

LUCIANA D'URSO: MY MOTHER (1909 – 1995)

by Dr Salvatore D'Urso

Dr. Salvatore D'Urso has had a distinguished career as an educator. He was Lecturer in Philosophy of Education at the University of New England, Armidale New South Wales, from 1965 to 1970 and Senior Lecturer at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, from 1971 to 1993. He is the founder and editor of Discourse: The Australian Journal of Educational Studies (1979-1992), now subtitled Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education. Dr. D'Urso, now in retirement, would be pleased to assist any one researching the history of Italians, particularly Sicilians, in Queensland. He may be contacted by writing to him at 33 Harts Road, Indooroopilly Qld 4008.

Luciana was born on 20 June 1909 in Mossman, North Queensland. She was the third of four daughters of Giovanni and Maria Rizzo, migrants from Sicily who had settled on the outskirts of the town of Cassowary on a small sugar cane farm. Lucy's life deserves to be commemorated and known to her descendants for the nobility hidden within its apparent ordinariness.

Her remarkable faculty for remembering people, places and incidents long past astonished me.



Wedding photo of Giovanni and Maria Rizzo. Giovanni married Maria at St Mary's Catholic Church, Port Douglas, on 29 November 1904, the day after her arrival.

The earliest photograph of Lucy, taken in a studio in 1914, shows her in an ample white dress and seated on a tricycle, black stockinged feet on the pedals, her fair hair tied in side bows. She is looking away from the camera distrustfully. As a photograph of its time it suggests the seriousness of the occasion.

Her eldest sister, Rosina, was several years older than Lucy, whereas Anna was just one year older; Lucy was to share with Anna a close companionship of childhood on a farm, establishing the basis of a special sisterly relationship which lasted for the rest of their lives. Their mother, Maria, trained her daughters in household tasks from their earliest years. She believed in the disciplinary virtues of labour, for which there was a pressing need on a pioneering sugar farm. These experiences of a farming childhood bred in my mother a life-long affection for domestic animals and the cultivation of vegetables and fruit trees.

Lucy and Anna spent their free hours exploring their rural and bush environment. They became partners in mischief and daring escapades. Lucy told of their raiding the watermelon plot of a Chinese neighbour and damaging his melons to give the appearance of animal intrusions. They became expert in climbing trees without always giving thought to how they might get down again. They ventured into the surrounding rain forest, becoming familiar with its plants and fruits such as the purple quandong. In this splendid world for growing up, Lucy and Anna developed the skill and spirit of tomboys. They became known as the Rizzo Sisters, who could 'stand up for themselves' and they supported each other — with fists if necessary — in quarrels with other kids.

Lucy and Anna lived in a time and place described as 'action-rich' and 'information-poor'

in the lives of children. In the pioneering years of settlement, children were usually called upon to assist in everyday family activities. Unlike today's town and city children, they also lived in closer contact with nature but had far fewer connections to the world beyond their immediate environment. Most of their learning, while working or playing, was first-hand: doing, seeing and exploring. School learning was different — it was abstract and removed from daily life. Reading was the only means of accessing the wider world. With Lucy, learning to read fed her imagination and created a yearning for further education beyond the circumstances of her family and her parent's notions of the proper upbringing of daughters.

The sisters attended a one-teacher bush school, Cassowarry State School, which opened in 1913. At first the girls walked three miles along a track to the school, until their father built a sled drawn by their horse, Prince. Other children came to

share the ride to school where Prince rested with other horses in an enclosure until the afternoon return to the farm. At that time, a Miss Hazenkamp was the teacher and Lucy recalled that her teacher's German origins incurred the hostility of local citizens on the outbreak of the First World War. In those days of imperialist sentiment, anti-German feeling was common throughout Australia and was particularly pronounced in areas of German settlement, often being inflamed by jingoistic journalism. However, my mother recalled her school days fondly, reciting lines from her early grade readers with amazing facility. She always regretted the brevity of her education which was a little more than five years.

