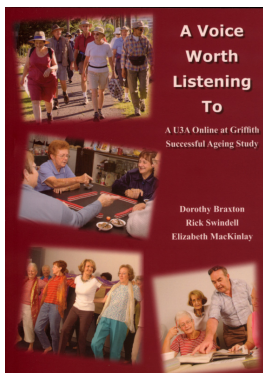


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## **An extraordinary Australian remains ‘a migrant’ at heart**

There’s one thing most migrants will tell you: no matter how long they might live in an adopted country, they never forget their place of birth. For some, those ties to their native country become even more important as they grow older.

Even those who were born in Australia or New Zealand of migrant parentage can still feel strongly about their ethnic background. Biology may be a lottery but there’s something innate about people’s need to explore the origins of their DNA. And, as many older people are quick to say, their cultural ties have always strongly influenced their lives in one way or another.

For example, Rosina O’Brien, of Brisbane, was born in Bungawalbyn, a small town in New South Wales, but when asked about her background this 93-year old woman emphatically declares, ‘I’m an Australian but it’s pure Italian blood running through my veins.’ Like many older people, Rose, as she is more often known, has traced her family history and still loves it when she can garner extra bits of information from different people she meets. She loves to tell people how her grandparents were recruited from Italy with promises of a Pacific paradise and then found themselves in a veritable hell hole. ‘You see, my grandparents were farmers in northern Italy,’ she explains. ‘They were caught up in that infamous Pacific scam – the one the French Marquis de Rays was responsible for. A lot’s been written about it. That led to my grandparents leaving Italy to sail to a remote place called Port Breton in New Ireland in search of a better life, only to discover the whole endeavour was built on a lie.’

Rose was referring to the infamous incident that occurred during early European colonisation of the Pacific. It’s a period in Papua New Guinea’s history that she remains intensely interested in, if for no other reason than that, in the course of time, it led to her birth in Australia when otherwise it would almost certainly have happened in Italy. Many died in this remote place, others went down with fever, while some who tried to escape by reaching the island of Buka made an easy meal for the local inhabitants.

Eventually Rose’s grandparents and their young son, Vincenzo Bazzo, reached safety on the neighbouring island of New Britain and were among those who were eventually rescued and taken to Sydney. ‘They then settled in an area that became known as Little Italy,’ she said.

Another child, Marina Pezzutti, who was born on the voyage, also survived the ordeal and years later she and Vincenzo would marry in

Australia, and eventually Rose was born.

'I grew up in both Bungawalbyn and Pomona in Queensland,' she said. 'I lived in an Italian family but in an English-speaking country and I soon became bilingual.' Asked if she still spoke Italian, she laughed and quickly responded, '*Come sta?*' then admitted that today her language skills were a bit rusty.

'I went to the local primary school,' she said. 'That meant walking three miles to school but first I had to help milk the cows. Then, after I walked home, I had to work on the farm again.' It was the beginning of a work ethic that persists to this day.

Rose was a good student, learning to recite the 32 verses of Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, a feat she can still accomplish today. There was no opportunity to go on to high school, let alone to tertiary studies, so she contented herself by taking several different jobs before she eventually married her husband, Charles O'Brien.

Charles would later join the army, getting his commission as a captain in the Military Police. He was serving in PNG at the end of the war and was then sent on to Japan with the occupation forces. 'After a year or so, we were informed families were to be allowed to join their men, so the children and I lived there for three years. Our daughter, Angela, in fact, was born in Japan.'

Rose has always had an unquenched thirst for learning so, not surprisingly, she explored what she could of the Japanese culture and history, interests she retains to this day. Until recently, she hosted many Japanese visitors travelling to Brisbane. And yes, she learned that language and, like her Italian, she can still 'get by' in Japanese.

In Rose's time, unless it was for economical necessity, it was not considered 'proper' for married women to be in the workforce, especially if they had a family. So, while her five children, including twins, were growing up, she started doing voluntary work and has been doing it ever since. Recently, she was rewarded with an OAM for her tireless efforts with first the kids' school tuck shop, then the Country Women's Association, Meals on Wheels, as a hospital volunteer, and in other fields of endeavour. 'I'm very proud of my award,' she said. For all that, in her 'younger' days she still longed for something more so, at age 70, she bought a private post office at Fruitgrove in Brisbane. 'It was wonderful,' she said. 'You can do anything at 70 and for the first time in my married life I had my own money. Charles always gave me what I needed for the household so it wasn't that I didn't have money. But it did mean that I had financial independence. That was important to me.'

Rose loved that period of her life but finally decided, at 78, to 'retire' and spend more time with her husband. 'For a while I wished I hadn't, because Charles spent a lot of his time at his computer and reading

anyway and I felt my staying home hadn't made much difference to him after all,' she said.

However, it was having time on her hands that led to her spending most weekdays with Meals on Wheels, not on the receiving end but working as a volunteer driver and arranging rosters. She saw that task as much more than just delivering food to her clients. It gave them a chance to have some face-to-face contact with another human being.

'Some spend 23 hours and 50 minutes alone each day. You want to stop and spend more time with them but then you know others are waiting and you have to get through your round in the allotted time,' she said.

In the middle of 2003 Rose gave up her driver's licence, which brought about some unwelcome changes in her life. She feels the loss of independence and, although she gets subsidised taxis to go shopping, she can't any longer do her meals on wheels. Instead, she has continued working two days a week at the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital as a volunteer, cooking in the kitchen. It means taking taxis, so 'volunteering costs' but, she said, it's worth it for what she sees as 'making a contribution' and having the company of her friends there. 'We make food to sell in the canteen,' she explained, 'and we give the profits to the hospital. Recently we donated a million dollars to them for new equipment.'

