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ITALIAN ANTI-FASCISM IN AUSTRALIA, 1922-45

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DURING THE EARLY 1920s, Fascism was accepted by the great majority of the twenty thousand Italian-born migrants residing in Australia, because in the actions and the rhetoric of the new Italian government they seemed to detect a new determination to defend their economic interests and political rights and to counter the threats posed to their religion, language and traditions by a largely hostile social and political environment.

Yet the cause of Fascism did not gain the allegiance of all Italians in Australia. Although Fascism could count on the sympathy of a silent majority and on the vocal involvement of an articulate and educated *élite*, the opposition to the regime was in Australia a force by no means negligible. It came mainly from Italians who had seen the birth of Fascism in Italy and were militantly opposed to it: who had been persecuted for their ideals and compelled to emigrate after its coming to power. These Italians were predominantly industrial and agricultural workers from the northern part of the country and from the Po river valley. The bulk of them arrived in Australia between the years 1924 and 1926, and for this reason an organised anti-Fascist movement did not start there before 1927. Prior to this, opposition to the regime was vented only on an individual level, mainly by sending letters and clippings from anti-Fascist newspapers, to the *Italo-Australian*, the only Italian newspaper in Australia, notoriously pro-Fascist. Its editor, A. Follì, not only rebuked the critical correspondents, accusing them of being agents of Communism, but also sent their letters to the Italian consular authorities for possible retaliatory action.¹

Once in Australia, anti-Fascist Italians preferred to settle in areas where there was already a high concentration of their countrymen: in the sugar fields of Northern Queensland, in the cities of Sydney and Melbourne, in the industrial and mineral centres of Corrimal, Wonthaggi, Lithgow, Broken Hill, Kalgoorlie, Boulder, Wiluna, and in the agricultural areas of Griffith and Lismore. Their presence in the midst of communities which also harboured pro-Fascist elements sparked frequent clashes. In the cities, they lived in boarding houses, where after a day's

work they met, played cards and 'bocce' (Italian bowling) and discussed politics. On the whole, they preferred to congregate with people of the same village and region. Moreover, new immigrants brought into the boarding houses the latest news from Italy, about the native village, the economic conditions which had compelled them to emigrate, the political situation and the determination of Fascism to make life difficult for the opposition.²

These first hand, emotional reports had a strong impact on the boarders, who were in the main young, single and class-conscious, and in this respect the boarding houses performed the function of centres of anti-Fascist political indoctrination and propaganda. The political activities in these boarding houses were so widespread that they deeply worried the Fascist authorities, to the point that in 1927 the Consul-General, A. Grossardi, wrote to the Prime Minister, Bruce, suggesting to him that it would be wise to keep some of them under police observation.³ Grossardi's intervention reflected the great apprehension felt by the Italian government about the anti-Fascist activities carried out by Italian emigrants. The Duce not only personally resented the attacks on his regime by the Italian anti-Fascist press abroad, but was worried that anti-Fascism abroad could create the impression of a divided nation in which Fascism faced strong opposition. Italian consuls were instructed to fight anti-Fascism on all levels, for example by asking foreign governments to expel 'those Italian agitators who are most active and who work for the perversion of the working masses'.⁴

Although holding different political beliefs, the Italian Republicans, Socialists, Communists and Anarchists in Australia had in common their hatred for Fascism. The anarchist movement was particularly strong in this country and owed its success to the remarkable activity of its leader, Frank Carmagnola. Carmagnola arrived in Australia in May 1922 and went to work in the sugar fields of Northern Queensland. There, in March 1925, occurred the first anti-Fascist demonstration in Australia. When three Fascists from Mantua, who had been involved in beatings of anti-Fascists, arrived in Halifax, they were confronted by Carmagnola and other anti-Fascists, assaulted and forced to drink castor oil⁵. The political climate was so tense in areas of Northern Queensland that all Fascists were 'treated as they treated anti-Fascists in Italy'⁶ and compelled to leave the area, so much that the *Italo-Australian* lamented that 'the fact is that almost all Italians in North Queensland are bitter and irreconcilable enemies of Fascism'.⁷

By 1926, the position of anti-Fascism in Australia had consolidated enough to give birth to the first political organisation, the Lega Antifascista (Anti-Fascist League), founded in Sydney by Frank Carmagnola at the end of that year. Financial contributions came also from the miners of Corrimal and Lithgow. The League could count on the support of approximately three hundred people in Sydney and one hundred in Corrimal and Lithgow.

At first, the League printed leaflets and broadsheets and mailed them

to Italians all over Australia. The response to this initiative was so favourable that Carmagnola and his friends were encouraged to publish a newspaper. The first issue of *Il Risveglio* (The Awakening) appeared on 1 July 1927. One thousand copies were distributed. Although lacking an editorial, its programme was clearly stated by its correspondents. Isidoro Bertazzon, in an article 'The lies of Fascism', quite openly advocated the struggle against Italian as well as international Fascism, while the anonymous author of the article 'From the land of Maramaldo' advocated countering Fascist violence in Italy with equal violence in Australia. The second number of the paper was issued on 1 August, and expressed 'its regret that Mussolini has not been killed in one of the attempts on his life' and 'the hope that Mussolini may be hung to a lamp post and with him all his followers'.⁸ The third issue appeared in September, and enlarged on the themes of the previous issues: anti-Fascist, anti-capitalist, anti-religious and anti-monarchist articles figured prominently in its pages.

