promote family oriented Italian immigrant communities in Australia which would contribute to the goal of population and nation building (Iuliano, 1999, p. 319).

By 1971 the imbalance of the sexes was no longer a problem among Italians living in Australia, since by then «women accounted for 45 per cent of the Italian-born population» (Pesman, 2002, p. 387). Significantly, the majority of these women had not come as assisted migrants in their own right, but as mothers, daughters, *fidanzate* (*fiancées*), wives and proxy brides (Pesman, 2002, p. 388). The Australian government's acceptance of proxy marriages as legal contributed to raising the proportion of female migrants from Italy, while also solving the problems associated with the perceived moral dangers associated with the migration of single women from Italy. More importantly, while providing lonely Italian men with much needed companionship and romance, it allowed Italian women to take the risk of migration independent of their family of origin. In many cases proxy brides were able to sponsor their parents and siblings who often migrated to Australia with their own spouses and children.

The Second World War had «left Italy seemingly prostrate» (Bosworth, 2001, p. 505). According to Bosworth, «in Calabria by 1950, around 24 000 people still lived in caves or huts precariously built from sticks and grass. Meat consumption in that region was an estimated 8 kg per person per year, but, given the enormous gap between rich and poor, many agricultural labourers, never more than temporarily employed, ate no meat at all and, frequently, also consumed no sugar» (2001, p. 505). Bosworth also notes that in 1946, *The Economist* claimed that «the Italian nation had no economic future and there was general

agreement that Italians, and especially those from the poorer classes and from the South, would be best off returning to their ancient recipe of emigration» (2001, p. 505). It was during this period of extreme poverty that the greatest number of Italians migrated to Australia<sup>15</sup>.

### **Motivations: Why did Italians Marry by Proxy?<sup>16</sup>**

From my interviews also emerges the view that in the aftermath of the Second World War and the early 1950s, the villages of rural Italy, particularly in the Southern regions of the peninsula, were populated mainly by women and children, as the men had left to find work in European countries such as Germany and France, or had gone to far away countries such as Australia. This explains why the practice of proxy marriage was not only common but also *alla moda* (fashionable).

The motivation of Italian men and women for entering into proxy marriages was different yet similar at once. The Italian men who had arrived without partners, were lonely and isolated in Australia, and very much in need of companionship. For those unable or unwilling to find a wife in Australia, proxy marriage was a welcome solution to their predicament. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world young women dreamed of love and opportunities. This is how Carmela recalls her decision to marry by proxy and come to Australia:

Devo essere sincera, a sedici anni non pensavo niente. Non avevo la minima idea perché incontravo questo viaggio. Così, come un'avventura, vedevo l'Australia nei miei sogni. Un'Australia costruita solo di sogni e fantasia<sup>17</sup>.

Similarly Lucia, who married Filippo and came to Australia when she was sixteen recounts:

Per me era un miraggio. Da ragazza pensavo: l'Australia! Non pensavo alle conseguenze che ci potevano essere. Dopo che mi sono sposata per procura i miei hanno detto che era troppo lontano, ma io ormai ero sposata... sono stata decisa. Ho attraversato 28 giorni di mare. Ero una ragazza molto aperta e l'Australia era un miraggio: chissà vado a vedere qualcosa di nuovo! Dalle foto ho preso Filippo in simpatia, mi è piaciuto, sono andata... ci ho pensato e non ci ho pensato... sono stata un po' impulsiva. Non so come ho fatto questo passo di venire qua. Forse se avessi avuto un ragazzo non sarei venuta. Mi sorprende ancora oggi di aver fatto così. Una mia madrina diceva «ma cosa state facendo, mandate una gatta dentro un sacco?» Dopo non volevano più che io venissi. Mia madre conosceva Filippo e le piaceva e anche ai miei fratelli piaceva però ripensandoci è stato veramente come mandare una gatta dentro il sacco perché quando esci fuori non sai cosa trovi. Pensandoci oggi giorno non so come ho rischiato! A lasciare a sedici anni la propria famiglia ed affrontare l'incognito... non sapevo nemmeno una parola di inglese<sup>18</sup>.



