THE FAMILY ARCHIVE · A REFLECTION BY JEANETTE CICCARELLI NÉE SCUDERI

Carmelo Scuderi *and* Gina Vanella

Grammichele to Melbourne, 1924–1948

I have been thinking a lot lately about my grandparents… all grandparents. For me, they were the generation who took that enormous leap into the unknown for the future of their families… and here we are today.

Most of us knew them in their role as grandparents. We remember the way they held our hands tightly to cross the roads, the soup they cooked for us when we had a fever, the smiles that we knew were just for us, the fussing and the laughter they delighted us with.

But lately, I have been wondering who they really were.

It has always been important to me to understand where they came from and how we got to where we are today.

> *I read this somewhere: "By honouring our beginnings, we start to find our place in the world."*

UNANSWERED

How did they love their parents in a time when affection was hardly ever displayed?

UNANSWERED

What mattered to them most? World peace? Accumulating wealth or commitment to family and nothing else?

UNANSWERED

Did they miss the family they left behind?

UNANSWERED

Were they really happy in Australia?

We may think we knew them, and that is certainly a gift not to be taken for granted, but I have this nagging feeling that I should have known them better.

For years I thought I had done a wonderful job preserving our family history. As a teenager, I was so proud of myself for recording those dates, places, names of ships, names of great-grandparents and so much more. Even some war stories and migration ones too.

Storytime happened during those evenings at home, sitting around the dinner table, after a very satisfying plate or two of pasta. Nonno Nick (my mother's father) and my father, Giacomo, leaned back on their chairs and lit their cigarettes. I could tell they were already reminiscing in their heads. The cafetiera was on the stove and the aroma of espresso coffee made me long for it even more…

I grabbed my pen and paper and soon it was happening.

I wonder if I was listening closely enough? Did I hear what had been left unsaid? I don't think I asked those questions of the heart. I know now that they mattered as much as the others.

UNANSWERED

How did you feel boarding that ship?

UNANSWERED

Were you frightened, anxious or excited about your future?

UNANSWERED

Did you cry when you left the rest of your family, your homeland?

UNANSWERED

Did you want to come to Australia?

UNANSWERED

Did you want to return to Italy?

UNANSWERED

What was your first thought when you landed in Australia?

My father, Giacomo Scuderi, had told me about the time when he and his mother came to Australia. It fascinated me then and still does now.

This is what I know about what happened.

1924

An extraordinary situation developed after my Nonno Carmelo left for Australia in 1924, as so many other young men had done. He left his wife, Gina Vanella and young son, Giacomo, behind.

The plan was not any different to all the others: work hard, save money, get a house and then bring the family over. But things don't always go as planned.

What would happen if the wife refused to go?

1926

This happened with my Nonno and Nonna. After 2 years in Australia, in 1926, my Nonno Carmelo called his wife and son to come over. He sent money and organised their voyage, but they didn't arrive….and this happened more than twice. Each time Nonno Carmelo walked home alone.

What happened?

I was told she did not want to leave Grammichele. We think that Nonna Gina also had a special connection with her hometown, Grammichele and the paesani.

From left to right: Giacomina? Teresa? Gina and ?

She and Giacomo lived with her sister, Giacomina, with whom she had grown very close. Giacomina also had a young son, Michele, and her husband, Paulo Sentina, also had left for Australia, 2 years before Nonno Carmelo. The sisters had a lot in common.

Michele and Giacomo

The two boys grew up more like brothers than cousins. My father spoke highly of Michele and they saw each other when my father returned to Italy when Michele's wife died. I didn't have to ask him if he missed Michele. I knew he did.

They were all content with their happy, comfortable and simple life.

Gina and Giacomo Scuderi, Grammichele.

Nonna and my father shared a very special bond that kept them always very close and devoted to each other.

Nonna had only been married a year when Carmelo left and Giacomo was 11-months old.

While Nonna remained in Italy, Nonno developed a relationship with an Australian woman and they had a child, a girl named Carma, born in 1928. Another child was also born, Norma Gwen, in 1930, but she died when she was 5 years old from pneumonia from whooping cough. Norma Gwen could have been omitted from this story but I felt a need to include her short existence in this story which is hers as well.

After Nonna's refusal to join him, they lost contact for about 10 years. No money was sent over during that time.

1932

In 1932, Nonna Gina's brother, Salvatore Vanella, who had been in Australia since 1922, and her brother-in-law Giuseppe, (Nonno Carmelo's brother) applied for her to come to Australia. The document states this was an 'unusual request' since her husband was already in Australia, and he was not the person applying.

