

CAPITAL CAFÉ*

By Helen Tasses

The Capital Café was the centre of migrant Wollongong for almost three decades. It was here that people came when they wanted to buy a house; to find a job; to get a translation; to have someone act as an interpreter; to get help from authorities; to organise migration papers for extended family members; to get a character reference; to find a guarantor; to eat a meal when they had no money.

The Capital Café was where people came to find a sense of community and as such it acted as a centre that eventually grew into some of the strong migrant communities we have in Wollongong today. It was where people came to just talk about their hardships in a new country or to argue politics endlessly amongst one another in their heartfelt need to understand why they ended up in a country that was so far away from what was once their home.

The Capital Café was in the forefront of bringing cultures together who all ate under the same roof. And for many patrons it was their first experience in eating garlic, drinking real cappuccinos, having chilli peppers in their hamburgers.

It was also where you saw prejudice openly displayed but where it was deflected with grace and dignity.

The Capital Café was a place with many faces for many people and its proprietors Tom and Zora Tasses always welcomed everyone into their restaurant with great warmth and gusto.

It was Tom who started the café in the late thirties. *When I first came to Australia I worked the eucalyptus trees around Canberra but as a child in Greece I learnt the shoe making trade. Once I had enough money I bought enough tools and materials to start my own shop in Braidwood. Unfortunately the climate there didn't suit me so I decided to move to Wollongong where I set up another shop at the bottom end of Crown Street. After a couple of years my health began to suffer from all the glues I was using. It was then I decided to move into the café business.*

At that time in Wollongong there were quite a few cafés about but I didn't let that worry me. I used to buy pies and cakes from Mr Guest's cake shop which was in that part of Crown St that is Wollongong mall. To me it seemed the best position for a café. Eventually I bought the lease and opened up the Capital Café. The premises were very old and needed a lot of work. As I made more money I started to renovate. I extended the entrance to the cafe first, then I replastered the walls, put down a new floor and eventually installed the café cubicles.

I remember going overseas on one occasion and bringing back huge black and white posters of the great movie stars of the time. These I hung on the walls of the café. A lot of ideas came from the American style of cafés. I had a neon sign at the end of the shop (which I think ended up at another café once we closed down the Capital in the early seventies) and loved having fresh flowers on the tables and at the entrance of the café. I changed the cubicles in the café twice and used ideas I got from my travels in America.

When I married Zora in 1950 I had about sixteen people working in the café, it was very successful in those early years. It provided us with enough money to help bring our extended families to Australia and to travel overseas regularly. We worked very hard and very long hours from early morning till midnight seven days a week but we had fun as well. We knew everybody in Wollongong, state and local politicians, the police, high commissioners, people from all walks of life. To this very day I bump into adults who remember me giving them free chocolate or milkshakes in the café when they were children, or their parents used to come and eat there once a week on a family outing.

By the time Tom married Zora the café was thriving. Zora met Tom in Sydney. *I came to Australia with my mother in the late 40s on the assisted passage*

scheme. My mother and I had spent six years in detention camps in the Middle East and our first port of call was Hobart. I felt like I had come to the end of the world.

I met Tom at a community dance in Sydney a couple of years later. I didn't know it at the time but he liked me and asked our mutual acquaintances about me. He hired a light aircraft one day and took me for a ride where he proposed to me. I said I would marry him and asked if he would help bring my family over from Europe.

We were able to do this as the Capital Café provided us with the means. I brought my brothers over, my cousins, Tom's sister and family. They all stayed in our home and worked in the café until they were able to establish themselves. It made such an important difference to our lives having our families in the same country and having the café made it all possible.

There are many stories to tell about the Capital Café, not only Tom and Zora's but the stories of people who would come there to eat and meet with friends or to find a new life in a new country. It was a crossroad of cultures and a very rich and exciting time for us all.

*As named by author of article, though crockery was marked Capitol Cafe. (Ed)