The retrospective reflection on the danger of «taking a risk» along with the insistence on the impulsive nature of the decision to marry by proxy men they hardly knew, and migrate to a country they knew very little about, is common among the women I interviewed. These comments highlight how difficult it is for us today to grasp the reasons why women as young as sixteen and their families could contemplate to enter into such arrangements. Fifty years since and at a time in which expectations of romance dominate women's marriage choices in both Italy and Australia, proxy wives themselves find it almost impossible to justify their actions. This makes it difficult for both us and the women involved to fully understand their motivations to marry by proxy.

Also attempting to find reasons for her risky decision, Giovanna did not invoke dreams of love or adventure, but claims she was prompted by fate:

Io non avevo nessuna idea di venire in Australia. Neanche lo immaginavo, ma poi forse è stato il destino. Come dire, *destiny*. È stato il destino che sono venuta, ho detto che è il mio destino di andare in Australia, e così ci siamo sposati nel 1956<sup>19</sup>.

Giovanna was not the only one among the women I interviewed to invoke fate as a reason for their marriage and migration to Australia, and this is probably the only way in which the women can make sense of their decisions retrospectively, at a time in which proxy marriage has become unthinkable for Italians. Asked to elaborate on the notion of *destino*, Giovanna replied:

È successo che mi è venuto d'istinto... d'istinto di dire che io sono destinata di andare in Australia. Questo è stato l'unico e il primo uomo che io ho conosciuto, ed è stato l'ultimo<sup>20</sup>.

Despite the success of her marriage to Salvatore, Giovanna missed the romance of getting to know him before meeting him in Melbourne as a married woman:

Perché io non ho avuto la soddisfazione, il piacere di essere fidanzata, di avere un contatto con lui, anche di un bacio, di una carezza, di per via di lettere, ma non di presenza... Sì, lo rifarei, ma però, sentendo sempre la mancanza di quella cosa. Perché io vedo tanti ragazzi che quando sono fidanzati, si abbracciano, si scambiano dei baci, anche di nascosto. Ma io, questo non posso dirlo, perché non l'ho avuto questo nella mia vita.<sup>21</sup>

Lucia also recalled that the first kiss of her life came from her husband, but like many others in her situation, life with her husband was marred by her enforced cohabitation with his family, which included his parents, two unmarried brothers, one unmarried and one married sister with two children, and a varying number of boarders, all sharing one large house:

Con la famiglia mi sono trovata malissimo. Abitavo con la famiglia di lui, e mi creda non è stato facile. E da lì sono iniziati i problemi e ho sentito molto la mancanza di tutti, di mamma, se ci penso adesso mi viene ancora da piangere. Ero contenta con mio marito però la famiglia no, non sono stati bravi con me. Mi sono trovata malissimo, non hanno capito che ero una ragazza giovane, sola, mi facevano i dispetti<sup>22</sup>.

Rosa also recalled her experience with sadness and tears. She was one of nine children and by the age of seventeen she worked three jobs to help support her family. She was secretly in love with a young man from nearby Salerno but was unable to invite her boyfriend to meet her parents because her older sister was still unmarried. Her sister was engaged but neither she nor her fiancé who worked in France had enough money to marry. Wishing to help her sister marry so that she could become engaged to her boyfriend, Rosa saved money to pay for her sister's wedding. However, while visiting her sister, who by then had moved to a small town five kilometers from her own village, she caught the eye of an elderly couple who had been entrusted with the task of finding a bride for their son, Frank, who had migrated to Australia and was desperately lonely there. Given her parents' ill health and her lack of prospects in Italy, Rosa was under pressure from her sister to migrate. She decided to consider the proposal, hoping to sponsor her own siblings to migrate to Australia as well:

No because... my mum was sick more than 20 years. She had a problem with the heart. And my father he got a crooked leg and he couldn't do much work, so we never had nobody, you know. It was very hard for me. [She begins to cry.] Was very hard for me to do something, but I did, I said OK, one day I help the other brothers and sisters, because they all need help<sup>23</sup>.

