Da Massa di Faicchio all'Egitto all'Australia Inviato da Ivo Cofrancesco 07/29/07 Ultimo aggiornamento 07/30/07 This is what Ivo calls also "An abbreviated story of Tullio Cofrancesco", his father, told by Ivo himself, as from his personal memories and what her parents told him... A beautiful story of a Cofrancesco family moving around the world, in three different continents, from Italy to Egypt to Australia, looking for a better life for themselves and their sons... From Massa di Faicchio to Egypt to Australia An abbreviated story of Tullio Cofrancescoby Ivan "Ivo" Cofrancesco My father Tullio Cofrancesco was born on the 31st of August 1909 in the village of Massa di Faicchio in the Province of Benevento Italy. He was the fourth child of Silvestro and Maria Giovanna Cofrancesco, my father hardly ever spoke to me about his early childhood as it seemed to cause him pain, his mother died along with the twins she was carrying giving birth to them, he was five years old. The little I do know of his early recollections is that as a boy he acted as a shepherd for his father’s sheep and goats, his father re married shortly after his mother died to Concetta Di Paolo and immediately had children with her. Tullio resented his stepmother and they did not get on, it appears that Concetta made him sleep with the animals when he got very sick in order not to infect her own children, on another occasion when they were arguing Concetta made some disparaging remarks about his mother and he took to her with a spade and then ran away afraid he would be getting another beating from his father, he was eight years old. His father Silvestro was frantic and could not find him, Tullio was hiding in his married sister’s place, it was only after Silvestro was made to promise not to harm him that his sister Rafaela told him where to find him, she also told him why Tullio took to his stepmother with a spade, that night I am told it was Concetta who unfortunately received a beating. From what I have been told by my father’s step brothers and sisters is that Silvestro was a hard working man of sober habits and did not gamble but when times were hard he was inclined to take it out on his wife and children. Times were tough and frustrating, the family was broke, the money that Silvestro had earned on his many trips to the United States was quickly dissipated as his land returned him little and he had taken his sister to court over an inheritance of land in Fontanavechia and lost. It was obvious that life could not continue in this manner, a lifeline for the family came in the form of a Michaela Cofrancesco, Tullio’s Aunty (his mother’s sister); it appears Michaela had moved to Egypt with her French Army officer lover and opened a bar in Alexandria. Upon hearing of the family’s plight, Michaela offered to take her sister’s three youngest children to Egypt, even then Silvestro played hard ball with her and she had to pay him 1000 Italian lire to take them, in those days that kind of money paid for food for the family for a couple of months. Michaela Cofrancesco arranged passports to be issued and clothing for Tullio, his sister Teolinda (aka Minichella) and his older brother Domenico and they departed from the port of Brindisi Italy in 1919 headed for Alexandria Egypt; I am told my father cried, he was nine years old. Michaela raised and educated her sister’s children as her own as she was childless, again I don’t know too much about her as my father spoke very little about his early childhood, but I was told by my mother that she was not held in high esteem as she owned a bar and that bar was frequented by foreign soldiers such as the English and the wild Australians etc. I do recollect a story my father told me about those wild Australian soldiers after world war one, it appears three Australian soldiers caused a riot, after having too many drinks, they stole a donkey from an Arab and proceeded to take turns to ride the beast in the streets of Alexandria each time one of them fell off another would jump on. tempers finally snapped when all three tried to ride the beast together and the donkey collapsed, this caused a minor Arab revolt who took the dismounted the soldiers and proceeded to beat them with sticks, the constabulary finally arrived to disperse the rioters and rescue the soldiers. As much as they were troublesome the Australians were generally well liked as their antics were often hilarious rather than nasty, their binge drinking and larrikin behavior were and are still legendary, Growing up my father Tullio, as well as learning to read and write, taught himself to speak and write in Arabic, French, English and Italian, as well as learned to speak in Greek and Spanish. He also learned to play the piano, piano accordion, mandolin and the drums, all by ear, these disciplines no doubt acquired in his aunt’s bar. Still in his mid teens Tullio worked for the Egyptian Gas and Electric Company and after a while started supervising the laying of gas pipes and wiring. Life for Europeans in Egypt was good and generally care free, many Italians had good paying jobs, the vast majority of Egyptians were poorly educated and were employed as laborers, domestics or farm hands. On Sundays Tullio played the drums in a band at the “Casa D’Italia” a family club where Italians would assemble with their families to pass away the time, socialize, dance, be introduced to a prospective partner all under the strict supervision