In 1919, Lucy's father sold the sugar farm to purchase a boarding house with restaurant in the centre of Innisfail. While negotiating the purchase, away from his family, a great cyclone in the early months of 1919, nearly destroyed the



From left. Standing: Maria Scibilia, Bernadetta Rizzo, Luciana Rizzo. Seated: Agnes Saraceni, Anina Rizzo, Rosina Saraceni nee Rizzo and Bernadetta Saraceni. Innisfail, c1925.

farmhouse which was sheltering Maria and the girls. Lucy recalled her mother fastening the rafters of the roof with rope anchored to furniture on which she and her daughters clung for additional weighting.

Rizzo's boarding house became a 'depot' or 'transfer centre' for the flow of Italian migrants to the Innisfail district after the First World War. It acted as a postal address and a source of information on available work. It offered desperately needed help of various kinds in matters such as family relations and money, dealing with civil authorities or meeting the unforeseen exigencies of migration. As only those who have been forced by poverty to leave home would know, it offered a welcoming friendly environment for new-comers to a strange place, most of whom brought little with them other than their eagerness to cut cane. Giovanni had bought the boarding house, which had been the Temperance Club, to preserve the cohesion of his family. He thought it preferable that his daughters should work in a family business, rather than 'going into service' elsewhere, working for others. The girls were put to work on the chores of the boarding house under stern parental authority — making beds, washing linen, setting and clearing tables, preparing meals, sweeping and cleaning. Their duties started before daybreak and ended well into the evening. Lucy recounted that she often acted as an interpreter for new arrivals while they put their affairs in order with different authorities in the town. This was a role that she was to play on behalf of the Italian women of the district in the decades which followed.

Lucy and Annie were enrolled at Innisfail State School for only a brief time during which they attended irregularly, mostly on alternate days as each took it in turns to assist in the boarding house. Thus there was little opportunity for self-improvement although, being addicted to reading, Lucy sometimes hid herself to enter the imaginary worlds of storybooks. She was discovered on one such occasion by her father who promptly destroyed her cherished literature. Her fondness for drawing was also suppressed. She was driven to hide her reading matter to be retrieved at bedtime when the long day's work was done.