Meanwhile, Frank wrote to her, sent her money and reassured her:

Oh, he was so kind, he was good. Every time he write to me he send me some money to make me love him, you know. He done so much for me. He pay me the ticket.

Yet, Rosa was torn. Three years passed from the day of her future in-laws' first approach in 1959 to when, under pressure from her father-in-law, Rosa eventually agreed to marry Frank:

R: When I decide I want to come and I want to marry him... I was thinking too much, thinking this trip's too far, you know. And my father-in-law he was mad, and he said, if you not go over there, I shoot you, I kill you.

S: Do you think he was serious?

R: I don't know, you don't know. You never know because you can't trust sometimes... And I don't want to make trouble for my family.

[She starts to cry.] I was forced to come<sup>24</sup>.

It would be tempting to use Rosa's story to claim that only impoverished southerners<sup>6</sup> with dim prospects were involved in the practice of proxy marriage. It is tempting to conjure images of violent patriarchs, scheming Italian immigrant men wishing to «import» wives from their old villages, following the well known *donne e buoi dai paesi tuo* (women and oxen from your own village), and motivated by a mixture of loneliness and *campanilismo* (Iuliano, 1999). Yet, whereas this is partially what happened in this case, other stories confirm that the motivations for marrying by proxy vary greatly according to circumstances.

Rosanna, for instance, has an altogether different story to tell. Born in a small village near Trieste, which in 1954 became part of Tito's Yugoslavia, at the age of nineteen she found herself living in a refugee camp in Trieste, awaiting compensation from the Italian government for her family's loss of their house. Compensation never came but in the meantime she met and fell in love with Sergio, a policeman from Trieste, who happened to remain Italian by chance since his parents had been born in Pola but his mother «came with the contractions to Trieste!». When her fiancé lost his job, they decided he would apply to migrate to Australia. Why Australia? Because, as Rosanna explains, «it was so en vogue, to everybody you were talking, they went to Australia». Moreover, since they came from the North and not the South of Italy, «you could come, being Anglo-Saxon, Aryan race, you see, we would come... we were assisted migrants and South Italians had to pay». And so, following their engagement, Sergio left and Rosanna stayed behind:

I was left in a refugee camp and we discussed that for the simple reason that in those days... I am talking very, very straight. In those days, was no pill, so we thought if things don't go well and it's not to your liking, you see that it's no better than here, it's better to come back one, than two or perhaps three, you see. So because you had to stay here for two years before you went back, otherwise you had to pay the government back the money. So anyway, Sergio is in Port Said when he writes to me, «Get ready the papers so we can marry by proxy»<sup>25</sup>.

Rosanna and her fiancé had always intended to resort to proxy marriage if he decided that Australia was going to work for them since brides could also come as assisted migrants provided they joined their husbands within twelve months from the day they were married:

It was always on the cards [to marry by proxy] because my parents would not have sent me there three-quarters around the world, a single woman, so they wanted me to be married. So that's why Sergio said, get the papers ready. But he said, don't send me papers until I go to Melbourne. Because he went to Bonegilla and then he went to Tatura to pick fruit and then he came here<sup>26</sup>.

Describing her feelings when taking the decision to marry by proxy, Rosanna comments:

It was very hard, like for any young girl, well your wedding day, it's your wedding day. But when you are faced with the situation we were in, it was not really a very hard decision, even if it was pretty hard for me because when I was walking up to go in front of the altar, I was still wishing it was like in the movies, when you hear the young man come up and calling up, «Stop, stop, stop, I'm here!» Yes, I was very lonely, I was very lonely<sup>27</sup>.

Remembering the aftermath of her lonely wedding day and her peculiar «honeymoon» when she «went to be bed» in her husband's bed, with her mother-in-law in the bedroom, she recounts:

I was still in the refugee camp, but for a week I went on a honeymoon, you see, four days with my mother-in-law, and then for the rest I went to Zia Amalia, who was Sergio's aunty, she was a widow, and I slept with her in the bedroom again. And when I came to the refugee camp... as I turned the corner, everybody said, «Buonasera Signora!»<sup>28</sup>.