By this time the Italian authorities and the Fascists in the community were so incensed that the Consul-General deemed it necessary to make representations to the Prime Minister, Bruce, against the appearance of the newspaper, 'a monthly publication of extremist character' which he considered 'to be most dangerous, and likely to inflame the minds of the Italians and cause a lot of trouble as it is openly inciting class warfare, bolshevism, anarchy, violence and political murders'.⁹

The Bruce Government, sensitive to all outcries of subversion, had already taken action, in view of the fact that *Il Risveglio* was printed at the Communist Party's printery at Annandale, Sydney.¹⁰ On 23 August the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor banned the publication of *Il Risveglio*, and Frank Carmagnola was prosecuted and fined £3.¹¹ Unmoved by the setback, the anti-Fascist League started printing leaflets which were equally strongly worded against Fascism and its institutions, and distributed them to the Italian communities around Australia. Again the Consul-General wrote to the Prime Minister asking for their suppression. The Commonwealth Investigation Branch was unsuccessful in attempting to trace where the actual printing was done, notwithstanding the fact that Grossardi supplied names and addresses of anti-Fascist leaders.¹²

Anti-Fascism and Fascism in the meantime confronted each other with increasing animosity. There was an Anarchist provocation during a picnic organised by the Fascists at Killarney, Sydney,¹³ while in Melbourne, violence erupted between Fascists and anti-Fascists in Carlton, compelling the police to intervene to separate the two factions.¹⁴ Also in 1927, in Port Adelaide the sailors of the M.V. *Palermo* clashed with Italian anti-Fascists who were wearing red scarfs and singing the 'Red Flag' on the pier; and in Sydney, the Anarchists demonstrated against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti by parading in the streets with flags and posters bearing the inscription 'Down with Mussolini, assassin of the Italian people'.¹⁵ The Fascist authorities, in order to counter the wave of anti-Fascism, in September 1927 issued *Il Littorio* (The Lictor Rods),

as a means of propaganda.¹⁶

Yet the most significant event of that year was the opening in Melbourne of an anti-Fascist club, the Matteotti Club. With Frank Carmagnola as secretary and Tom Saviane as president, the club attracted all anti-Fascist Italians, whatever their other political allegiances. A year after being established the club had 500-700 subscribing members. The Matteotti Club functioned as the main centre for the diffusion of anti-Fascism and of ideals of class solidarity. Funds were used to finance the distribution all round Australia of anti-Fascist and Anarchist literature and to support Italians when they were on strike; also money was sent to France, to pay the legal costs of trials of anti-Fascists. In 1928 Carmagnola tried to obtain permission from the Commonwealth Government to print another newspaper, *La Riscossa* (The Counter-attack), but he was refused it by the Prime Minister in June 1928.¹⁷ Not until November 1929 was permission granted to the secretary of the Matteotti Club to publish *La Riscossa*. The appearance of the newspaper gave new impetus to the cause of anti-Fascism in Australia. Three thousand copies were printed monthly or fortnightly according to the funds available and distributed throughout the country by Carmagnola's agents. They were also distributing other anti-Fascist literature which the Matteotti Club was sending them, mainly the leading Anarchist newspapers from Paris, New York and Buenos Aires.

The year 1928 saw the rise to prominence in anti-Fascist circles of a remarkable man, Omero Schiassi. Of middle-class and cultured background, Schiassi, as a lawyer, was active in the Italian Socialist Party before he emigrated to Australia in 1924. He hated Fascism and from Melbourne he maintained contact with the whole spectrum of the anti-Fascist movement, including F.S. Nitti, the ex-Prime Minister in exile in France. In 1925 Schiassi wrote two articles for the *Avanti* (Milan) newspaper, one on the police strike in Melbourne and the other, critical of the Australian government, on the federal election. Grossardi, the Italian Consul-General, then drew the attention of the Home and Territories Department to these articles.

Grossardi believed that his intervention was instrumental in Schiassi's application for a position as instructor in Italian at the University of Melbourne being unsuccessful in 1926.¹⁸ However, Schiassi obtained such a position the following year (he was a fine Dante scholar), to the annoyance of Grossardi, who had the effrontery to complain to Prime Minister Bruce that 'this was done without giving me any notice of the appointment and without informing me in any way that an appointment was taking place' and that it was done notwithstanding 'that the University was well acquainted with Dr Schiassi's political tendencies'.¹⁹ Grossardi took his revenge by 'advising' the Italian community not to attend Schiassi's lectures—thus keeping him in poverty, since his salary varied according to the number of his students.

In 1928, when there were some signs of division within Italian Fascist ranks in Australia, Schiassi made a bid for leadership of the anti-Fascists

by forming the anti-Fascist Concentration of Australasia. This body, in Melbourne, was a branch of the Paris-based Anti-Fascist Concentration which aimed to bring together most opposition parties. Schiassi saw the importance of collaborating with the Anarchists of the Matteotti Club; they had a network of useful contacts as well as a record of militancy and toughness. Schiassi also recognised the need to obtain support for anti-Fascism from Australian political parties and trade unions, and he achieved some acknowledgement from people like Maurice Blackburn, the federal Labor M.P., and W.J. Duggan, president of the ACTU.

