

Life in Italy

For centuries, Italy has been a land situated at the crossroads of contending cultural influences, including the effects of numerous foreign invasions. The fusing of foreign blood with that of native inhabitants began during prehistoric landings of people from east and west and continued with Greek colonizers who established cities from Naples to Sicily in the seventh century B.C. and who named the south of what is now Italy “Magna Grecia.” From the north, Germanic tribes used ancient roads and Alpine mountain passes to push into upper regions that still bear their names; the word for Italy’s Le Marche region comes from a monetary word for German currency, “the mark.” From the south, Arabs based in northern Africa conquered Sicily in the ninth century. The Sicilian town of Marsala still bears its Arabic name, “the harbor of Allah.” A German-Norman king, Emperor Frederick II, governed the region of Apulia in the thirteenth century. Young boys in the streets of Naples are still called “guaglióne,” Neapolitan for young lad, a word that arrived from France in the fourteenth century when French Angevins ruled the city.

By 1860, Italy resembled a collection of foreign-controlled regions rather than a country. The Kingdom of Lombardy-Veneto was part of the Austrian empire, which also ruled the duchy of Tuscany including Parma, Massa, Lucca, Piacenza, and Modena. A king of the House of Savoy ruled Piedmont and Sardinia while the middle region, the Papal States, fell under the jurisdiction of the Pope. The Spanish Bourbons ruled the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, a territory extending from below Rome to Sicily, the “Mezzogiorno,” a land that produced 80 percent of the Italians who came to the United States. When north and south joined in 1861, Italian society still retained remnants of its anachronistic system of lord and serf, which had evolved into wealthy “galantuomini,” the land-owning gentry of the old feudal aristocracy and capitalists, and “braccianti” and “contadini,” poor field workers and farmers.

In his book *The Man Farthest Down*, Booker T. Washington, who visited the sulphur mines and farms of Sicily in 1910, compared the southern Italian peasant to poor Blacks in the American South: “The Negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the colored farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is

incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population of Sicily.” For the majority of southern Italians of the lower classes in the late-nineteenth century, life was an endless cycle of grinding “*miseria*,” a “*stato d’animo*,” a psychological state conditioned by centuries of political oppression, economic hardship, and social alienation. Southern villages were squalid, backward places whose people lived in a closed society with little interaction with other parts of Italy. Only 2.5 percent of the population understood the Italian language and most people spoke regional dialects that were unintelligible in other parts of Italy. Formal education was reserved for a privileged few.

Giuseppe Garibaldi’s famous March of the Thousand in 1860 culminated in the defeat of the hated Bourbons and in the union of north and south into one state. Italy was declared a nation under King Victor Emmanuel. Shortly after the declaration, the Piedmontese prime minister, Marquis Massimo D’Azeglio said cynically, “We have made Italy, we have yet to make Italians.” The country’s euphoria over its new status faded quickly. “United Italy” imposed higher prices, high taxes, and introduced conscription. Northern industrialists, misunderstanding the south, imposed heavy taxes on the peasantry to promote the north’s industry. Mules, considered the trucks of poor farmers, were taxed, while cows and horses of wealthy landowners were not. In the view of poor southerners, Italy’s political leaders squandered the chance to provide equity for its poorer citizens. Armed insurrections against the northern occupation of the south by southern “*briganti*” led to bloody reprisals and mass executions by the army of the newly formed Piedmont-based government. The failure of the *Risorgimento* led to the greatest migration of any country in world history. At the port of Naples, Italians leaving on ships for America expressed their disenchantment with Italy. As they boarded, they were heard saying, “Put your shovels down and let someone else pick them up.”

“BORN IN THE HAYSTACKS OF LE MARCHE”

Josie DeBenedet spoke at her kitchen table on June 6, 1999. She proudly pointed to the tiled walls of her kitchen that had been installed by her late husband, Odorico, a highly-skilled Venetian craftsman.

Like my father said, he was the oldest of sixteen children — my adopted father — he was the first one. So the mother was pregnant and he was born on July 6, 1874. The hay at that time was ripe, you had to pick it and take in the hay before it would rain. If it rained then the hay would be spoiled. And his mother started labor pains. So he was born in the haystack. Then the mother wrapped him up in a blanket and somebody brought him home. And she continued working — the poor woman — to hurry up to get the hay in. On a Saturday night they used to go dancing. They would never wear shoes. And they would all meet in the town of Fano, they called it *La Via Croce*, the street of the big cross, and that’s where everybody would meet. And they would take off their shoes before the dance and then coming home they would put their shoes on over there because they were always barefooted. And they would just

JOSIE DEBENEDET
in her kitchen,
North Haven, 1998
A. Riccio



go dancing together and then come back and sing going home. They wore those big clog shoes, they call them “i zoccoli,” those big clog shoes they wear now too, they never get out of style, those big heavy things.