Similarly Lia and Ida used proxy marriage in order to «marry and have a life» (to use Ida's words). Originally from Sicily, Ida's family migrated to Jerusalem where she was born, and later moved to Egypt. In 1955, she married by proxy Enrico, who was the son of Calabrian migrants but was born in Egypt and had migrated from there with his family to Australia in 1950. Prior to his migration to Australia, Ida and Enrico had been engaged but decided to cancel their engagement because of the uncertain future awaiting Enrico in Australia. In order to follow his family to Australia, Enrico had had to leave a well-paying job in Egypt and was concerned that in Australia he could not have provided for Ida as well as he could have had he stayed in Egypt. After five years and once he had «a house and a car» he wrote to Ida asking her if she wanted to join him in Australia. It was too expensive for Enrico to go back to Egypt to marry Ida, but Ida's father would not allow her to leave as an unmarried woman. Hence proxy marriage was a good solution to their predicament<sup>29</sup>.

While Ida and Enrico mentioned only practical reasons for choosing to marry by proxy rather than love and passion, Lia's reasons for entering into this type of

arrangement were entirely romantic. At seventeen she was engaged to Angelo, a young man from a nearby village who worked as a policeman in her village. Angelo's father had already migrated to Australia and his family joined him in 1956. Following Angelo's departure, he and Lia were distressed, fearing for the future of their engagement and not knowing when and if he would be able to go back to Italy to marry Lia. On the boat to Australia, however, Angelo learned from the captain that they could marry by proxy. At the first opportunity, he wrote to Lia asking her to forgo a conventional wedding in order for them to be reunited sooner rather than later. Lia agreed at once, since, as she explains: «I was very much in love with him. He passed away forty-five years ago but I am still in love with him»<sup>30</sup>.

Unlike all other women I talked to, Lia's father, rather than her husband, paid for her fare to Australia. Upon her arrival in Melbourne, Lia, like the majority of the women to whom I talked, was expected to go through another wedding party, this time organised by the husband's family or friends. Usually for such celebrations, the bride donned the wedding dress she had worn on her wedding day in Italy, and, depending on the husband's financial resources, the couple had their pictures taken by a professional photographer. Given that it was often almost impossible to have the party on the day in which proxy brides arrived in Australia, although married, as Giovanna recounts,

la sera ho dormito con mia cugina e lui ha dormito con suo zio, abbiamo dormito separati perché volevo rimettermi il vestito bianco<sup>31</sup>.

Lia, by contrast, was unable to wear her white dress at the wedding party in Australia:

Well that was my idea, to put the white dress on but when I come in here, when we come out from the ship the friends of my husband give a party, it was nearly night time, then I was expecting that we go to the church and put the wedding dress on. But we didn't go to the church and I didn't put the wedding dress on because we went to bed together and they say it was not allowed anymore to put the wedding dress on!<sup>32</sup>

The stories concerning the meaning associated with the white dress suggest that to some extent proxy marriage was a practical adaptation of traditional marriage customs to novel conditions generated by migration. This explains why many women and men risked marrying people they hardly knew. At a time in Italy when young men and women had very little opportunities to get to know each other well prior to marriage, the practice of proxy marriage did not seem as hazardous and peculiar as it may seem today. This was particularly the case for

those who did not know each other well but came from the same village, and their family, or the family's reputation, was well known to them or their parents. Giuseppina and Giuseppe, who both came from the same village in Sicily and married by proxy in the late 1950s, recall how they felt very safe in marrying by proxy, even though they could hardly remember each other, because they «knew the family very well»<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, Giovanna explains that she agreed to marry Salvatore because «c'erano delle conoscenze in famiglia»<sup>34</sup>. In fact, Giovanna had relatives who had migrated to Melbourne, knew Salvatore there and could confirm he was of good character and led an exemplary life in Australia.