Always impeccably dressed, Schiassi was a strange mixture: almost courtly in his manners, he was aloof and conscious of his intellectual superiority, yet he was a convinced Socialist, following the reformist trend. There was a big gap between him and the uneducated, barely literate Italian workers, and businessmen, but he had a very dramatic imagination which found expression in rhetorical speeches which were admired, though often not understood, by ordinary Italians. Despite Schiassi's considerable political influence, he was unable to weld together the various strands of anti-Fascism. He soon split with the Anarchists, regarding them as too inflammatory in their methods. For their part, the supporters of the Matteotti Club wanted action, not just words: they sought confrontation with the Fascists, and to this purpose went around in clubs and public places, armed with guns and iron bars, provoking Fascists to fight. On 2 February 1929, when the first talking picture was screened at the Auditorium in Melbourne, showing an address by Mussolini to the American people, Carmagnola and a few dozen anti-Fascists disrupted the show. Similar disturbances were staged during the visit of Father Salza, an agent of Fascist propaganda. In Ingham, in November 1928, anti-Fascists gathered outside the building where he was lecturing and threw stones on the tin roof thus causing panic among the audience. When Father Salza lectured at the Australian Hall in Sydney, about thirty anti-Fascists attempted to disrupt the meeting, but were confronted by the Fascists and thrown out.²⁰

The most remarkable incident was what was later called by the anti-Fascists, the Russell Street fight. On 27 October 1929, while 100-150 Melbourne Fascists, all wearing their black shirts, were celebrating at the Temperance Hall in Russell Street the seventh anniversary of the March on Rome, they were attacked by Carmagnola and his men who rushed into the hall and took them by surprise. Before they could realise what was happening, several Fascists were injured.²¹ The news of the fight quickly reached Sydney: the impact on the local Fascists was such that many did not attend the local celebration of the March on Rome, held on 29 October, for fear of a similar attack from Sydney anti-Fascists, and many of those who were present at the celebration refrained from wearing the black shirt.²²

There was a toughening of anti-Fascist positions in 1930. In January, anti-Fascist Italians at Corrimal demanded that the management of the local mines dismiss an Italian who admitted being a member of the Fascist

Party. In Coalcliff, Italian workers suspected of belonging to the Fascist Party were closely questioned and allowed to continue to work only when their 'innocence' was proved.²³ In February, in a letter to the All Australian Trade Union Congress, Carmagnola charged the Italian consuls in Australia with being 'actively engaged in organising strike breakers by forcing Italian workmen to accept work at less than award rates of pay'. The secretary of the Matteotti Club went on to claim that the consuls had given advice to unemployed Italians to accept the jobs of Australians while the latter were on strike. 'Any Italian worker who disregards the advice', the letter added, 'is put on the list of anti-Fascists, and the Government of Italy advised, which leads to the persecution of any relatives or friends in Italy'.²⁴ In March, Schiassi extended his activities to New Zealand by nominating a sympathiser, Umberto Colonna, as New Zealand representative of the Anti-Fascist Concentration of Australasia. On May Day, Italian anti-Fascists paraded in red shirts along with all Labour organisations, carrying banners and posters condemning Fascism.²⁵

In 1930 there also occurred a most serious crisis within the anti-Fascist movement. Hit by the Depression, many were unable to subscribe to *La Riscossa* or to pay the membership fee of one guinea to the Matteotti Club. Rivalries between Carmagnola and Bertazzon, as well as economic difficulties, split the anti-Fascist movement and Bertazzon was expelled from the Matteotti Club. On 14 June 1930, he started to publish a fortnightly paper, *L'Avanguardia Libertaria* (The Libertarian Vanguard), which was of strong Anarchist inspiration. Meanwhile Carmagnola was still issuing *La Riscossa* in Melbourne. During this period the two groups viciously attacked each other. By the end of 1931 the split had reached its logical conclusion: *La Riscossa* ceased publishing and the Matteotti Club was compelled to close; Carmagnola returned to North Queensland where he found work on a tobacco farm and still continued to publish *La Riscossa* from Ingham, although in a reduced format.

In Ingham, Carmagnola continued to harass Fascism and Fascists. On 26 December 1931, he and two other anti-Fascists, Tom Saviane and Mario Tardiani, abused and assaulted the Italian consul of Townsville, Mario Melano, beat him and ripped from his coat his Fascist Party badge. Later on the same day, a group of forty anti-Fascists stormed the hotel where Melano was staying and threw a glass at him. Carmagnola and Tardiani were charged with unlawful assault but were acquitted by a jury.²⁶

However, the anti-Fascist movement in Australia virtually disappeared as an effective, aggressive force. To mark its doom, the Commonwealth Government in 1932 took steps 'for the suppression of the two publications printed in Australia in the Italian language under the titles of *La Riscossa* and *L'Avanguardia Libertaria*'.²⁷ In addition, Schiassi's Anti-Fascist Concentration faded away. Incidentally, the difficulties met by Schiassi in his attempt to secure Australian citizenship in this period are a good indication of the way in which the cause of Italian anti-Fascism

was regarded adversely by the Commonwealth Government before World War II. Schiassi applied for naturalization on 12 April 1929, precisely at the end of the required five years of residence. Although the Commonwealth Investigation Branch could find 'no reason why the application should not be granted', a decision was deferred for a year on the ground that 'Schiassi is regarded in his own country as a Communist, and if he still holds Communistic views, his naturalization would be debarred under the Minister's general ruling'.²⁸

