

# The Fortunes of Fortunato

Lesley Syngé

Fortunato Stablum could not have been a happy man as he left the Broken Hill courthouse on the afternoon of 18 July, 1913. He'd lost a dispute about a possession – possibly one of the few he'd acquired after immigrating to Australia some eighteen months before. The magistrate dispensing justice for New South Wales had ordered him to surrender the item under dispute – a horsehair mattress – to his former landlady and to pay costs.

Mrs Soret, the keeper of the boarding-house he no longer lived in, successfully gave evidence against him with the help of her friend and housekeeper, Mrs Degoumois. Mrs Soret was that minute carrying off the mattress in triumph. Similarly, the court reporter was on his way to the office of the *Barrier Miner* with his story for the afternoon edition:

## THE LODGER'S MATTRESS

### A BOARDING-HOUSEKEEPER'S CLAIM

### AN AUSTRIAN'S ENGLISH

The trial boiled down to a battle between the word of the good French women of Broken Hill and the word of the Italians. The newspaper mentioned Austrians because Fortunato's place of birth, Rabbi, (pronounced Rah-bee), a valley in present day Trentino-Alto Adige was, until after the first world war, under Austro-Hungarian rule. Only when annexed by Italy in 1919 could the 'Austrians' call themselves Italian without confusion. Fortunato's English was so rudimentary that the magistrate depended on assistance from an Italian interpreter.

Stablum's deposition was followed by evidence from his two countrymen. The first Italian swore that he had sold Fortunato a horsehair mattress. The second was Fortunato's former roommate in Mrs Soret's boarding house but, since the interpreter had apparently been dismissed, the roommate was unable to contribute anything beyond, 'No understand.'

At midday, as the *Barrier Miner* reported, '... the hearing was adjourned ... to enable the mattress to be brought in.' At the sight of it, Mrs Soret said it was hers. And that was that.

For Fortunato, a miner with silver-lead-and-zinc dust collecting in his lungs, it must have been a winter of discontent. The monotonous red and grey soils of the remote mining town north of Adelaide and 700 miles west of Sydney must have been in stark contrast with his native Italy. He was an alpine man, born into summer pasture and deep winter snow close to the Austrian border. Now he was a man of the semi-desert and – a man without a mattress.

A strange story and a fine example of the sort of random facts that search engines like TROVE, the National Library of Australia's online portal, unearth about a man, long after he, and all the players, have turned to dust.

In 1982, I participated in a project, the aim of which was to produce a social history of the year 1938, to contribute to Australia's bi-centennial celebration. Hundreds of oral histories of 'ordinary' Australians were collected nationwide. I conducted three interviews. One subject lived in Rockhampton, one in Mount Morgan,

and one in Clermont. Violet May O'Keefe or 'Vi' was my Rockhampton interviewee. She had married a great-uncle of mine late in life (each was widowed and of the Roman Catholic faith) and she would boast, 'My father was Eye-tal-yin.'

I thought her the perfect subject and interviewed her on 11 May that year.

After posting my three cassette tapes away, the '1938 oral history project' disappeared from my radar. Recently I was pleased to locate all three interviews in the National Library of Australia's oral history and folklore collection. I asked for transcripts, confident of re-discovering what a significant contribution I'd made to Australian social history, only to suffer a private sheepishness: the interviews were stultifying in their plainness and full of stumbles. Had there been a prize for the worst interviews I'm sure mine would have won. Still, Aunt Vi's references to her Italian father made it the most interesting of the trio. She didn't name him once throughout the whole interview so I telephoned the family history buff to see if she knew anything more.

She did.

Fortunato Stablum, born in Rabbi in 1885, arrived in Australia 1911. I googled Rabbi while we chatted and located it north of Trento, the capital city of the province. I'd holidayed in the Northwest Italian Alps near the Swiss border; Aunt Vi's father was from the Central Alps near the border with Austria. I'd gotten within a couple of hour's drive from Trento by spending a day in Bergamo so the internet description of Trento as a sophisticated, elegant European city with an old quarter of medieval and Renaissance buildings, magnificent cathedrals, palaces, and piazzas was easy to picture. Aunt Vi's father suddenly felt more real.

