

# Lena's people

By EDMUND CAMPION

**L**ena Gustin came to Australia from Italy in 1956 with her husband and two small children. She felt very lonely in a strange land. In the shops she could not understand what people said to her. Australian food was different and foreign to her taste. Even the Catholicism she found here was strange. It was quite unlike the communal and festive religion she had known at home.

Then one day she came across a suburban coffee shop that had just invested in an espresso coffee machine, then a novelty in Australia. The owner didn't know how to work his new machine, and when Mrs Gustin showed him how to do it, he offered her a job. In her new job, she began to feel at home in Australia.

But she knew there were thousands of Italian women who were

like her. They were part of the post-war migration boom that brought shiploads of non-English speaking people here. Workplace experience allowed the men to get some grip on this new society, but their wives often found Australian life friendless and threatening.

So when the editor of the Italian-language weekly *La Fiamma* asked her to write an advice column, she said yes. For seven years she answered readers' queries about family problems and about the difficulties of settling in a new country. Eventually she was handling three pages of *La Fiamma* each week, and her writings became a chain linking together many who shared their experience of this new land.

Lena Gustin kept worrying about Australian anonymity and isolation—there had to be other ways to beat it. She hit on the idea of an Italian-lan-

guage radio show mixing news from home. Italian music and her own comments on listeners' problems. It was a huge success. By the end of the 1960s she was reaching an audience of 300,000 and sacks of mail came for her each week.

By that time, she universally known as 'Mama Lena'. New settlers found her to be an understanding radio mother who spoke, as Italians say, from the heart and to the heart. She could touch her listeners' pockets, too, whether it was for flood or earthquake victims back in Italy or for a personal need here in Australia. Both Australian and Italian governments honoured her for her welfare work.

Now she is to be honoured by the general public. In March, the State Library of NSW opens an exhibition in which Lena Gustin has a central place. Called *La Dolce Vita?*, the ex-



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**Mama's mail:** through her radio show, Lena Gustin became known to thousands as 'Mama Lena'.

hibition tells the story of 20th century Italian Australians. They range from the painter Antonio Dattilo Rubbo to fashion model Terry Palani, who came here in 1955 at the age of 18, for the Italian fashion parades initiated by the *Australian Women's Weekly* and David Jones stores. A Miss Italy, she married a

Sydney businessman and is still here.

Less happy stories in the exhibition are of those Italians who were prisoners here during World War II. There were 18,000 POWs, as well as nearly 5000 Italian Australians who were interned (many of them unjustly) as security risks in wartime.

Something of their experience is caught in the camp diaries of an interned poultry farmer, together with the letters sent to him by his niece. There is also an interview with a legendary POW escapee, an officer known as *La Volpe* ('The Fox').

Inevitably, the Catholic Church has a part in the story. Like Lena Gustin, Italians who came to Australia found that the church here was unlike what they had known at home. Desmond O'Grady, one of the first Irish-Australian Catholics to write sensitively about these new arrivals, said that they found Australian Catholicism 'almost Protestant in its austerity'. Whereas Australian Catholics tended to make Mass attendance the sole measure of Catholicity, Italians made their faith an intimate part of their lives. Their religion was close to patron saints and the Holy Family, and they felt relaxed (not 'on duty') in church.

If Italian Australians felt lost in suburban parishes, there were usually priests from Italy to minister informally to them. One of these was Giuseppe La Rosa. Working at the Apostolic Delegation, he developed a strong welfare network among NSW Italians during the war years and then initiated an idea for a weekly newspaper, which became *La Fiamma* ('The Flame'). Then he went back to Italy and was forgotten. The exhibition restores him to history.

The librarian who put *La Dolce Vita?* together is himself part of the story. Jim Andrighetti is the son of postwar migrants from Belluno, near Venice. His father came from there in 1951, to be joined two years later by his wife and daughter. During his early days here, Andrighetti depended on a support network based on the East Sydney restaurant, *La Veneziana*.

The restaurant's owners, Carlo and Angiolina Lorenzi, made their pasta house a meeting place for young Italians. Rightly, they too feature in this exhibition; but their presence can also be seen as a gesture of gratitude from the son of one whom they made welcome. 