“LIFE ON A FARM IN FANO”

Renee Vanacore and her husband Anthony spoke on their back porch on November 20, 1999. They were married without a ceremony during World War II on a fifteen day pass.

My mother grew up on a farm. I remember the house. There was all corn in back of us. From my mother’s house to my grandmother was quite a distance. And over my grandmother’s house, alongside there was a bridge and water. That water I used to



ALBEROBELLO, ITALY, 1975

A. Riccio

drink, it was so clear, it's not like over here. And my mother had a goat for the milk, rabbit to kill for food, chickens. I don't know where the hell the market was, the store. And downstairs she had hay with all the animals to stay in the wintertime and we had our rooms upstairs. The animals used to help to heat the place in the wintertime. We had a fireplace to keep the animals from freezing because we used to get cold weather. I never used to go anyplace. In back of us was a little hill and the people had corn and lettuce and tomatoes. We used to get everything; she used to go up the hill and go and get the stuff. We ate; we didn't starve. It was a good life.

“THE CAT CHOKER FISH”

Nick Vitagliano spoke at the kitchen table of his Branford home with his wife Mary and daughter Maria on June 2, 2000. He recalled his father witnessing the 1908 earthquake recovery in Messina, Sicily.

As a boy, he [my father] says, “Ca ci sta sempre una miseria,” There is always misery here. He said you couldn't get away from it. It was inbred. Even the dust in the street would give you misery, you couldn't escape. He said he just wanted to make a change and go away somewhere where he would have nothing to do with this country [Italy]. He never wanted to go back and he meant it. When his days were numbered I said, “Pa, why don't you go to Italy and visit?” But he didn't want to go back because he had bad memories of Italy. My father came here because he was sick and tired of “I Borboni,” the Bourbons. My father used to say, “Chilli Borboni, mala gente, si rubavano tutte cose,” Those Bourbons are bad people, they steal everything from you. My wife's father knew first hand, the Bourbons. He was fisherman. He used to go out with the little boat and then he used to return. When he used to return, best fish, he used to clean them up and send them out. The Bourbons would walk along the shore and take all the fish for themselves. They used to leave the little ones, my grandmother used to call them “li affocagatte,” the cat chokers. Those little fishes, they were so bony that even the cat would choke on it! They were the scrap; you know what I mean? My grandmother on my mother's side, oh she was a tough one, she used to stand up to these people but she couldn't do too much about it, she was too little. They ran the country; I don't know how such terrible people can take hold of power. Where they lived in Castelmare di Stabia, they used build ships. They used to have to get permission from the captain to go in the “cantiere,” the shipyard, with the boat because not too many people went in there to fish. So there was always fish in there. “'O Borbon,” the Bourbons, used to keep them out of there but they used to get in. You had to be nice to the people who owned “o cantiere” so that you could go in the area where the shipbuilding was taking place. And it was accommodating for the fishermen because there was always a box or traps to fish off the grounds where they were building the ships. My mother and her friends used to run through the ruins of Pompeii and she used to have fun. She used to say, “Oh, nuie fuievano sempre cuando uscivano la polizia di Borboni, perche erano mala gente,” Oh, when the Bourbon police used to come out, we used to run away because they were such bad people.



CHILDREN AT PLAY IN AN ALLEY, ROME, 1975

A. Riccio

“THEY WERE BAD PEOPLE”

Anna Fasano spoke Italian at her kitchen table with her husband Attilio where they were processing tomatoes for winter canning on August 8, 1998.

A ninety-year-old woman named Irena from my village in Castellabate used to tell me stories [in the 1930s] that she remembered when she was a child under the rule of the Bourbons. The Bourbon leaders were in complete control; everything was in

their hands. They were the law. They used to say that when someone in the village got married, they had the wedding ceremony and the party afterward. At night the husband had to bring the new wife to the Bourbons. The Bourbons slept with her that first night; they did whatever they wanted with her, and the next day they would hand her back to the husband. And if she was a “disonorata,” dishonorable, and not a virgin, this meant she was dishonorable in the eyes of the Bourbons and they would kill her. They thought having sex with someone who wasn’t a virgin would bring them dishonor. How many bad things the Bourbons did! They would rob everything, kill people. They were bad people.

(translated from Italian)

“THEY EXCHANGED PICTURES”

Rosemarie Foglia spoke in a conference room next to her office at City Hall on June 28, 1999.