Fortunato is no blood relation of mine. I've never seen a photograph of him and doubt I ever will, but documenting the lives of obscure Australians gives me a strange satisfaction so I decided to interrogate the interview I'd conducted with his daughter about her life in 1938, to construct a biography of the man. Then add whatever else I could find.

Vi was 60 when I put my tape recorder on her kitchen table. Records show that by the end of 1918, Fortunato was an underground copper miner in a steady job working for Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company in Queensland, and married to Edith Hoare, the butcher's daughter. Fortunato and Edith Stablum welcomed their first daughter, Violet May, into their family of two boys, in 1922. Aunt Vi described her family of origin this way:

*Violet May: My father, who came from Italy, worked his way up through Australia and came up to Mount Morgan. There he met and married my mother. I don't know a lot of his background 'cause in those days, being of a different nationality, you didn't speak much of your own country. As we grew older and asked, he used to say 'No. This is your country; this is my country.' Other than that ... we knew nothing. Only that he was the youngest of a large family, the youngest boy of seven. He did enter the seminary for a little while, but it wasn't his vocation. So he was sent out, to this country, sort of in disgrace. ... I think that's why he never kept contact with them [his Italian family]. ... In their days and times ... your parents chose a career for you. If you objected, well ... you're on your own. And he came out. He was about 28, I think, when he came out to Australia.*

For the best part of a decade, Mount Morgan was good to Fortunato Stablum. His in-laws, the Hoares, liked him and Edith, 15 years his junior, gave him a family to care for and belong to. Violet remembers the midwife visiting before the birth of her sister Rose in 1925.

*Violet May: Mum had her at home and the nurse used to come on horseback, riding side-saddle. ... We used to think it was marvellous – this lady coming in on a side-saddle, for Mum.*

Yet the children were told that storks brought the babies. Later they were told that they were found under cabbages in the garden. From Vi's point of view, it was a 'fairly strict household' of 'staunch Roman Catholics'.

*Violet May: I was third eldest ... and being the eldest girl, well, in those days, you were just 'mum's hands'. You helped. You were reared up as a family, everybody was given a certain little job. You didn't argue about it, you knew your jobs and you fitted in and did them. That's how it always was ... . Even as I grew older and worked, I was always there with Mum. You came in from work and if there were babies to attend to, you automatically came in and had a look around. If there was a baby to be bathed and looked after, you did it. Or you did tea while mum did the baby.*

She remembered her Mount Morgan schooldays of boys and girls initially mixed in together before 'the girls went off to the convents and the boys ... to the Christian Brothers'.

*Violet May: The state school was on the corner and we were on the other. And we used to sing out to each other going to school, 'Catholic, Catholic, Catholic, ring the bell while the Protestants go to hell.' [It was] very good teaching and very strict. ... We learnt 'parrot fashion'. ... Our tables – we never, ever, forgot them.*

A major turning point in family life came in December 1927 when Vi was only 5 years old. After years of instability due to fires, strikes and closures, Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company went into liquidation. The economic crisis coincided with a health crisis – the dusts of Broken Hill and Mount Morgan mines had taken their toll on Fortunato's lungs and he was diagnosed with miners' phthisis, a workplace-induced lung disease widely called 'the miners disease'.

*Violet May: The mine closed down in Mount Morgan. Dad's health wasn't too good so Dad came down here [to Rockhampton some 30 kilometres north-east, in the Fitzroy River basin] to give us all better opportunities for work. He wasn't able to [find employment] because of his health. Of course, you got a pension. ... They called it 'the miners' phthisis' [pension] in those days. You got what they called 'state aid' for the children. The parents were paid, I think it was about five or ten shillings a week for each child. Your mother collected that. Your father collected 'the miners' phthisis' ... once a fortnight. ... it must have been [the] government [that paid the benefit] ... because it was the government building you always went, and collected it.*

Before he could collect the pension, Fortunato needed Australian citizenship. His application for naturalisation to the Home and Territories Department on 21 November 1927 is now filed in the National Archives of Australia and did much to enhance his biography-in-progress. The application for a Certificate of Naturalisation consisted of a two-page form accompanied by a statutory declaration and other evidence, addressed to His Excellency the Governor-General in Canberra.