When Labor came to power in October 1929, Schiassi thought that he had a better chance, especially as he was a personal friend of A.E. Green, the new Minister for Defence. But Schiassi's pleas were unsuccessful, until February 1931 when he was granted naturalization. The decision had been delayed because the Government was influenced by the slanders circulated by the Fascist authorities. For anti-Fascists, naturalization was a guarantee of protection against any request for their deportation made by the Italian Government. It was ironic that Fascists in Australia, who had no need for such protection, gained naturalization without difficulty. Thus when Remigio Budica, one of the most violent Fascists in Melbourne (he assaulted Schiassi on one occasion), applied for naturalization he got it in less than a month, thanks to Italian consular support and a sympathetic report by the Commonwealth Investigation Branch.²⁹ Evidently, double standards applied—the Fascists were representatives of law and order, of stability.³⁰

Depression and The 1930s

Whereas the driving force in the Italian anti-Fascist movement in Australia was provided by Anarchists in the 1920s, that role was taken up by Communists in the following decade. This was partly because of a change in policy by the Communist International, which now recognised Fascism rather than social democracy as the real enemy. Communists worked towards alliances with other left-wing bodies.

How great was Communist influence in the Italian community in Australia? An ex-Fascist businessman, G. Vaccari, estimated that in 1940 there were about 200 Communists, 150 of whom were nominal only. According to Vaccari the great majority of Italians, about 123,000, were 'satisfied with the Australian democratic liberal order and therefore refractory to autocratic totalitarian system. Not belonging to extreme parties in Australia . . . Sympathising with the legitimate national aspirations of Italy such as independence, order, tolerance, welfare, but disinterested in Italian politics'.³¹

Although this statement underplays the extent to which Italians had succumbed to Fascist propaganda, Vaccari's figures on Communist strength are basically correct. Yet the Communist contribution to the anti-Fascist struggle was crucial in the 1930s, in the face of economic depression and the collapse of the press and club established in the previous decade. Apart from the Communists and their supporters, opposition to Fascism became once again a personal act of defiance, of emotional

and sometimes violent reaction to specific issues or events. One of the few of these outbursts worth remembering occurred in Ingham in December 1934, during a visit by the Italian Consul-General, Marquis Agostino Ferrante. Propaganda leaflets against his coming were printed, and the Consul-General had to be granted police protection for the duration of his stay in Ingham.³²

In that same year, a group of people established in Melbourne the Gruppo Italiano contro la Guerra (Italian Group against War). Outstanding figures in this project were Luigi Stellato, a Calabrian fruit and vegetable market agent, who held strong pacifist ideas, and Matteo Cristofaro, who became the leader of Italian Communists in Australia. Cristofaro had migrated to Australia in 1927, and in 1931 he joined the Communist Party of Australia.

To Cristofaro and others, Communism was the most attractive single force of the Australian political system, not only because the Communist Party of Australia in the past had often supported the anti-Fascist movement and lent to Italian anti-Fascists its facilities, such as printing presses and halls, but mainly because it was the brother-party of the Italian Communist Party in exile, the only Italian party which survived the Fascist totalitarian onslaught. In the 1930s it still operated an efficient network of underground contacts all over the world, through which anti-Fascist propaganda was distributed to the masses of Italian migrants and political refugees abroad. To Italian anti-Fascists in Australia, Communism was attractive for what it offered: an organization to rely upon; political guidance; a source of information on the development of international anti-Fascist movements and activities; a wealth of readily available propaganda material in the Italian language.

The Gruppo Italiano contro la Guerra was involved in all activities promoted by the Communist Party of Australia and other left wing organisations: when Egon Irwin Kisch, a Czech writer delegate to the Second National Congress Against War and Fascism in Melbourne, was refused permission to disembark by the Lyons Government in 1934, and later on was arrested for illegally entering the Commonwealth, the Gruppo Italiano assembled almost three hundred Italians who took part, along with members of the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism, in anti-government demonstrations. By the end of 1934 the Gruppo included approximately forty militants, a dozen of whom were also members of the Communist Party of Australia. The Communists, by far the most active in the Gruppo, met under the ideological supervision of Ralph Gibson, then a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, who was present at their weekly meetings and counselled on the political line which they ought to follow: the motions carried by the Communists were then put forward to the whole membership of the Gruppo Italiano and discussed.³³

Propaganda material received from Communist sources overseas supplemented the scarce anti-Fascist literature printed in Australia. After the disappearance of the two Anarchist newspapers, the anti-Fascist

movement was unable to publish another newspaper, although the Gruppo Italiano printed some leaflets and small pamphlets. The Gruppo also tried to influence the situation in Italy itself. In 1936 the Italian Communist Party began forwarding to members of the Gruppo Italiano, lists of addresses of people living in Italy to whom they should mail, anonymously, propaganda material. The Party hoped to avoid in this way the strict censorship affecting all mail and printed literature coming to Italy from countries such as France, Belgium, the United States or Argentina, which hosted large communities of exiles. About sixty to eighty names were supplied to members of the Gruppo Italiano and Cristofaro sent propaganda material, mainly newsprint on rice paper.

The Italo-Ethiopian conflict boosted the political activities of the Gruppo Italiano. So, too, did the Spanish Civil War. The Gruppo took part in huge rallies at the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne along with other organisations of a People's Front character, and was in close contact with many of them, such as the Victorian Council against War and Fascism; the Spanish Relief Committee, chaired by Nettie Palmer (who was a personal friend of Cristofaro); and the Council for Civil Liberties, whose secretary, Brian Fitzpatrick, was a friend of Schiassi.