of parents that would ensure total respect and decorum. My father Tullio was enjoying life as a single man, his sister was of the opinion that Tullio was enjoying it too much and strongly suggested that he should marry and that she had found the perfect girl for him, her name was Ida Cafarella the daughter of Teodore Cafarella and Teresa Botta a much respected Italian family from Alexandria Egypt. My father told me that in the beginning he was not keen as he had never seen or met the girl and he was having a good time. Tullio’s brother Domenico who had seen this girl from afar suggested that if Tullio was not keen he was prepared to put himself forward as a prospective suitor. So Tullio did what other young men did in those days and went past my mother’s place and checked her out. Ida Cafarella did have previous suitors but she did not like any of them, one in particular her father thought lazy and she rejected him and another who was persistent to the point of serenading my mother under her balcony, in desperation her mother warned this young man if he persisted she would throw the night bedpan at him and he gave up. There are numerous stories of how courtship was carried out in those wonderful innocent days; I always found them humorous and moving. And so it was that on a Sunday my mother Ida and her younger sisters, Giovanna and Gilda went to the club with their parents, Ida did not know that Tullio played in the band and had never set eyes on him before... The story goes that Ida and her sisters were looking at the band and were poking fun at the drummer because his frantic drumming actions were causing his curly hair to fall in front of his face, standing nearby was Tullio’s sister who informed Ida that the drummer was the man she was going to meet and asked her if she thought he was suitable, she looked and said he was acceptable. My mother told me this story so many times, she thought he was so handsome and when she met him she thought him so well spoken and polite and so the courtship began under the constant supervision of her parents and her brothers and sisters, I am told that one night as Tullio was going home and for a moment they were alone he kissed my mother Ida on the forehead and got busted by her father who gave him a lecture on propriety. Tullio was very much loved by Ida’s younger sisters, it seemed he always made time for them and he was probably the only other male they had contact with apart from their brothers, in all the years my grandmother Teresa Botta was alive Tullio was always the favorite by far in his mother in law’s eyes even after Ida’s sisters married and the son in laws endeavored to win grandma’s heart she never wavered in her affection for my father, it was a source of amusement as they would buy my grandmother a present and ask the question …who is your favorite now? The answer was always Tullio. Tullio Cofrancesco married Ida Cafarella on the 12th of February 1930 at the church of Santa Caterina in Alexandria Egypt they were both 20 years old. Children soon followed my sister Giovanna Maria was born the 21st of July 1931 and my brother Silvestro the 16th of September 1932 both were named after their paternal grandparents. With the birth of these children, Tullio was promoted to the accounts department at the Gas and Electric Co. and life was good and prosperous and my mother acquired jewels and other valuables. My second sister Adelaide was born in this prosperity on the 2nd of December 1936 but dark clouds were looming and war was in the making and when Italy joined the war in 1940, Tullio being an Italian citizen was interned along with other Italian men of military age. Tullio spent nearly four years as a prisoner in Egypt living in tents guarded by various allied troops, some Italians were killed when they protested about the conditions and Indian guards sprayed the tents with machine gun fire, my father Tullio was missed by inches as he ducked for cover. These Indian guards were eventually removed and replaced by British soldiers who had a more humane way of dealing with prisoners of war, Tullio was appointed cook and had to learn how to be one, stories abound as to what he used in order to provide fellow prisoners with adequate food. My mother Ida Cafarella visited my father on allocated visiting days during the years he was interned, she brought him food and cigarettes all scarce commodities during the war. Ida sold all her jewels and all the family’s valuables during the war to insure that the family lacked for nothing. This photograph is of a visit to Tullio in camp. Pictured are my mother Ida, my father Tullio, my eldest sister Giovanna and the younger sister Adelaide. My father Tullio could have got out of internment a lot sooner had he been willing to forego his allegiance to Italy but he refused. As long as Tullio lived he never considered himself anything else but Italian. At the end of the war my father got employment with the British army stores “NAFI” his reasonable command of English and Fluent French oral and written came to his advantage. I, Ivo “a.k.a. Ivan” was born on the 21st of July 1945, I was called my father’s last “sforzo” effort, the youngest by far of my family. With his job at the Nafi came prosperity again, he was well liked and regarded there and he only ceased his employment when the British left Egypt. After the war we lived in Cairo, Port Said and finally moved to Alexandria after the British left. On