We were one of the few northern Italian families on this side of town, which was on Greene Street [Wooster Square]. As a matter of fact I don’t know of any other northern Italian family in that immediate area. My mother and father were from Provincia di Asti and my father came from Grezzano di Badoglia and my mother came from a neighboring town, Ciocarro, an area between Milan and Torino. My father came here because he was the third child in his family and my grandmother believed in the oldest child running the entire family. So my eldest uncle would actually put his younger brothers to work and then he would allocate the allowance and my father just couldn’t really deal with this because he would be doled out x amount of lira per week and was told what to do and how to do it. And my father could not really handle the idea that his older brother was handling all of the money and very frugal in his style. And also my father came to this country because he had been engaged to marry a young woman from his town but her father developed tuberculosis and my grandparents would not allow my father to marry her because obviously in those days the feeling was that tuberculosis was hereditary. So my father did not marry the woman that he had really been involved with for years and to this day I have a silk letter folder that this woman had sent letters to my father and then eventually sent this letter folder where the letters could be kept in.

My mother lived in a neighboring town and my father’s sister had the adjacent farm. And my mother had been involved with a young man also from that town but he too was the second child, which meant that my mother would have to move into what was their family estate. Now that was all well and good, however once the war started and all the men went into the service, my mother ended up running what was her farm and hiring and firing and just running it. And my grandfather was quite sick at the time and could see the handwriting on the wall because by the time my mother’s fiancé returned from the service my mother was in control of almost everything. And I’m inclined to say my mother had a bossy

streak and my grandfather realized this would never do, that my mother would have to marry this fiancé and then go into this household and be second. And my father just saw problems. So my grandfather forbade my mother to marry this young man and my paternal grandparents forbade my father to marry the young lady that he was involved with. My father had been here for a few years and worked around the clock in an attempt to save money and make money because his goal was to have his fiancée come to this country and when they had enough they would go back. Now my father first came to New Haven, but ended up working in New York on Bleecker Street, horse and buggy delivering wine because they delivered wine on Bleecker Street, the same as a milk delivery. A bottle of wine was delivered every day and he delivered wine to Bleecker Street all to the Italian people. Now remember you're talking about tenement houses so no one could make their own wine, they didn't have the facilities, they didn't have the basements, they didn't have the dark cellars, they didn't have anything. So my father ended up working for someone that made wine and he would deliver it horse and buggy like we know milk deliveries.

But the years were going by and obviously my father's fiancée in Italy realized that she would probably never come to this country and my father would not disobey his parents. So my aunt who was a neighbor of my mother's talked to my maternal grandfather and said, "Look my brother is in the United States alone, you're trying to break up this romance, we should try and set them up." So this is how it happened. My mother was twenty and my father was thirty, which was a very acceptable thing in those days. And my father started writing to my mother and eventually asked for her hand in marriage through my grandfather in Italy. They never met. They exchanged pictures. And they all said yes but now my maternal grandfather could not have my mother come here alone and they had a gentleman that was like the town politician that lived in Manchester, Connecticut and was a banker as a matter of fact. And this is key because it affected their entire life. And my grandfather said my mother could come to this country when this gentleman went back to Italy and he would be my mother's guardian to accompany her to the United States. Well that happened in January of the following year. So my mother came here at twenty accompanied by this elderly "cavaliere," gentleman, which was a very recognized thing in Italy. Cavaliere Bosco and his wife went to Manchester and my father went from New Haven to Manchester and met my mother and they were married two weeks later. And their marriage lasted till death. And they celebrated their fiftieth anniversary and it was a fine marriage. But the thing was my mother and father saved and were very frugal and all because their goal was to return to Italy and buy a farm and make their home there. And my father entrusted all his money with this cavaliere and this cavaliere would bring the money back to Italy and my father had probably at that point something like fifteen thousand dollars in American money, which had been sent to Italy. The banks failed and my mother and father lost all of their money in Italy when all the banks failed. I guess because of the war and the dollar, the banks failed, not here but there, and my father lost the money that he had worked around the clock for.

“ HE NEVER WANTED TO GO BACK ”

Mary Santacroce was ninety-seven at the time of her interview in her kitchen on December 21, 1999. She recalled having given birth to all her children at home.

My father never had any inclination to go back. He said that life was too hard there because living in Atrani he had to go up to the bigger cities to work. So he was away from home like for weeks at a time in what would be the same as a Stop and Shop warehouse, that's where he worked up north. And he'd be away from his family even for sometimes a month at a time and then would come home with whatever money he earned. And that's why when they came here, he never once had an inclination to go back. He said he was happy here. Because my husband used to work hard in Italy and he used to go work out of Atrani and he used to send the money home because the father was dead and he had two young sisters at home.