By 1938, those members of the Gruppo Italiano who were also members of the Communist Party of Australia numbered about thirty-five. Also, non-Communist members and sympathisers of the Group had increased considerably. Many felt the need to have their own club, where they might meet socially and where politics could be discussed. So the Casa d'Italia (House of Italy) was established in Carlton in 1938. Membership of this club was formally denied to people 'having political opinions incompatible with the principles of social progress' (i.e. Fascists).³⁴

In the final analysis, the Gruppo Italiano did not achieve spectacular results in the 1930s. It was unable to create a mass movement and its strength was limited to Melbourne and a few Victorian country towns. It was unable to overcome the severe obstacles which faced all the anti-Fascist groups in the interwar period. In the first place, anti-Fascism had the disability of fighting a doctrine which ascribed to itself the right of being the sole dispenser of patriotism. Fascism appealed quite successfully to the unsophisticated, scarcely educated migrants, who were linguistically and socially insecure and isolated, targets of discrimination and abuses. Italians abroad in general, and in Australia in particular, fell for the Fascist rhetoric, the ceremonies, the speeches, the trappings of the regime, and its aggressive and bombastic style. Italian anti-Fascists, much as they explained that they 'were not, as the Fascists claimed, anti-Italian, but were more Italian than them, only we were for an Italy as Mazzini and Garibaldi wanted it, for a Republic Italy', were not believed.³⁵

Secondly, anti-Fascism had to fight a subtle, efficient and well financed Fascist propaganda machine. The Fascist consuls, the secretaries of the Fascist branches, the Italian press, the clubs, all diligently carried out the Italian Government's policy towards anti-Fascism: Italians were warned not to finance anti-Fascist newspapers such as *Il Risveglio*,³⁶ and the anti-

Fascists were threatened with being deported back to Italy. Anti-Fascists were denied membership of the 'national' clubs such as the Club Cavour in Melbourne, because of their 'anti-national' activities.³⁷ Also they were discriminated against by the Italian employers and businessmen who, having to rely on the good offices of the Italian authorities for obtaining licences to import goods from Italy, were forced by the circumstances to declare their allegiance to Fascism.³⁸ With the passing of the years, the effects of Fascist propaganda became obvious: many anti-Fascists, frustrated by years of activities that seemed to be leading nowhere, deserted the anti-Fascist ranks, and Fascist propaganda reaped its fruits even among its opponents.

The third factor which hampered the progress of the anti-Fascist cause was the narrow base of support which the movement enjoyed. Outside general links with the Communist Party of Australia and the Trade Union movement, Italian anti-Fascism here was politically isolated, both nationally and internally. Allegations made by the Fascist authorities that the enemies of Fascism in Australia were acting under orders from international Communism could not be corroborated by any evidence. Also, due to their inability to work harmoniously together and to present a united front against Fascism, the Italian anti-Fascists scattered their meagre intellectual and financial resources and weakened the political effectiveness of their activity. Furthermore, the anti-Fascists had to face a hostile public opinion: their internationalism, their class consciousness, the advocacy of violence, alienated and isolated them from the majority of the population. They 'were believed to be what the Fascists and the Consuls said we were: Communists, troublemakers, dangerous people; instead, we were only poor immigrants who came here to improve our conditions'.³⁹ Anti-Fascists were frequently warned, 'in their interest, to abstain from provoking further public disorders and from bringing into Australia their political wrangles and national divisions'.⁴⁰ Missing completely all ideological implications and historical realities, Australians believed that the place for Italians to settle their quarrels was Rome, and not Sydney or Melbourne. Finally, an important obstacle met by the opposition to Fascism was the absence in its ranks—with the exception of Schiassi—of an educated elite, of an intellectual leadership. In Australia there were no 'fuorusciti' as in France or the United States who could be at the fore of an articulated and informed opposition; instead, here, the character of Italian anti-Fascism was brisk, rough and sharp tongued.

The Italia Libera Movement⁴¹

Italy's entry into World War II marked the end of the Gruppo Italiano and the Casa d'Italia. Their members were as uncertain about their future as the Fascists were, and the club was closed by the police in September 1940 (three months after the Communist Party of Australia had been declared an illegal organisation by the Menzies Government). Nevertheless, Cristofaro persisted in the struggle. By 1941 he had formed

the Movimento Antifascista Italiano, which carried on the same sort of activities as the defunct Gruppo. Carmagnola wrote to Cristofaro that his leaflets 'got on the nerves of the local Italian greengrocers at the market'.⁴² Yet the response of the Italians who had not been interned was very poor. In Australian society, there was widespread distrust of all Italians, whatever political ideas they professed, and irrespective of how long they had lived in Australia. They were suspected of being potential, if not actual, fifth columnists. Consequently, Italians tended to shun political discussions.

In 1942, many anti-Fascists recognised the necessity for a radically new approach on their part. They realised, for instance, that they had committed a great mistake in neglecting to obtain the support, or at least the interest, of the Australian people for their cause. They had restricted their activities to the Italian community and failed to establish a liaison with Australian politicians. Anti-Fascism had never become a pressure group. Thus, the Australian Government and the politicians had been approached only by the Italian consuls and by pro-Fascist businessmen.