The reasons why young women took the risk of marrying by proxy and leaving everything behind vary according to individual circumstances. The majority of women I interviewed state that after the devastation of the war many women wished to start a family. Nonetheless, for those who had not been previously engaged to their husband and had not known him well, the poverty generated by the devastation of the Second World War that led many men to migrate, thus reducing the number of men of marriageable age, motivated Italian women to marry by proxy. Incidentally, given the lack of prospects in their impoverished villages, migration was seen (by many but not all) almost as inevitable, at least for a few years. This suggests that since marriage and migration were intrinsically linked and the former could not take place without the latter, proxy brides migrated in order to marry but also married in order to migrate. Or perhaps, to use Giovanna's words, it was fate (*il destino*).

For a well known Italian Australian writer, and the daughter of parents who married by proxy, proxy marriages could be seen as marriages «of hope and escape, of adventure in a new land, of growing up at last, of the thrill of being with someone as determined as you are that you will succeed in being happy and that you will not live again in poverty and in war» (Dell'Oso, 1994, p. C3). But this type of arrangement also carried with it the potential for disappointment, especially for those women who had not met their prospective husbands face to face, and had at most only corresponded with them. These women had never been to Australia, many had no family in Australia, nor did they speak English. All of this contributed greatly to their isolation and loneliness.

## Representations

Like most of the other women, Lia was terrified of travelling alone for more than a month, and was relieved when two sisters from New Zealand took her under their wing. The sisters were much concerned about the young Italian woman, since, according to Lia, they had heard many terrible stories about proxy wives.

These terrible stories have remained a staple of the ways in which proxy wives are viewed by many. In their occasional appearance in Australian fiction, women who married by proxy are depicted as victims. Recent examples include the film *Love's brother* (2004, written and directed by Jan Sardi) and Annamaria Dell'Oso's opera libretto, *Bride of Fortune* (commissioned by and performed at the Festival of Perth by the Western Australian Opera Company in 1991)<sup>35</sup>.

Both *Love's brother* and *Bride of Fortune* centre around the idea of betrayal. In the film, the shy and reserved Angelo, tired of rejections from women in Australia yet unsure of his motives, sends Rosetta (in Southern Italy), a photo of his younger and handsome brother, Gino. Wishing to escape poverty and on the basis of one letter and Gino's photo, Rosetta agrees to marry Angelo by proxy. Upon her arrival in a small town in Australia, Rosetta discovers she has been deceived but eventually all ends well when Rosetta finds love with Gino (whose photo she had dreamed about) and Angelo takes Gino's place in the arms of Connie, Gino's former girlfriend.

In the opera the bride-to-be, Grazia, a Calabrian peasant, is tricked into marrying an Italian man living in Australia who turns out to be ten years older than he had claimed to be. Vito is also crippled, abusive and an alcoholic. Moreover, he hides from her the fact that he is also supporting a daughter from a previous marriage in Italy. Vito lives in a dingy flat in an industrial area of Melbourne. Upon arrival Grazia discovers that she has been deceived but finds herself trapped in the marriage. She finds work in a factory, where she suffers discrimination and ridicule by her fellow workers. Her husband robs her of her earnings and eventually holds her hostage before he is killed by the police. The mortally wounded Vito pleads for forgiveness and the pregnant Grazia forgives him by placing her wedding ring on his finger as she holds him. Following the death of Vito, Grazia decides to remain in Australia to raise the child with the help of her sister, whom she plans to bring out from Italy. These fictional representations of proxy brides are similar to portrayals of their counterpart, known as «picture brides», in the contexts of the Japanese and Korean diasporas. The phenomenon of the picture bride has inspired both fictional and academic works (Makabe, 1995; Uchida, 1997; Ayukawa, 2002).

In all of these works, the women saw the marriage as a door to opportunities not available to them in their home countries. But because of the deceitfulness of their prospective partners the marriages turned out to be difficult and disappointing. This version of the story is repeated over and over again in many testimonies and self-published migrant autobiographies. This is, for instance, how one Italian migrant to Australia describes the fate awaiting unsuspecting proxy brides who end up living on remote Australian farms:

The destiny of these women was marked. Reduced to slavery, they would never be able to return home, nor could they ask anyone for help. Once married it was impossible for them to rebel: since they did not speak English, who could they turn to, to relate their misadventures? Sometimes I witnessed desperate scenes: some women didn't want to get off the ship but did not have the money to pay for the return journey (Caruso, 1999, p. 206).