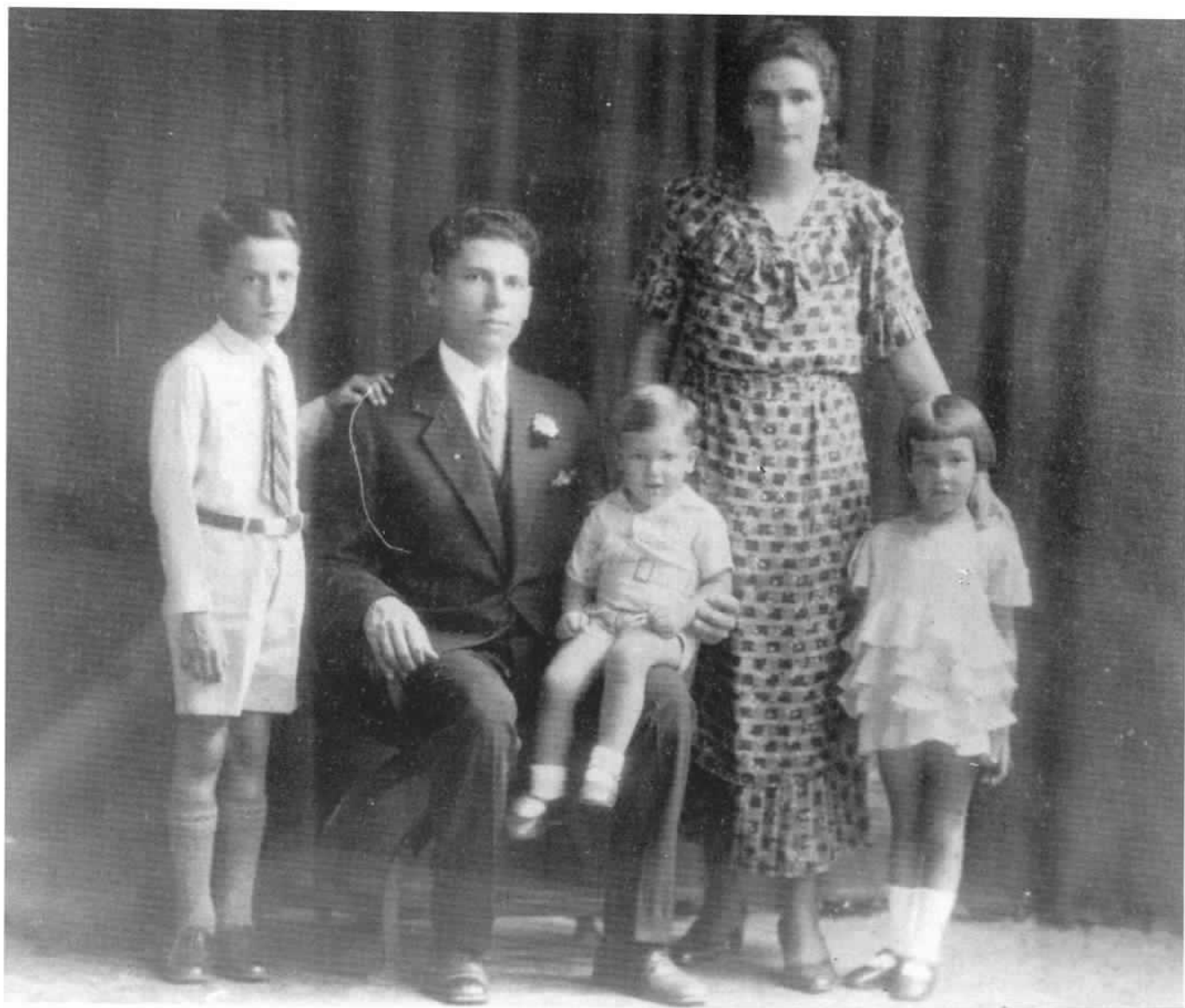
Lucy and Annie came to bear the heaviest of the children's duties in Rizzo's boarding establishment. Rosie, the eldest, departed into an arranged marriage to Antonio Saraceni, at the age of sixteen years, while Nita (Bernadetta), the youngest and



Alfio D'Urso, (first from left) standing, in Cairns, c.1922.

most favoured, was exempted from drudgery. It is not surprising that as they grew into young women, the Rizzo daughters should attract suitors in an Italian community with an excess of single male migrants. In addition to its rooms and restaurant, Rizzo's Building included a barber shop and a billiards hall. Overall, it generated the attractive atmosphere of an ethnic club, within which Lucy and Annie enjoyed the attentions given to women of marriageable age. Lucy was particularly favoured in her beauty. She was tall and slim with a well-proportioned face of broad and high cheekbone, a generous mouth, soft dark eyes, and bronze burnished long and waived hair. In comparison, Annie was short, more thickly built and of darker complexion. While Annie resembled her mother, Lucy was unmistakably her father's daughter.

Among the patrons of Rizzo's establishment was Alfio D'Urso who had migrated from Riposto on the eastern coast of Sicily in 1920 at the age of sixteen years. After a short season in the Childers area, he moved to Innisfail. Alfio stood out among his companions — he was taller, lean in build, of light complexion and curly hair, with eyes that shone with a hint of danger.



Alfio and Luciana D'Urso with their children Salvatore, John and Concetta, 1937.