Further, it was realised that it was necessary to attract to the anti-Fascist ranks not only the Italians who had been and were opposed to Fascism because of its totalitarian philosophy, but also those who in the past had been the victims of Fascist propaganda, and were now ready to support the Allied cause and the creation of a new, democratic Italian state. The policy of confrontation carried out for twenty years had to give way to a policy of persuasion. With these ideas in mind, the Movimento Italia Libera (Free Italy Movement) was founded in 1943, with Schiassi as its chairman. A concerted effort was made to secure the support of distinguished Australians and a letter was sent to the Australian Attorney-General, Dr Evatt, requesting official permission to work amongst Italians in aid of the Allied war effort. The letter stressed the fact that the Movement was being sponsored by eighteen prominent Australians. The Attorney-General's Department immediately agreed to allow the Movement to operate as requested.⁴³

One of its first tasks was to seek the release of all anti-Fascists from the internment camps. The Movement corresponded with a large number of internees and in many instances was able to make successful representations on their behalf to the Federal Government. The Government was asked to change the classification of anti-Fascist Italians from 'Enemy Aliens' to 'Friendly Aliens'. Besides this, Italia Libera protested against the discrimination perpetrated against Italians conscripted in the Allied Works Council, since they were treated and paid worse than Australian workers and their civil rights were not respected. Also, the Movement pressed the Commonwealth to allow all naturalized anti-Fascist Italians to serve in the armed forces against the Axis.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding the inevitable failures, Italia Libera succeeded in obtaining the release of many anti-Fascists, some of whom were Jewish refugees who had escaped from Italy after the 1938 racial laws. They

joined the Movement and became its intellectual leaders. Claudio Alcorso, a textile engineer, soon became the political and financial mentor of the anti-Fascist movement. He had left Italy on 1 September 1938 and gone to England where he attended a post-graduate course at the London School of Economics; in March 1939 he migrated to Australia. At the outbreak of the war, he was interned and sent to the South Australian camp of Loveday. Here he frequently showed his anti-Fascist feelings, most notably on 28 October 1941, when he and other Italians went out to work in defiance of the 'holiday' proclaimed by the Fascist leaders of the camp to commemorate the March on Rome.

The contacts with Italian internees at the end of 1942, and during the first half of 1943, were instrumental in the creation of a solid infrastructure for the Movement. Indeed, after its official birth, Italia Libera expanded considerably all over Australia. In New South Wales its rapid growth was, to a large extent, due to the excellent work carried out by its Secretary and old-time anti-Fascist, Tom Saviane. During the first year of activity in New South Wales, the Movement opened five branches—at Griffith, Leeton, on the South Coast, in Broken Hill and in Canberra. The Movement grew rapidly also in other parts of Australia. Branches were opened at Brisbane and Ingham in Queensland; at Perth in Western Australia; at Morgan, Renmark and Port Augusta in South Australia; at Melbourne, Shepparton, Tatura, Geelong, Silvan, and in the Gippsland district in Victoria. On 29 March 1944 Massimo Montagnana reported to the Central Committee that the national membership of the Movement was 1,500.

The leaders of Italia Libera tried hard to make their presence felt with regard to the conduct of Italian affairs in Australia. Huge donations were made to the Liberty Loans launched by the Australian Government: Schiassi was proud to mention to Evatt that Italians had contributed fifty thousand pounds to the First Liberty Loan Campaign.⁴⁵ In July 1943, Montagnana asked for the Federal Government's permission to print a monthly newspaper, but it was not granted. In July 1944 another application was filed. This time the application was successful, not in virtue of the arguments put forward by Schiassi in support, but because the Security Service believed that, by allowing the several factions co-existing in the Movement to have a public outlet for their political discussions, it would tighten its control over the Communist minority and the more extreme elements.⁴⁶ The first issue of the newspaper, called *Il Risveglio* (The Awakening), appeared in November 1944, although bulletins of the same name had been issued since August 1944. The newspaper was sold fortnightly and lasted for many years until 1956, when it was closed down. The main aim of the newspaper was to win Italian public opinion for the anti-Fascist cause. *Il Risveglio* failed to achieve this goal. At the peak of its fame, it reached only five per cent of the Italian migrants and its impact on the Italian community was slight.

Moreover, Italia Libera was not successful in many other respects. It did not become a mass party, since it was not able to reach the Catholic

masses or the masses influenced by Fascist propaganda. It failed to win recognition from the Australian Government, as the sole spokesman of the Italian community, and did not exploit to the utmost its political opportunities because of its internal disunity. There were political and organisational disputes between the Sydney and Melbourne centres. The progress of Italia Libera was hindered by other factors besides its own mistakes and human weaknesses. The war years did not destroy the social and political infrastructure of the Italian community. Although the most rabid Fascists were interned, other people, who had supported Fascism for twenty years but had been more restrained in their public life, were still holding positions of influence. Now, as twenty years before, they were ready to dump an uncomfortable ideological baggage; while in the 'twenties they sold Liberalism for Fascism, in 1943 they traded Fascism for Democracy.