In working-class towns like Mount Morgan, a sizeable number of people were illiterate; Fortunato, too, needed the assistance of the local Justice of the Peace who did the typing and witnessed the necessary signatures. Fortunato signed in jagged black ink, clearly a man unaccustomed to writing.

The first item in the bundle was evidence of obligatory newspaper notices. Each was clipped from Rockhampton newspapers, *The Morning Bulletin* and *The Evening News* which also sold in nearby Mount Morgan:

*I, Fortunato Amadio Stablum, of Italian Nationality born at Rabbi in the Province of Trento, Italy, and resident sixteen years in Australia, now residing in Ganter's Gully, Mount Morgan, Queensland, intend to apply for naturalisation under the Commonwealth Nationality Act, 1920–22.*

On the form itself, two Mount Morgan miners swore that he was of good character and the Justice of the Peace stated he was a person of 'good repute' with 'an adequate knowledge of the English language'.

The applicant's statutory declaration was even more revealing of the man. Born on 5 April 1885 to Italian parents. His father's name was Giuseppe. Fortunato had dark hair and brown eyes, a small scar on one lip and an eye that turned inwards because of an accident. Height 5 feet 6 inches. He sailed to Australia on the *Koenigin Luise*, a Norddeutscher Lloyd Steamer, disembarking in Port Adelaide in 1911. He worked in Broken Hill for three years and took up employment with Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company in 1914. The company was currently in liquidation. He was married to Edith. Four children were listed: Thomas 10, William 8, Violet 5, and Charlotte Rose 2. Under Thomas's name it was typed:

*My adopted child – illegitimate child of my wife before she married me – legally adopted.*

As an 'Alien Subject' he was required to register as such, and did so in Mount Morgan in 1916. Although all four children were Australian-born, their official status was that of offspring of a 'Registered Alien' so he requested their inclusion on the Certificate of Naturalisation. He was also required to state:

*During my time in residence in Australia I have not at any time offered my services to a nation at war with Great Britain, or taken any action detrimental to the interests of the British Empire.*

The application was sent off. Two months passed without response.

With Australia's population a mere 6.3 million, the political process was then a more personal one. Frank Forde was the Member for Capricornia in the House of Representatives and a minister in the Labor government and, on 18 January 1928, Fortunato went to the MP's Rockhampton office for advice.

Like Fortunato, Frank Forde was a practising Roman Catholic (one with an Irish background) and this may have encouraged the approach. Forde immediately despatched a letter declaring Stablum 'a good honest and trustworthy man' and asked the Home Secretary to expedite the matter.

The bureaucratic process continued, probably no faster nor slower than before.

A police report submitted 16 February 1928, by a constable in Mount Morgan, came next in the file. He vouched for the Italian's good character stating that there was 'no record against him here' and further that Stablum could 'read English but not write it', could understand it, 'and speak it well'. He further verified that during 'the war' the Italian hadn't shown himself, by act or speech, to be disaffected or disloyal to His Majesty the King.

The application was approved in early May and the same Mount Morgan Justice of the Peace summoned Fortunato to renounce his Italian nationality and his allegiance to the Kingdom of Italy. He swore to be 'faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth his heirs and successors'. The Renunciation of Nationality form was dispatched to Canberra. It was July 1928 when the Home and Territories Department posted the coveted certificate to Mount Morgan. Fortunato could now move his family of six Australians to Rockhampton, where he believed job opportunities for his children lay. He was 43. He had only seven more years to live.

Miners' phthisis, or silicosis, is a debilitating and deadly disease. When coal-miners contract it, it's called black lung disease because the normally pink lung tissue turns black. Boom mining towns of the twentieth century like Mount Morgan and Broken Hill were characterised by bands of brothers going down with this disease

together. Man by man, generation after generation. In twenty-first century Australia, workers who cut up stone for kitchen benches get it. A sufferer can expect lungs filled with mucus, coughing fits, weight loss and a long, slow demise. Fortunato Stablum had given sixteen years' worth of labour to the Australian mining industry; a major personal contribution to the nation's developing economy. As he contemplated who would provide for his family and much younger wife, we can imagine his fight to live as he moved his family of two boys and two girls to prosperous Rockhampton, built on Mount Morgan money.