his arrival at Alexandria Tullio opened a household goods store with his brothers’ in law but it was not profitable enough to maintain 3 families and it was sold. My father got employment with the biggest department store in Alexandria called “Sidnaui” he was in charge of the kitchen ware department, he earned a wage plus a share of commission of the sales and life was good, we had a servant and a washerwoman who came once a week. My brother Silvestro was employed and took his pay packet home unopened as my mother insisted and as was the custom. Life as I remember it in my early childhood was good, my father used to come home for a siesta during hot summer months, his annual holidays consisted of two weeks on half days where he would be home by lunch times and two weeks of full holidays, good times spent by relatives’ cabin rented by the beach, of swimming to Nefertiti island and diving for urchins, family gatherings and Sunday lunches that went on forever. On the beach circa 1952/53 pictured are left to right my brother Silvestro, sister Giovanna a family friend my sister Adelaide in front left to right my cousins Roberto, his sister Marisa and me Ivo. Things started to slide when Gamal Abdel Nasser took power and started to nationalize industries so that by 1954 the big commissions and bonuses that were paid to my father were just about completely removed as people no longer visited Egypt or the locals spent up big, so we said tearful goodbyes to our loyal servant and mother did our washing herself. Europeans especially the French and English were discriminated against and to a lesser extent Italians were as well, my father was of the opinion that eventually we would have to migrate elsewhere, discussions were held about Brazil where my mother’s brother lived, the United States and Australia. During his internment my father had a friend who kept in touch that migrated to Australia and he thought it a beautiful young country with lots of opportunity and they were desperate for European migrants. My father Tullio decided that we should send my brother Silvestro to check Australia and arranged for him to be sponsored by his friend. And so it was that in 1955 we waved Silvestro my brother goodbye as he boarded the ship in Alexandria, the family spent all the money clothing him and it was thanks to an uncle that Silvestro had some small amount of spending money for the 4 week long trip. By 1956 things really worsened in Egypt and with the advent of the Canal war, Alexandria was bombarded for 3 days and with darkened windows we prayed for safety, it was a very scary and scarring time, and as some over zealous Egyptians were beginning to worry many Italians, the Italian consulate decided that if authorities in Egypt could not guarantee the safety of Italian citizens they would repatriate those who wished to depart. My father Tullio decided the best possible and safe outcome was to go back to the country of his birth and so it was that in February 1957 we departed Egyptians shores headed for Naples, we left with barely our clothes and little money as the Egyptian government would only allow a small amount of cash and goods to leave the country, Italy accepted us back as refugees. So in March 1957 we boarded “MV Esperia” a 3000 ton ship from Alexandria and reached Siracusa 3 days later, we visited the weeping Madonna on the short stopover and marveled at how clear the sea water was that you could see the sand at the bottom, we re boarded and headed to Naples where buses we waiting to take us to our refugee camp. Italians from Egypt were in the main a snotty nosed lot used to the spoils of decades of dominance in the country that hosted them, they were quickly brought back to earth as the bus took us through the bombarded and poor section of Naples whose people hung their washing between buildings much the same way as the poorest of Egyptians did. When we arrived at the camp which was a building specifically built for the poor and disadvantaged of the city that some amongst our group debated if they had made the right decision in leaving Egypt, Tullio never doubted that decision and suggested that we should be grateful that Italy had given us food and shelter. While in Naples, Giovanna my father’s stepsister who lived and worked there invited us to her employer’s home for dinner “she worked as a nanny and domestic”; those people greeted us so well and welcomed us with open arms. It was an opportune time while in Naples that my father Tullio decided that he should visit his sister in Massa di Faicchio the place of his birth, so he hired a car with a driver to take us there, the driver could not locate the address but my father Tullio after all those years was able to direct the driver straight to the house where he was born. We stayed a couple of hours in Massa and Tullio waved his sister and my aunty Raffaela and her family goodbye and headed back to Naples. After one week our family and others were relocated to another refugee camp in Bologna as the government believed there was greater work opportunity for the men to find work and settle although the great majority of those refugees were looking to migrate elsewhere. There were close to a hundred refugees that went to Bologna, families and single men, families were allocated a room depending on the number of individuals in the family, some even had two or three families living in a dormitory styled room, mobile partitions was the only