The most remarkable representative of this group was Vaccari who, amongst other things, had publicly expressed his support for the Fascist aggression against Ethiopia.⁴⁷ When World War II broke out, Vaccari was not interned; instead, he became the protege of the other institution which from the outset was strenuously opposed to Italia Libera, the Catholic Church. Archbishop Mannix, and the Jesuit directly responsible to him for affairs concerning the Italian community, Father Ugo Modotti, immediately saw that the new anti-Fascist movement was determined to win the allegiance of Italian Catholics, and was undermining the political and moral authority of the Church. Their opposition, of course, was not solely an expression of pro-Fascist tendencies, but to some extent also an expression of anti-Communist fears. A few months after the creation of Italia Libera, Mannix held a rally, on 12 September 1943, at the Cathedral Hall, Fitzroy, to launch a Relief Fund for Italy and to explain what were the duties of Catholics in the existing political situation. Mannix declared that 'Mussolini is the greatest man living today. His will go down in history as the greatest government Italy has ever had. The cultural, educational civilization created by him, Italy and the world will always admire and hold it as the greatest in the history of the globe'.⁴⁸ But the *pièce de résistance* was the speech by the federal Minister for Information, A.A. Calwell. He had previously attended and given his support to anti-Fascist meetings, but he now took a completely unexpected stand. 'I say', he uncompromisingly stated, 'that those who have been associated with Italia Libera, . . . are not rendering any service to the Italian community by maintaining that body in existence'. The last speaker was G. Vaccari.

After this public declaration of war on Italia Libera, Archbishop Mannix adopted more devious methods of political intrigue. On 13 September 1943, he wrote to Prime Minister Curtin asking him to appoint an Italian as an accredited liaison officer between the Government and the Italian community. Curtin accepted Mannix's proposal, and the name of G. Vaccari was suggested to the Prime Minister for consideration. The Security Service investigated Vaccari's past and advised the Prime

Minister that 'Vaccari is *persona grata* with Security Brigadier Simpson. Major Brown knows him well'.⁴⁹ On 26 November 1943, Vaccari was appointed Unofficial Italian Liaison Officer in Australia. The appointment was a severe blow to Italia Libera, because it meant that the Government had granted to Vaccari unofficial recognition as the sole spokesman for Italian affairs in Australia, a more or less *de facto* consular position.

In December 1943, Italia Libera sent a strong letter of protest because 'the Commonwealth Government has accorded official recognition to one who has always been and still is a Fascist',⁵⁰ and two months later Dr Evatt withdrew the authorisation which had been given to Vaccari to make representations in relation to members of the Italian community.⁵¹ But if Vaccari was the secular weapon in the arsenal of the Catholic Church, there also was a clerical one, no less efficient, in the person of Father Ugo Modotti. In August 1944 Modotti launched a new newspaper, *L'Angelo della Famiglia* (The Angel of the Family) from whose columns Italians were warned to beware the anti-Fascists who were described as atheist traitors of their fatherland. The editorial in the first issue made clear the unequivocal opposition of the Church to Italia Libera. At the same time, attempts were made to stop the publication of *Il Risveglio* by accusing its editor of picking out and publishing 'all anti-Catholic and anti-monarchical matter in order to disseminate Communist theories'. In short, in 1944-45 Modotti adopted the same policy which Consul-General Grossardi had carried out in 1926-28; that of branding all anti-Fascists as Communists and of setting up an effective propaganda machine. However, this time the campaign of denigration failed; the Government knew that neither the editors of *Il Risveglio* nor the leadership of Italia Libera were Communist. However, by the end of World War II, Alcorso, the editor of *Il Risveglio*, had to admit Italia Libera's goal to become a mass movement had failed. The Catholics had been reluctant to accept its overtures and the Fascists were certainly not prepared to join such a left-wing organisation, not even after February 1945, when Alcorso accepted the sponsorship of people who had been in sympathy with Mussolini's Government, such as Sir Raphael Cilento, President of the Dante Alighieri Society in Brisbane during the Fascist period. Alcorso was ready to go a long way on the road of compromise in order to gain widespread support.

The lowering of the standards of ideological purity upset many anti-Fascists who, aware that the Movement had failed to grow, notwithstanding Alcorso's last-hour exercises of political pragmatism, became estranged from it. Also, Italia Libera was not able to obtain recognition from the Commonwealth as the sole representative of the democratic aspirations of the Italian community. Canberra never consulted Schiassi or Alcorso on any problem. Besides, Italia Libera's efforts to draw the Australian people's attention to the anti-Fascist contribution to the Allied cause, both here and in Italy, achieved only a very limited success. Many Australian organisations and the press continued in their attacks against Italians in general, without giving consideration to the fact that

some of them were anti-Fascists. Although the censor had instruction not to allow the publication of the word 'dago', this epithet was used on several occasions. When *Il Risveglio* appeared, *Smith's Weekly*, in an article entitled 'Another Wop Newspaper', advocated its banning, reminding the readers of *Smith's* successful fight to ban the supplement in Italian which the Queensland *Worker* printed 'for Dago members of the A.W.U.'.⁵²

In the end, Italia Libera's main policies failed. Alcorso's hopes to create a mass movement were frustrated by the apathy and the political illiteracy of the Italian masses, and by the xenophobic malaise of most Australians. Yet Italia Libera was not a complete failure, since some of its policies had a lasting effect. The Movement gave to all Italians the opportunity to exercise a distinct political choice and, to those who took it, a feeling of pride in contributing to the liberation of their country. It freed many of them from the internment camps, and fought against the conformism, the bigotry and the interested opportunism of many others. Australians were urged to realise that Italians were not just a mass of stereotyped foreigners, but were human beings who cherished strong political beliefs, and who were ready to fight even their own people in order to uphold their right to social justice and political democracy. It is difficult to measure to what extent Italian anti-Fascism was successful in these areas. Yet all available evidence substantiates the claim that between 1943 and 1945, Italia Libera made a real contribution towards creating a climate of political détente between the Italian community and the Australian people. An indication of its success in this particular area is given by the fact that Italian migrants after World War I, in which Italy fought as an ally of Australia, were met only with barely concealed contempt, open hostility and discrimination; yet after World War II, when Fascist Italy was an enemy of Australia, Italian migrants found more respect and consideration than ever for their social and political problems.