The regional city had its consolations. Silent movies or 'picture shows' for a start. Vi was around 7 when her father took her to see Charlie Chaplin.

*Violet May: I remember Dad taking the sister [Rose] and I. It cost us five pence each. Yes, I still remember it ... in the old Wintergarden Theatre.*

There was also the well-appointed Rockhampton Botanic Gardens.

*Violet May: We used to go to the Gardens and places like that ... we used to pack up a picnic lunch, sandwiches ... on Sunday afternoon, mostly. The bands used to play in the Gardens in those days. ... You'd always walk. You didn't have transport .... all walked off and skipped along.*

Church was all-important. Perhaps surprising for a man who'd left an Italian seminary for a more worldly life. But perhaps not, if one imagines a drive to connect his two worlds – from seminarian to father of five. Five, because in 1930 another son, Daniel, was born.

*Violet May: Christmas was very religious ... religion, to our family, has always been our way of life. If we'd have taken God out of our life, we wouldn't have had the family life we have. We always say [with everything we do], it's with God's help and God's grace. [The week before Easter] was a very religious occasion. In our household, my dad ... went to church more so than Mum, I suppose because she had so many jobs to do. ... We all went to mass every [Sunday] morning ... and ... every day for the week of Easter.*

I daresay her father was praying for a miracle.

Once you know that Fortunato Stablum died at the end of 1935, my great-aunt's memories of the 1930s and 40s seem a little odd. Although her father was slowly dying, she speaks of family life as a seamless experience of 'togetherness' – until she married her first husband in 1947.

*Violet May: [We lived in] a low wooden home with big, open verandas ... a big home. ... There were two boys to a bedroom and two girls to a bedroom. ... you'd probably have one of the cots in the room with you ... a four-bedroomed house. ... Big kitchen areas and big dining areas ... the heart of the family. We [Rose and Vi] helped [our mother with cooking and cleaning]. ... Boys didn't have to do housework ... they'd help with the garden. You'd never think of asking your brothers to wipe up. ... One of us washed and wiped. ... We [sisters] did the washing. ... You used to boil your clothes outside ... in great big tubs. ... [It'd] take the two of us. ... If mum had the babies and didn't get a chance, when we came home from school, before we ... got undressed and did our homework, we automatically collected the washing. We ... [grew] all the vegetables for the household ... didn't go to a fruiterer ... everything for the house came from the garden.*

It would have been Fortunato's garden, something he could manage with damaged lungs. A connection, too, to his early life on a farm in the valley of Rabbi. I can imagine him standing in front of a row of cabbages with Tom, Bill, Vi and Rose to explain baby Daniel's arrival in 1930.

Vi said that the family ate the evening meal at five then listened to the seven o'clock news on the radio so there must have been plenty of time to hear the younger children's stories about their schooldays.

*Violet May: If we did wrong, we used to get a caning ... two smacks with a cane. And if you didn't learn your homework, they used to put you in the corner and call you dunce. The nuns used to have their lunch brought up from ... the convent. We [girls who collected the lunches from the convent kitchen] had to pass the state school ... we were, I suppose, about 12. [The container] ... used to have the three hot meals in it. [Had] to miss the state school boys or they'd run over and lift the lid and spit in it. They did that to us a couple of times. ... You'd have to ... say, 'Sister, you can't have the top meal. The boys spat in that.'*

Fortunato Stablum's Rockhampton years weren't limited to family, church, and vegetable garden. He enjoyed card games but was not a drinker. 'In my whole life, even at Christmastime, I've only ever seen my father take two glasses of beer,' Vi said. According to her, the family was very conscious of being working-class and her father was 'a great Labor man ... very much in Labor politics'.