Why still be a volunteer at 93? 'Sometimes I don't know how I'll last the day,' she admits. 'You're on your feet for a couple of hours at a time. A few times now I think, "Do I really want to get up and go?" but then I know I do. It keeps me alive.'

Looking back over the latter part of her life, Rose believes she's handled the 'age thing' well but she can see that each decade has brought about its own changes. 'At one stage I started to feel inferior. That was when my children all had university degrees and I had only gone to primary school. When grandchildren started arriving, I felt needed again. Then there was the time I had my post office. That was good. But since the grandchildren have grown up, my self-image is dented again, so the voluntary works helps with getting over that. At 80 I started to realise I was getting too old to do many of the things I'd been used to doing but I still had my work. And I still had my church. I've always been a Catholic and it means a lot to me.'

In 1991 Rose's husband died and that required a huge adaptation after so many years of having someone alongside her. 'Life was suddenly very different from what it had been at 70,' she said, 'Now I just want one of my family to ring me every morning to make sure I'm still alive. My father lived to be 94, so I feel I have time yet but it would be good to get that morning call. The family still wants me to go on holidays to see them but it's not so easy to do that now. I have a hearing problem and they think I'm too old to have an opinion. They

tend to talk among themselves and exclude me. Not deliberately. It just happens.'

Rose wants to be involved because she still has opinions on a lot of issues. She has always had a strong interest in politics and speaks out when she gets the opportunity. She believes older people should be consulted more because younger decision-makers can't empathise with what it's like to be older, especially those in their 80s and 90s. 'They might think they know, but they don't really understand.' She said she'd enjoy having five minutes with the Prime Minister or Premier Beattie. 'I'd start by telling them they should be providing more nursing homes or places where people who need assistance can get whatever help they need. I still live alone and manage to get up and down my stairs with considerable ease, but I respect that others aren't so fortunate. And I'd also tell them that there should be more places provided for *couples* in nursing homes. The last thing two people want when one or both has to have such care is to be separated from their partner after living together, perhaps for 60 years or so. Most nursing homes seem only to offer single accommodation. The cost of such provision shouldn't be a factor. It's what's right that should count.' Meantime, Rose isn't sitting around waiting 'to drop off her perch'. She was looking forward to attending a family reunion at Little Italy near Woodburn with some of her children and some of her other relations from both sides of the family, and other people who are also descendants of those original settlers who survived the New Ireland experience.

You can tell, talking to her, just how much that historical background keeps resurfacing, even though it wasn't so much in her own direct life. In that, she is like so many of her generation. It's not that they're living in the past, just that the past is important because of how it relates to their present way of life.

Apart from her hospital work, Rose continues to do crosswords to keep her brain 'sharp'. She also loves writing poetry and recently published some of her work in a book called *Reflections*. And she still has one challenge to conquer. 'I want to write romantic fiction,' she said. 'Mills and Boon stuff. I'm going to do it, you know.'

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## **We need to nudge the neurones**

Older people’s greatest fear is becoming dependent on others. As discussed elsewhere in this publication, exercise is an effective way of preventing or delaying physical decline. The good news is that mental exercise can also do wonders in reversing or delaying mental decline. The Seattle Longitudinal Study, which has continued since 1956, studied the cognitive development of 500 randomly selected people aged from their early 20s to their late 60s, at entry to the study. As might have been anticipated, the study found that some age-related decline in mental ability in later life is almost inevitable. (It would be most unusual to find an 80-year-old who is as physically fit as was the case at age 60; the same holds true for mental ability.) The amount our mental ability slips in later life depends on a number of things, many of which are under our control. Some of these choices include

### **• Education**

Well-educated people develop more problem-solving skills than less educated people. One possible explanation for the beneficial effects of education is that the brain becomes ‘hard-wired’ in early life and additional education strengthens this circuitry. An alternative explanation is that education encourages a pattern of intellectual activity, and in better-educated people this pattern persists through life. Yet another explanation is that better educated people build up a lot of ‘reserve’ memory. Therefore, capacity lost through ageing is not as obvious as it is in those with little education and low reserves. Regardless of the explanation, after formal studies are completed, continuing mental stimulation is essential.

### **• Social networks**

People with strong social networks have more opportunities for sharing mentally stimulating activities than those who are socially isolated. Unfortunately, many older people often lack mental stimulation because their network of friends disappears.

### **• Seeking more demanding activities**

Playing bridge or studying something new is better than playing bingo. Other studies show that mental ability is not exclusively down to genetics. Studies of large numbers of twins, some of whom were separated and adopted, show that only about half our mental ability is down to the genetic lottery. Lifestyle choices have a strong effect on our ability to improve our mental functioning.

What can we do if our cognitive function has slipped? Memory loss among healthy older people is reversible with training. In one study,

people were asked to recall as many words as possible after being given a long list of random words. After training and practice, older people more than tripled their word recall and outperformed young people without training, although young people did better after training. It seems that older men and women can improve enough to offset about 20 years of memory loss.

The message is clear – use it or lose it. Joining intellectually demanding groups like U3A has clear advantages. The activities are mentally challenging; education is a socially and mentally invigorating activity; and mixing with new groups of like-minded people will encourage new social networks and involvement in novel learning experiences.

R. Swindell

**Read more**

The Seattle Longitudinal Study. – <http://geron.psu.edu/sls/>  
Rowe, J., and Kahn, R. (1999). *Successful aging*. New York: Random House. (Chapter 8: Maintaining and enhancing mental function in old age.)