

“Growing through the brick floor”

The story of a migrant family from a woman's perspective

Post-war mass migration from non-English speaking European countries is nearly 50 years old.

The migrants of those years are now totally integrated and part of the Australian social landscape. Their presence covers nearly one third of the continent's history since free white settlement began.

The transplant of impoverished, but culturally rich, inventive and determined people, to a strange and alien land, laid the foundations to the Australian economic “miracle” of the 50s and 60s.

But this was achieved through enormous personal sacrifice, in the face of official indifference and often hostility. It was the “swim or sink” approach to receiving immigrants, the “fodder” for a booming industrial sector. It was the harshest environment for newcomers since the Chinese were hounded from the Australian goldfields in the second part of the 19th century.

Diana Ruzzene Grollo, in her book “Growing Through the Brick Floor” tells the story of her own and her family's experiences as migrants to Australia in the early 1950s. She offers a rare woman's insight on issues, situations, the callous insensitivity of authorities and even the Church to the human traumas unfolding before their eyes.

The migration experience is related against a comprehensive historical, geographical and cultural backdrop of the Veneto region where the author's roots are deeply embedded, stirring strong emotions of love and affection for the land and its people.

Ruzzene Grollo's story spans a lifetime and is anything but a rags-to-riches story. It starts with the recollections of a shy and frightened seven-year-old girl, proficient only in Venetian dialect, thrown into a fundamentalist Catholic education system that was totally insensitive and reluctant to embrace any influence which threatened to “taint” its flock.

It continues with the experience of back-breaking work in factories from the age of 14 and into adulthood amid heart-rending personal and family dramas.

The heroine of the story is the author's mother Maria, whose vision and wisdom inspires her children to improve themselves and not to accept their “factory fodder” status.

The story is essentially about the Ruzzene family and the desire to record it for her children arose while the author was a mature student at La Trobe University in the early 90s.



The author: Diana Ruzzene Grollo

Later she decided to share her innermost feelings and experiences of those years because they were virtually identical to those of countless other migrant women. More importantly their struggle represented a triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Historian Professor Robert Pascoe, dean of the Arts Faculty at Victoria University of Technology, says Ruzzene-Grollo's story is the authentic voice of the migrant female.

“No other Italian woman coming to Australia since the war has told us as much as Diana Ruzzene in this book... what it was really like to be an Italo-Australian woman in the 1950s and 1960s.”

Professor Pascoe says these women were vilified by racial taunts, repressed by the Church, exploited by sweat-box factory owners while carrying “the emotional burden of their families and to endure childbirth and the rest of the women's lot, in this strange land.”

“Growing Through the Brick Floor”
by Diana Ruzzene Grollo

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