privacy afforded all single men were in one big dormitory. Although living conditions were tight and showers and toilets were shared, the floor on the building we lived in was kept spotlessly clean and we were well fed by the Italian Government, I would dare say that in 1957 we probably ate better than most hard working Italians. We lived in Bologna for the preceding 10 months and in that time my father’s only work was as an interpreter at the Bologna trade fair for three weeks, the other young men who lived with us had little better luck and only worked occasionally as laborers or fruit and grape pickers. My brother Silvestro occasionally sent us some money but mostly we lived on whatever we had which was virtually nothing, Tullio was waiting anxiously for word that our application to migrate to Australia was accepted. During all our time in Italy, Tullio kept the family together and shared all the meager resources that he had with us. During our time in Bologna my father Tullio’s stepbrothers and a sister came to visit us, Tullio had never seen some of his stepbrothers, he was so happy to have the opportunity to finally meet them and they did come and what wonderful human beings they were because although at that time still poor they made the time and effort to meet him and us his family. After about eight months in Italy we received word that our application to migrate was accepted subject to a medical examination, Tullio contacted the relevant authorities and finally had our medicals, our only worry being my mother Ida who had developed Diabetes in Italy. Anxiously again we waited for an answer after a most thorough medical examination and thankfully as my mother Ida had a manageable type of diabetes that did not require insulin injections our application to migrate was accepted. Getting the good news, acceptance at last. Here we are in Bologna receiving the letter that we had been waiting for telling us our application to migrate has been accepted. Ten months of living on the poverty line was nearly over, you may notice that although we had no money we don’t appear to be under nourished thanks to the goodwill and generosity of the Italians and their government. We packed our bags, hugged the rest of the refugees who themselves were waiting on news, by this time also some of the single young men had found some employment and had left the camp. We boarded the train in Bologna and had one more duty my father wanted to attend and we stopped in Rome so Tullio could visit and say goodbye to his other sister Teolinda “aka Minichella” this we did and thoroughly enjoyed our day that included a visit to the “Trevi” fountain into which we dropped a coin. Its was full of excitement and anticipation as we boarded the train in Rome on our final leg to Genova where our ship “MV Castel Felice” was waiting to take us to our final destination of Sydney Australia. Tullio presented our tickets, passports, visas etc. and along with some 500 other migrants boarded the ship for the four week trip, our first stop along the way was Athens in Greece where we had to pick some very important cargo, 800 lovely Greek women all married by proxy by some very lonely Greek men in Melbourne and Sydney, most of these ladies came from the various country villages of Greece, they looked bewildered as they did not speak any Italian nor had they seen or been on a ship before, some refused to sleep in their cabin as they were afraid, the crew showed enormous compassion and understanding for these people and as the trip progressed some indeed did go and sleep in their cabins rather than the decks. The aspiration ship “Castel Felice” taking migrants to their new land Departing Athens we headed for the Suez Canal which had recently been re opened, we were greeted by our relatives from Egypt who had hired a boat and paid some money for them to come and say hello. From Suez we stopped in Aden to pick up some water which we were advised not to drink, the trip was mostly uneventful although Tullio got seasick and my mother more so and she generally spent the trip in her cabin, the food was good and a lot more nutritious that what we had experienced in Italy……..meat was on the menu. Our time on the ship was mostly good, we attended some functions such as dances, the cinema, they held some English classes which my sister Adelaide and I attended, Tullio my father did not need to as he could speak English reasonably well and we used the ship’s swimming pool extensively in the warm hemisphere, we crossed the equator and were in the mid Indian Ocean when the weather changed and we experienced some rough seas. We reached Fremantle our first port of call in Australia in the middle of the night and I can remember thinking what a bleak place it was, as it was totally deserted apart from the very few people who were disembarking and we were taking fresh water on board. From Fremantle we crossed the great Australian bite and the sea was rough and we arrived in Melbourne, Fremantle was bleak in the middle of the night but Melbourne was Alive with color and thousands of people greeting the vast majority of disembarking Greek brides, we noticed some looks of elation and looks of disappointment as men and women who married by proxy finally got to meet, some brides were reluctant to leave the ship, no doubt some bridegrooms wished some stayed on board. The next port of Call was Sydney our new home, I still don’t know why but in Sydney the