NOTES

- 1 *Italo-Australian*, 3 May 1924. For the first section of this essay, see also G. Cresciani, 'The Italian Resistance to Fascism in Australia: 1922-1940', *Teaching History* (July 1973).
- 2 While the boarding houses were the exclusive meeting point for anti-Fascist working class Italians, the supporters of Fascism (the employees of the Lloyd Sabauda Shipping Agency, of the Italian newspaper, the businessmen, traders, greengrocers and in general the members of the Italian Establishment) congregated in clubs like the 'Circolo Isole Eolie' and the 'Club Italia' in Sydney, or the 'Club Cavour' in Melbourne.
- 3 Australian Archives, CRS, A446, item 57/67255, Grossardi to Bruce, 19 September 1927.
- 4 Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Series VII, vol. II, Doc. 71, Romano Avezzana to Mussolini, 6 June 1923.
- 5 *Italo-Australian*, 14 March 1925.
- 6 Interview with F. Carmagnola, 18 September 1971.
- 7 *Italo-Australian*, 14 March 1925.
- 8 CRS, A 446, item 57/67255, Grossardi to Bruce, 19 September 1927.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 CRS, A 446, item 57/67255, NSW Premier to Bruce, 3 November 1927.
- 11 CRS, A 446, item 57/67255, Bruce to Grossardi, 14 October 1927.
- 12 CRS, A 446, item 57/67255, Grossardi to Bruce, 2 December 1927, and Attorney-General to Prime Minister, 16 April 1928.

- 13 *Italo-Australian*, 28 September 1927.
- 14 *Il Risveglio*, 1 September 1927.
- 15 Interview with T. Saviane, 7 November 1971.
- 16 *Italo-Australian*, 5 October 1927.
- 17 CRS, A 445, item 232/4/12, External Affairs Opinion No. 9.
- 18 CRS, A 1606, item SC C5/1, Grossardi to Strahan, 1 December 1926.
- 19 CRS, A 446, item 57/67255, Grossardi to Bruce, 2 December 1927.
- 20 *Italo-Australian*, 2 March 1929.
- 21 *Argus*, 29 October 1929; also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1929.
- 22 *Italo-Australian*, 2 November 1929.
- 23 *ibid.*, 25 January 1930.
- 24 *Argus*, 1 March 1930.
- 25 *Italo-Australian*, 17 May 1930.
- 26 *Brisbane Courier*, 14 January, 12 and 13 February 1932.
- 27 CRS, A 445, item 232/4/12, Postmaster General to Prime Minister, 10 November 1932.
- 28 CRS, AI, item 31/721, Attorney General's to Home Affairs, 22 April 1929, and Department of Home and Territories, Memorandum No.29/3939, 30 April 1929. Actually, Schiassi was never a Communist.
- 29 CRS, AI, item 28/1049, consul Melano certificate, 18 January 1928, and Attorney General's to Department of Home and Territories, 24 January 1928.
- 30 A parallel may be noted in the refusal of naturalization, on political grounds, to a number of left wing Greeks and Cypriots in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. See Kenneth Buckley, 'ASIO and Civil Liberties', *Meanjin Quarterly* 32, 4 (December 1973), p.474.
- 31 CRS, A989, item 455/7/2, Vaccari to Prime Minister of Italy, 7 August 1944.
- 32 *Worker's Weekly*, 21 December 1934.
- 33 Interviews with Cristofaro, 1973-4.
- 34 Statute of the club, in Stellato papers, held by the author.
- 35 Interview with T. Saviane.
- 36 *Italo-Australian*, 27 June 1927.
- 37 *ibid.*, 16 November 1929.
- 38 Anti-Fascists were not accepted as cane cutters in the gangs hired by Italian cane farmers (interview with T. Saviane).
- 39 Interview with F. Carmagnola.
- 40 *Italo-Australian*, 28 March 1925.
- 41 For an expanded version of this section, see G. Cresciani, 'The Second Awakening: The Italia Libera Movement', *Labour History* 30 (May 1976).
- 42 Carmagnola to Cristofaro, 13 November 1941, in Cristofaro papers, held by the author.
- 43 Cristofaro papers, A.R. Chisholm to Cristofaro, 14 February 1943.
- 44 CRS, A989, item 455/7/2, Italia Libera to External Affairs, 28 June 1943.
- 45 CRS, A446, item 57/67255, Schiassi to Evatt, 18 July 1944.
- 46 W.B. Simpson, Director-General of Security, declared: 'I consider that the proposed publication would assist this Service to keep a check on any undesirable or subversive elements which may endeavour to influence the policy of the Movement'. (CRS, A446, item 57/67255, Security Service to External Affairs, 3 August 1944).
- 47 *Il Giornale Italiano*, 10 July 1935.
- 48 Cristofaro papers, Minutes of the meeting, 1943 file.
- 49 CRS, A1608, item AA 19/1/1, Mannix to Curtin, 13 September 1943, and handwritten note by Curtin.
- 50 *ibid.*, Italia Libera to Prime Minister, 8 December 1943.
- 51 CRS, A989, item 40/40, External Affairs note, signed by Evatt.
- 52 *Smith's Weekly*, 3 March 1945.