These various fictional and autobiographical representations can be seen repeated in some newspaper reports and anecdotal stories that invariably resurface when proxy marriage becomes from time to time a subject for public discussion. Articles published in the Australian press and in the Italian Australian newspaper, «Il Globo» during the 1950s and 1960s repeatedly reported stories of «disastrous» proxy marriages and discussed the «problems» of lonely Italian men looking for brides (Wardrop, 1996, pp. 19, 41). These representations create an almost archetypal story which informs general and widespread views of proxy marriage, particularly within the Italian Australian community.

Given the ubiquity of this image, it is not surprising to find these ideas repeated by most of the people I interviewed. Invariably, the women and men to whom I talked, referred to cases in which men had supposedly lied about their age, or their prospects and living conditions in Australia, or had sent a photo of themselves looking much younger. In all cases, they were careful to reassure me that they were among the few who did not lie to each other. When pressed for details, however, they admitted that they had heard of these stories but they did not know anyone in particular who had been in that predicament. That is surprising, particularly since all of the proxy brides to whom I talked mentioned that on the boat to Australia there were always at least two or three and often more young women who had also married by proxy and that many of them stayed in contact and became close friends. Surely, if this was the case, and deceptions had been so widespread, my informants would have personally known women who had been deceived.

Only one man, Giuseppe, who did not marry by proxy but wished to be interviewed because he knew many who had, told me about his sister who married a widower who had claimed he had only one but in fact had three children. He also told me about one of his friends from Sardinia who married by proxy a woman from Calabria whom he had not previously met. When she arrived in Australia to join him, she was disappointed because he was very short, and this had not been mentioned in his letters and was not obvious from the picture he had sent to her. Apparently, the couple stayed together despite the wife's disappointment but (since she was tall) she never wore high heels<sup>36</sup>.

Giuseppe also remembered the story of another of his friends who had paid for his bride's passage and sent her money to buy a ring but upon her arrival



discovered that she had used the money to pay for her brother's passage and that she had no intention of staying with him. Similarly, in her study of proxy marriage, Wardrop cites a number of anecdotal stories of deception and disappointment, including the story of Giovanni's duped friend. This story, however, in which the deceitful party is a woman, changes the archetypal story according to which women were victims and never agents. This story of victim-hood and disappointment, moreover, sits uneasily with the evidence that has emerged from my research.

### **Conclusion**

The Australian government's migration policies and the historical context which frame the practice of proxy marriage allow us to make a number of informed conclusions with regards to Italian women's agency in relation to marriage and migration. Coming of age at a time in which migration was viewed as the only option for escaping poverty in the destitute rural villages of Italy, but also facing social restrictions concerning their ability to migrate in their own right, proxy marriage could have provided a convenient solution for those willing to take a chance on Australia. Moreover, at a time in which the Australian government felt the need to attract large numbers of migrants from Europe and accepted Italians, albeit reluctantly, but was increasingly concerned to balance its intake of migrants, proxy marriages seemed to have been a positive solution for all concerned. Indeed, the number of women who migrated to Australia as proxy wives demonstrates that, albeit unintentionally, the Australian government's acceptance of proxy marriages as legal did contribute to raising the intake of female migrants from Italy.

A better understanding of the historical context, however, does not help us challenge common assumptions about proxy marriage. In fact, the ways in which the phenomenon of proxy marriage has been represented, not only in fictional works and life writing, but also in the Australian and Italian language press in Australia, create an archetypal story of deceit and disillusionment which informs general and widespread views of proxy marriage, particularly within the Italian Australian community. The emphasis on victim-hood and deception foreground how the past, even the near past of fifty years ago, is interpreted through the filter of today's assumptions. In neglecting to acknowledge, and therefore come to terms with, the radical difference between the past and the present, we silence the voices of the past, and fail to understand what, for instance, may have motivated thousand of young women to leave everything behind and migrate to the other side of the world to join husbands they often knew little about.