greeting public were behind wire gates whereas in Melbourne it was so much more open, so the greeting in Sydney was not as colorful as that of Melbourne but we were happy to finally see Silvestro my brother who we had not seen for nearly three years, he was there with some friends to greet us and take us to our rented home in Leichhardt a suburb of Sydney were most Italians went to live when they first arrived. The house we rented was very small but the family was broke and we had to settle for whatever could be afforded, Tullio did not hesitate in taking the first job opportunity that came along and started work as a Store man for a company called Commonwealth industrial gases, it was a job far below his expertise but he settled we needed the money, my sister Adelaide also was able to find employment, so we had 3 people earning money in the family and things got progressively much better, we had plenty, I restarted my education after virtually a two year gap at a Catholic school some two suburbs away. It was close to twelve months when we looked and liked a property in the Sydney suburb of West Ryde, its was far away in those days from the centre of the city but it was a nice big house on a large block of land and close to bus and railway transport. Tullio liked the house and with the big block he soon had us two boys clear the land and plant tomatos, beans, carrots etc. a country boy is always a country boy. Life was good again the family was re united and there was sufficient funds to buy furniture pay the mortgage and so on, after a short few years my sister Adelaide met someone as did my brother Silvestro and finally my older sister Giovanna. In ensuing years Tullio arranged for the migration of his brother in law Vincent Scarfi and his wife Gilda (my mother’s sister) and their family, his other sister in law Giovanna’s children “the Sidraks” My brother Silvestro Cofrancesco wed Olga Debono pictured here accompanied by my sister Adelaide and her husband Rosario Trovato. Over the years motor vehicles were bought and transport was not too much of an issue, Tullio took my mother shopping on Saturdays and some Sundays we either had family gatherings or went on picnics by Sydney harbor magnificent foreshores. Tullio on some Sundays would do the cooking using the skills acquired as the designated cook in the concentration camp as a prisoner of war, his cooking was very creative and the dishes he would put together were magnificent. On a Sunday get family gathering back row Peter Nyistor the husband of my sister Giovanna, my mother Ida Cafarella, my father Tullio Cofrancesco, middle row are Rosario Trovato husband of Adelaide Cofrancesco carrying his son Sebastian, my sister Adelaide, Olga Debono wife of my brother Silvestro and me Ivo, front row are Sarina Trovato , my brother Silvestro with his first born Tullio Cofrancesco. Taking the photo was my sister Giovanna As my brother and sisters married and moved out, I remained at home and was very well looked after by my mother, my father Tullio had got me a job with Commonwealth industrial Gases the company that he worked for and generally traveled together to and from work and it was during that time that he shared a little of his life, but I was young and brash and not to keen to listen, something I have regretted a lot since, but I do remember that he was most insistent that I should not change my surname which at the time was giving me some grief, he told me to be proud of it, that it had history and that I should never bring shame to it especially by changing it in any way. My father Tullio and I shared a little time together and had a few laughs along the way, some things that are best left to father and son talks and not recorded but are fondly remembered by this writer. I met and married Carmel Maree Deece on the 8th of November 1969 and moved out of home, something I really did not want to do but being newlyweds I reluctantly agreed but it was obvious that my absence caused some financial difficulties and after 6 months moved back and we separated the back part of the house to give us some privacy. Things were traveling reasonably smoothly and my father Tullio was starting to relax a little and enjoy himself when on the 26th of November 1971 he died of a blood clot to the lungs he was just 62 years old, it was such a devastating blow to our family, our rock was gone. His funeral was attended by all his family and friends and an unbelievable number of work friends who filled the church and say goodbye. My mother Ida Cafarella, died 20 years later and there is not a day that went by that I can recall that she did not mention his name, she missed him terribly, the drummer whose hair fell in front of his face all those years back had made a very lasting impression. Tullio was a man of honor, he rarely had a bad word for anyone, he was loyal to his friends and loving to his family, he shared all he had with us, the sacrifices he made for us that include buying a bicycle for me during the most miserable of times are never forgotten. The memories I have is of a smiling happy man comfortable in the knowledge he did his duty willingly and fearlessly. I could write a whole lot more about Tullio Cofrancesco my father but thought it would be best just to record the most relevant parts of his all too short journey in this life.Thank you Dad for being such a good man. cofrancesco.net
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