I wonder what this implies.

Salvatore stated he would take care of her financially and provide a home for her if her husband was unable to do so. …or didn't want to do so.

…but Nonna Gina still didn't come.

Salvatore and Giuseppe had hoped that by reuniting them both, Carmelo would "be free from the infatuation of a woman with whom he is entangled".

It sounds to me like the marriage was over.

Meanwhile Nonno Carmelo worked hard to establish himself as a market gardener but almost went bankrupt when he tried to expand his agricultural ventures. The post war recession hit him hard as it did many others.

Nonno was not financially comfortable and was on the 'susso', the sustenance payment provided to those in need. His partner had children from previous marriages, and he was supporting them as well. The most heart-breaking decisions had to be made, and all the children were placed in an orphanage. Carma was the only child to remain with her parents.

It seemed to me that Nonna knew of this relationship….I confirmed this from documents I read. This surely would have had a huge influence on her reluctance to join her husband…but I think, there was more to it than this.

Two world wars occurred during their separation, a recession, and an economic boom was looming.

1946

In 1946, Carma married an Italian from Abruzzi. Nonno must have been so proud. He sent a card and photo of himself with Carma, on the back he wrote:

Carmelo Scuderi and daughter, Carma, on her wedding day. 1946

> *“This photo is a wonderful memory of your father and sister. We offer you this memory of this holy marriage with the deepest feeling of love, from your father and sister.”*

I noted that the card did not mention Nonna.

Giacomo replied and sent this photo. He wrote:

Giacomo Scuderi, Grammichele.

> *“With much affection I offer this photo to my father so you will always keep alive the image of your dear son.”*

1948

In 1948 Nonna Gina and Giacomo arrived in Australia to join my Nonno. My father was 24 when he met his father for the first time in his living memory. Gina was 53.

They had been apart for almost 24 years. I still wonder what happened in 1948 that brought them to Australia.

Nonna Gina and my father travelled on the ‘Toscana.’

They met Nonno Carmelo at South Wharf, Port Melbourne on December 6, 1948. For the purpose of recognition, they waved their white handkerchiefs high up in the air so they could find each other. They did not know the rest of the crowd there would be doing the same.

I would have loved to have seen that!

UNANSWERED

Did Nonno actually believe that they would really come this time?

UNANSWERED

Was he shocked to see them?

UNANSWERED

I never thought to ask my father what was that first meeting like, with his father. Was he nervous?

UNANSWERED

How did they connect after all those years apart?

UNANSWERED

Was their father-son relationship spontaneous or did they have to work super hard at it?

UNANSWERED

Was it ever there?

UNANSWERED

Was Nonna forgiving and loving with Nonno? Did Nonno resent leaving his ex-partner and not living his former life?

Now Nonno left his Australian partner and is committed to his first and unfamiliar family. His daughter, Carma, effortlessly becomes part of the Scuderi family.

Giacomo, Carma, Gina, Luciano Iacuone (Carma’s husband), Carmelo

Somehow, Carma and Nonna Gina instantly formed a connection. Carma took Nonna shopping, accompanied her to hairdresser appointments and doctor visits. They shared cups of strong brewed tea. I saw this and had occasions to join them. I grew to enjoy those cups of tea too.

My father always told us that Aunty Carma was his half-sister. I remember I appreciated hearing the truth of Carma’s existence, knowing that matters of this sort were often best left unspoken.

Dad and Aunty Carma bonded beautifully and so naturally as well. It was as though they had always known each other.

I saw that too. A new family is formed.

Do happy times follow? I don't really know. They remained together and I didn't see any reason not to believe they were content.

UNANSWERED

I still wonder what happened in 1948 that finally made Nonna and my Dad come to Australia after so long apart.

UNANSWERED

Did Giacomo persistently express his desire to meet the father he never knew?

UNANSWERED

Did he want more than what Grammichele could offer him?

UNANSWERED

Did he envisage a future with amazing opportunities to fulfil his dreams?

UNANSWERED

Maybe he just wanted to 'see the world' beyond Grammichele and then come back home.

UNANSWERED

Were they struggling financially?

UNANSWERED

Did Nonna feel it was time for her son to meet his father?

UNANSWERED

I don't know.

Nonna Gina and Nonno Carmelo never returned to Grammichele.

> *There is no one to ask any more and I know I will never know the answers… and no one else will know either.*

Being in this position now worries me a bit. I can still leave a legacy of what I know and hope someone cares enough.

— Jeanette Ciccarelli née Scuderi