The stories my informants constructed undercut common assumptions about proxy marriage. At the same time, when my female interviewees attempted to make sense of their decision to marry by proxy they struggled to reconcile past motivations with their understanding of marriage and courtship rituals today. Hence they marvelled at what they did, and at the risk they took, and concluded that it must have been their fate to end up in Australia, and therefore to marry by proxy. Paradoxically, their inability to explain their motivation for their courageous decision contributes to a more complex understanding of the practice of Italian proxy marriage in Australia. This is valuable at a time when many proxy couples are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of their wedding and in the context of these celebrations are attempting to create, recreate and make sense of what the peculiar origins of their lives together may mean for themselves and their descendants.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to the women and men married by proxy who were so generous with their time and so willing to share with me their stories of marriage and migration to Australia. I am also very grateful to Klaus Neumann, Maria Nugent and Bernadette Luciano who read and commented on earlier versions of this article. Thank you also to Elissa Sutherland who was involved in this project and conducted most of the interviews with me.
- <sup>2</sup> According to Susanna Iuliano's careful calculations, of the 300,000 Italians who settled permanently in Australia between 1945 and 1976, approximately 8 per cent married by proxy (Iuliano, 1999, p. 321).
- <sup>3</sup> Little scholarly work has been published about Italian proxy wives and proxy marriages. To date, the research on proxy marriage includes one chapter of a doctoral dissertation (Iuliano 2002), an article (Iuliano, 1999), a book chapter about fictional representations in Italy and Australia (Pilz and Scarparo, 2003), a brief section in Vasta (1992), and an eighty-page monograph (Wardrop, 1996) which provides a collection of interviews and documents, such as marriage certificates that illustrate the practice, but does not analyse the complex motivations and consequences in any depth.
- <sup>4</sup> F.H. Moylan to Prime Minister Menzies, 27 October 1958, National Archives of Australia (hereafter: NAA): A463, 1957/599.
- <sup>5</sup> Richard B. James to Prime Minister Menzies, 21 June 1953, NAA: A463, 1957/599.
- <sup>6</sup> A.E. Harvey to Prime Minister Menzies, 21 October 1955, NAA: A463, 599.
- <sup>7</sup> T. Heyes to Minister of Immigration, 11 June 1958, NAA: A446, 1962/65442.
- <sup>8</sup> According to Jeannie Martin, since the first intake of assisted migrants came to Australia (about 50 women from the Foundling Hospital in Cork arrived in the then colony of New South Wales in 1831), the function of migrant women in the colony was clear. First, they had to exert «a sobering influence» over men since the excess

of single men was deemed to be a moral problem. Second, «they were to become the wives of labouring men and the mothers of their children» and, third, «they were to provide menial domestic (later factory) labour in the homes and industries of the colonial elite» (Martin, 1984, p. 109). Change in regulation, when it seemed that these single women refused to solve the problem of the «moral degeneracy of the colony» and indeed were then blamed for such degeneracy, meant that young married couples, their children and young women who came under the protection of a married couple were given precedence (Martin, 1984, p. 109). Hence, to use Martin's words, «[t]he ideal female immigrant had not only to fulfill the above functions, but also be *dependent* on the patronage of some form of male-headed household» (italics in the original, Martin, 1984, p. 109).