*Violet May: Dad, Mum and us four elder ones ... we used to discuss it [politics]. ... Naturally, all us children were Labor. [We] used to say, 'Oh, they're the Nobbies on the hill' – they would've been ... a businessman or ... lawyer or something like that. ... A working person [in the neighbourhood] would always help out ... if the husband had to go to work and the mother was in hospital having a baby, my mother'd think nothing of minding her two or three children ... and she'd do likewise.*

Despite communion with fellow unionists – Mount Morgan and Broken Hill miners alike were unionised to a man – and his probable membership of the Australian Labor Party, Fortunato may have felt a loneliness that his older daughter missed.

*Violet May: We never learned any Italian from my father. ... I only ever heard him speak in his own tongue once. We were at a church celebration, and the bishop could speak fluent Italian. Once you spoke to Dad, you knew he was Italian by his accent and him and the bishop, well, they must have chatted on. He was really happy to find somebody of his own country to speak [with]. But what the conversation was about, I don't know, because I couldn't speak Italian. But that was the only occasion that he did.*

Edith Stablum must have found the early 1930s difficult. She became reliant on the eldest of the five children to add to her husband's invalid pension and the state aid payments for the younger ones. Tom and Bill had jobs by then and it became obvious that Vi would have to join the workforce too.

*Violet May: My family couldn't afford to send me to high school. So I went out to work. ... The younger ones in the family did [go to high school but] the older ones, we had to go out to work to help with the family. To rear the rest of the family coming on. My first job was in [Ashton's] Newsagency in Rockhampton, getting twelve shillings and sixpence [a week]. ... It bought us a terrible lot. We could buy a very good pair of shoes for five shillings.*

She and her brothers gave all their wages to their mother.

*Violet May: The whole lot. ... If you wanted a new frock, your mother bought it. If you wanted two shillings, which was a lot of money, your Mum gave you two shillings [when] you asked for it. You just took home your pay envelope and gave it to Mum. That's what everybody did then. ... Mum and Dad used to bank five shillings a week for us so when we were 18, we had ... twenty or thirty pounds ... our start in life. I worked [in Ashton's newsagency] for 18 months. And oh, it was lovely, because you met so many people. ... Different cross sections of life you'd meet. And all the different books ... and stamps and things like that.*

It may have taken her mind off her father's declining health. Or he may have already died. It's hard to tell. At some point the 'Dad' who banked five shillings a week from the pay packets must have been the five Stablum children's step-father, a man Vi made no mention of whatsoever.

Fortunato succumbed to lung disease around Christmas 1935. Born in 1885, he died at 50. The family he left behind consisted of wife Edith 35 and children: Tom 18, Bill 16, Vi 13, Rose 10, and Dan 5.

*Friends of the late FORTUNATO AMADIO STABLUM are respectfully invited to attend his Funeral, which will move from St Joseph's Cathedral, THIS (Friday) FORENOON, at 11 o'clock, for the North Rockhampton Cemetery. TUCKER & NANKIVELL, Undertakers.*

Fortunato must have belonged to the Independent Order of Oddfellows, a non-sectarian international fellowship that believed in the universal brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, because *The Morning Bulletin of 27 December 1935* also printed a notice for the members of the Loyal Livingstone Lodge:

*MEMBERS of the above Lodge are requested to assemble at the Oddfellows' Hall at 10.30 o'clock to attend the Funeral of our late Brother.*

One could let one's imagination run away, thinking on the man who lay dying. Did the pristine environment of his childhood in Val di Rabbi come often to his mind? An extreme environment of glaciers and landslides and raging rivers. Snow-capped mountain peaks and birch forests. Deer, hares, golden eagles; terraced vineyards and orchards. Church bells striking. Days of claustrophobic fog. Spring melt; the village water mill working overtime. The Stablum home: holy pictures on the walls, prayers to Our Lady of Caravaggio, the patron saint. A mother spinning wool, father Giuseppe carving wood and mending shoes. All seven children and parents sleeping together in one warm room. A village where everyone knows everything about one other.