There was an inevitability about the mutual attraction between Lucy, the strikingly appealing young woman of seventeen with a passionate and independent spirit, and Alfio, some six years older than her, of handsome stature, a tall boy trimmed by hard work, provocative in his youthful masculinity. Maria, Lucy's mother, intended that her daughter should wed an older and established man of the town, a cabinet-maker, through whom she would enjoy not only security but also social position in the Italian community. Lucy rejected her mother's matrimonial intentions — she was determined to choose from her own heart, which was already drawn to young Alfio D'Urso, a humble cane-cutter without any prospects at all, the very type of man whom Maria scornfully dismissed as a possible son-in-law. The course of youthful passion was not to be blocked by maternal interdiction. Lucy and Alfio became clandestine lovers, trysting within an extension of Rizzo Building undergoing

construction. Maria's fury at her daughter's insubordination was unbounded when she discovered it and there was no alternative than to settle the couple's future in Sicily, far from the prurience of the local community. I was born to the un-married couple on 26 May 1928 in Riposto, Catania. In the next two years or so in his native town, my father supported his wife and children by casual labouring. Concetta, my sister, was born in September 1930. In 1931 Alfio and Lucy, weighed with their responsibilities, returned to an uncertain future in Innisfail and to the unforgiving hostility of Maria. Balancing on the edge of poverty as foretold by her mother, Lucy summoned a fierce strength for the survival of her family. Wanting her own dwelling, however modest, she persuaded Alfio to invest their meagre savings in a low-built cottage of four rooms and verandah on the edge of town at 53 Grace Street.

Our home consisted of two bedrooms, 'living room' and kitchen. The small open front open verandah provided some playing space. The floors were uncovered and the walls unlined. There was a wood-fuel stove but not connected electricity or water. A laundry shed and 'dunny' stood at the rear shaded by a large mulberry tree. Within this modest domain, Lucy's undaunted spirit presided.

After a few years of the most scrupulous budgeting, certain improvements made our home comfortable particularly when electricity and water were connected, the verandah was closed in, and the house raised, which permitted a cemented utility area underneath. We were a working-class family in a working-class neighbourhood that included mostly Italians, some Greeks, Maltese, Chinese, and Anglo-Celts. There was tolerance and a taken-for-granted social equality among these plain-living people and a spirit of endurance in the tough times of the 1930s.

It was only due to his reputation as the foreman (ganger) of a team (gang) of formidable cane-cutters that Alfio received cutting contracts in the depth of the Great Depression when priority or preference was to be given to those of British descent. The labour of cutting green cane was gruelling, the rates were low, and the season all too short to provide income for the off-season, known as the slack. In these hard pressed circumstances, Lucy displayed her striking resourcefulness as a housewife: she cultivated a vegetable garden; she kept chooks and ducks in a backyard enclosure; she patched and sewed clothes; she traded the coupons of brand name products, patiently accumulated, for the manufacturers' kitchen linen; she prepared several meals from meat such as cheaply priced skin bone. The rules of the household were: eat it up, wear it out, make do, go without. She avoided the entrapment of debt, purchasing by cash alone.

We saw little of my father in the 1930s. He lived with his gang in barracks on cane farms during the season, cycling to and from home on the weekends. During the 'slack' he earned money through his gambling skill as a card player.

Lucy was the abiding presence of my childhood, the mother of Mediterranean tradition — nurturing, guiding, comforting, and correcting recalcitrance with a stern discipline. My brother, John, born in mid-1933 was incorporated into the regime of the household of which I vividly recall one ritual

in particular: our Friday night bath time, which Lucy conducted with relentless efficiency. She scrubbed each of us in turn from head to toe with a cake of Sunlight soap, poking her fingers into nostrils and ears, ignoring cries from soap-stung eyes, vigorously rubbing groins and back-side, and between the toes, lifting a stunned and dripping body from the tub to the kitchen floor, enfolding it with a clean towel to be dried with skin scorching rapidity. Fitted into fresh pyjamas and glowing from Lucy's bathing treatment, there followed the scarcely less excruciating procedure of hair combing, ear cleaning, and nail cutting.