- <sup>9</sup> Heyes to Minister for Immigration, 11 June, 1958, NAA: A446, 1962/65442.
- <sup>10</sup> Heyes to Minister for Immigration, 11 June, 1958, NAA: A446, 1962/65442.
- <sup>11</sup> A.L. Nutt to Heyes, 9 July 1957, NAA: A446, 1962/65442. The dangers to which single women could be exposed during the initial settling in period refer to the Australia government practice whereby assisted migrants upon arrival normally went to a Migrant Reception Centre from where they would be placed in employment. In his 1958 letter to the Minister, Heyes indicated that the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee in Australia had been prepared to provide accommodation at a Hostel run by the Pastorelle Sisters (an Italian religious order) instead of «allowing the girls to proceed in the first instance to an immigration centre» (See A.L. Nutt to Heyes, 9 July 1957, NAA: A446, 1962/65442).
- <sup>12</sup> A.L. Nutt to Heyes, 9 July 1957, NAA: A44, 1962/6544.
- <sup>13</sup> Heyes to Chief Migration Officer, 18 May 1960, NAA: A446, 1970/78623.
- <sup>14</sup> Martin points out that female migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have also played an important role in production «by providing a pool of cheap, exploitable labour for undesirable low-skill jobs in the manufacturing sector» (Martin, 1984, p. 110). As Martin explains, «by 1961 the workforce participation rates among overseas-born women were 39.4 per cent compared with 32.5 per cent among Australian-born women. By 1966 married migrant women were 30 per cent of the married female workforce, by 1973 they were 44 per cent of married women working and this trend has continued since» (Martin, 1984, p. 112). These women were mainly from Italy, Greece, Malta and Yugoslavia (the migrant groups most disliked at the time) and worked as «process workers and machinists in the textile and garment trades, in fabricated metal products, electrical equipment and household appliance industries, in chemicals, plastics and rubber and as packers and labelers» (Martin, 1984, p. 113).
- <sup>15</sup> According to Francesco Cavallaro (2003, p. 49), the migrants who arrived in Australia in the period from 1946 to the mid 1960s form the «statistical backbone of the Italian community today» and it was at this time that «southern Italians started to migrate to Australia in large numbers».
- <sup>16</sup> My research draws on 25 oral interviews conducted across Melbourne between February and June 2007. I limited my interviews to women and men living in Melbourne for pragmatic reasons, and because the largest number of Italian born Australians live in Victoria.

- 17 Carmela Palermo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 7/3/07.
- 18 Lucia Mullerer, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo, Melbourne, 1/3/07.
- 19 Giovanna Scifo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 10/3/07.
- 20 Giovanna Scifo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 10/3/07.
- 21 Giovanna Scifo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 10/3/07.
- 22 Lucia Muller, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo, Melbourne, 1/3/07.
- 23 Rosa Petraglia, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, 19/2/07.
- 24 Rosa Petraglia, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, 19/2/07.
- 25 Rosanna Opeca, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 16/3/07.
- 26 Rosanna Opeca, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 16/3/07.
- 27 Rosanna Opeca, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 16/3/07.
- 28 Rosanna Opeca, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 16/3/07.
- 29 Ida and Enrico Mussolino, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 16/2/07
- 30 Lia (name changed as requested by informant), interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 2/3/07
- 31 Giovanna Scifo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 10/3/07.
- 32 Lia (name changed as requested by informant), interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 2/3/07.
- 33 Giuseppe and Giuseppina Zuccala, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, 9/3/07.
- 34 Giovanna Scifo, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo and Elissa Sutherland, Melbourne, 10/3/07.
- 35 There is also an Italian film in the tradition of the *commedia all'italiana*. The film was made in 1971 and features Alberto Sordi, playing the role of a typical immigrant to Australia, and Claudia Cardinale as the *illibata* bride-to-be. The title of the film *Bello, onesto, emigrato Australia, sposerebbe compaesana illibata*, summarises the plot. In the Italian film, both parties lie about their real identities. Having been rejected before, Amedeo, played by Sordi, sends Carmela, played by Cardinale, a photo of his handsome friend Giuseppe. Carmela on the other hand, in a photo sent to Australia, pretends to be an innocent Calabrian country girl, while she is in fact a prostitute desperate to leave Rome and her life of exploitation by a pimp who beats her.
- 36 Giuseppe and Rosaria Grasso, interviewed by Susanna Scarparo, Melbourne, 27/2/07.

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Giovanna walks to the altar accompanied by her father.  
(Courtesy of Giovanna Scifo)



Giovanna reads to the guests a telegram sent by Salvatore on their wedding day.  
(Courtesy of Giovanna Scifo)