A family so poor the boy Fortunato had to be sent to a seminary. At what age did he enter it and which one? Bressanone towards Brenner Pass on the border with Austria was within walking distance of his valley and a more likely choice than say, a seminary in distant Rome. *Seminario maggiore di Trento*, founded in the 16th century, was a possibility. Or Novacella. Did he encounter Giacomo Besadola (1847–1929), the most famous man to be born in the Trentino, nicknamed 'the mushroom priest' because of his study of fungi? Did he feel overawed by the seminary cathedral, decorated sumptuously for the glory of God with works of art dating back centuries, all incense and pomp and ceremony? Aunty Vi believed he lasted in a seminary for only 'a little while'.

There were many mining operations in the Trentino, as there are today: marble for church and palace floors, lead-zinc ore, and minerals such as analcime. Fortunato must have exchanged his clerical collar and cassock for the garb of a workingman. Broken Hill was not his first mining experience because he listed his occupation as miner in 1911 when boarding the *Koenigin Luise* in Genoa.

Given the dramatic effect Fortunato's death must have had on my interviewee – Vi's childhood cut short, her seven years of 'parrot fashion' learning over – I combed again through the interview in the wake of the funeral notice found on TROVE. It was interesting that she failed to pinpoint her father's death while emphasising her life as 'mum's hands', helping with baby after baby, when in fact her little brother Dan was already 5 years old.

I initially wondered if Aunty Vi had ever really thought about her father until I sat her down for the interview. I was meant to keep the focus on 1938 when she was 16, when she said she'd left the newsagency to help her mother. 'My mother was having another infant and I went home to manage the household.'

Violet May Stablum then found work in a steam laundry, a job that lasted through the years of the second world war, all the while giving her weekly wages to her mother, helping with the children until there were twelve of them, and she turned 26 and married. A childless marriage. In the jumble of work and babies and mass and picnics, Vi seemed intent on depicting family life as a Roman Catholic ideal, a sort of selfless domestic factory where 'Mum and Dad' reigned as head of a growing and devout household.

I returned again and again to the interview record when Vi told me she married at the age of 26, and says vaguely that they had 'lost' her father 'by that time'.

Lost him, indeed. Lost him a good 12 years before, when she was 13 and still at school.

I was at a loss to understand the scrambled timeframe. Her avoidance of mentioning that the 'infant' who arrived was the first of her step-siblings.

Because Violet May O'Keefe neither mentioned the actual death of her 'Eye-tal-yin' father nor her mother's remarriage, I'd assumed – from 1982 until 2020 when TROVE tossed me Fortunato Stablum's funeral notice – that Aunt Vi's pride in being from a family of 12 was a pride in being the oldest daughter of her father's 'tribe'.

Now I believe her disingenuousness about her father's death reveals an awkwardness that she could not face: Edith, mother of five, married Thomas Healy on 25 February 1936, two months after her Italian husband's death and, as registered in Births, Deaths and Marriages, her next seven children were his. A young widow of 35 probably needed to find a breadwinner as soon as possible, but tongues would have wagged. Edith may well have asked her 13-year-old to refrain from talking about it. Aunt Vi, unnerved by the authority of a tape recorder on her kitchen table, surely kept her word.

It gave me a jolt to find the name of Fortunato Stablum on TROVE at all, let alone read a ridiculous story about a fight over a mattress. I doubt the tale of imbroglia ever reached Mount Morgan. Had he needed to confess anything dodgy as the end approached? I suspect not. A further jolt was to meet Mrs Degoumois in the *Barrier Miner*. She testified that she helped out in the Soret boarding-house from time to time and had been with Mrs Soret on the day that she bought a horsehair mattress; yes, she knew that mattress. Her full name, as given to the magistrate, was Violet May Degoumois. I imagine Fortunato Stablum, standing glumly outside Broken Hill courthouse in New South Wales, cheering himself up with the ring of it.

And the rest – as they say – is history, a very patchy one, in this case. Enough, though, for us to know that the luckless fellow left the monotonous, arid expanses of Broken Hill to find better times with Mount Morgan Mining Company in Queensland. Enough for me to plan on seeing Val di Rabbi, said to be the most beautiful valley in the Trentino, on my next trip to Italy. Enough to say:

RIP in North Rockhampton Cemetery, Fortunato Amadio Stablum 1885–1935.