My father's health deteriorated sharply in the mid-30s. Misdiagnoses of his condition by local doctors eventually led to specialist examinations in Brisbane and Sydney which virtually exhausted my parents' financial resources. Convinced that his occupation was the source of his debilitation through sinus infected digestion, specialised medical advice recommended he leave the cane fields for some other livelihood. After briefly managing an unprofitable card club, Alfio opened a billiards saloon in September 1937 in the main street of Innisfail in a building constructed by his brother-in-law Antonio Saraceni, husband of Lucy's sister Rosina. Antonino Passalacqua, husband to Annie, simultaneously opened a hairdressing business in the same building adjacent to the billiards saloon. When Lucy's parents bought a small house in Surry Hills, Sydney, to spend time away from the northern summer, she was asked to become the resident manager of the Rizzo Building, which had been rebuilt after it was severely damaged by fire in 1934. My father strongly favoured the move from our home in Grace Street to the centre of Innisfail since it gave him a couple of minutes' access to the billiards saloon. In 1940s we moved into the flat which Lucy continued to occupy when later widowed.

In February 1942 Alfio was interned and spent two years at Loveday Internment Camp, in South Australia. During his absence the billiard saloon was kept open through the employment of a Ceylonese man, Mr. James. On learning that American servicemen of a Signals Unit stationed at Etty Bay were seeking a laundry, Lucy and Annie decided to run a domestic business. Annie was also living in the Rizzo Building following the internment of her husband. The business was a profitable one and the nest-egg that had been laid in his time away surprised my father on his return from internment in January 1944.



Alfio D'Urso in front of the billiards saloon he opened in Innisfail in 1937.

Lucy's hard work and the greatly increased returns from the billiards saloon during wartime, provided the basis for the family's subsequent security. Another two-storey house was built adjacent to the old house, the two properties yielding a double rent. This resourcefulness greatly assisted the family. After the hardship of the 1930s, the postwar wellbeing was a happy change of fortunes.

I left home early in 1945 to continue my secondary and tertiary studies and pursue a teaching career. The same year, in April, my sister Diane Delanie (Dee) was born. I saw my mother in vacation times which I invariably spent at home. I recall the constant demands on her time, freely given, by Sicilians in need of interpreting services on legal, medical and financial matters. My parents'

home became a calling station for assistance which was never refused. It was entirely appropriate that in her twilight years her commitment and service was recognised by the presentation of awards by both the Queensland government and the Johnstone Shire Council.

Lucy continued as the manager of the Rizzo Building's business with its tenants. Tragedy struck in 1951 when her youngest sister Nita, despairing of her daughter's recovery from poliomyelitis, ended her daughter's life and her own. It was left to Lucy to meet her parents in Sydney on their return from a visit to Sicily to inform them of the double blow. It was Lucy who tended to the rapid decline of her father who died a year later and who cared for her mother now reduced to a near catatonic state from the deaths of her daughter, grand-daughter and husband in so brief a time. Virtually incapacitated in the last years of his life by continually infected legs, Alfio nevertheless lived on to the grand age of 87 years, dying in November 1990. His wife cared for him with devotion and patience and remained the stalwart helpmate of her youthful lover to the very end of his days. After Alfio's death, Lucy continued to live in the Rizzo Building until she passed away in May 1995. She was the last and longest-living member of her generation.

With the marriage of her children, the birth of grandchildren and of great-grandchildren, Lucy and Alfio became established as the progenitors of an impressive lineage of descendants. That they achieved this familial stature from their humble origins can only be seen as an astonishing 'success story' of migrant contribution to the evolving formation of Australian culture.

I will remember my mother as a human being of passionate intensity and an absolute integrity of vision. It will be inevitable that the fourth and subsequent generations of descendants will be probably unaware of or indifferent to their Sicilian ancestry. This sketch of Lucy Rizzo D'Urso is written in the hope of the preservation of a memory of her.