



We are the last generation that can relate to those immigrants that came across the sea to make a better life for themselves and their families.

My father Francesco was born in 1897 in Burgio, Sicily, a small town in the province of Agrigento. When he was three-years old his father, Rosario, at age 32, left the family and migrated to America. He knew if he didn't he would be trapped in the clutches of poverty with no hope of a better future for his family. It must have been heartbreaking for him to leave his wife and three children not knowing when he would see them again. But he did!

After a two week voyage below the deck in steerage he arrived in New York City in 1900 and made his way to Buffalo where he settled on Canal Street in a neighborhood called the Hooks. The "Hooks" was teeming with Italian immigrants, living in tenements in what we would now describe as horrible living conditions. For six years he worked and saved enough money to send for his family in Sicily.

In January 1906, Francesco, his mother Paola and sisters, Caterina and Nicolina, departed Sicily to join Rosario in America. Francesco was nine-years old and had not seen his father for six years.

The above scenario is a common story for most of us over the age of 65 who are the direct descendents of the massive wave of Italian immigrants that came to America. Often, when with friends, many of our discussions revolve around the past. Our memories are similar. When I tell my children and my grandchildren what it was like growing up in an old Italian-American neighborhood, I wonder if they really understand not having experienced it themselves.

The Sicilian language permeated the neighborhood. It was part of the communal atmosphere. Those of us who were part of the first generation were able to converse in the dialect spoken by their parents. The second generation Italians lacked the ability to speak fluently, but



Rosario and Paola Di Leo
In front of their home at 285 Busti Ave

could understand the dialect when spoken to, especially when condemned sharply by their elders. I attempt to speak to my grandchildren in Italian, but it is a lost art. They shake their heads and do not understand - nor do they want to.

Our parents and grandparents seldom owned or drove an automobile. Vacations were for others, not for us. Summers were for work or the playground. Central to the community was the neighborhood. Everything you needed was in walking distance and most of the stores and shops were owned and operated by other Italians. Through open windows in homes you heard the voice of huckster coming down the street

shouting in Italian the names of the fresh produce on his truck that day. The women, as they did in Italy, bargained for price and questioned the quality of the produce for sale. The milkman, the iceman, the insurance man, and many of the various street vendors worked their trade up and down the streets. You never had to leave the neighborhood to shop. Your basic needs came to your doorsteps.

In essence you could say that the neighborhood reflected the towns in Italy that were vacated by the immigrants. Relatives, if not in the same house, were close by. In the building where I lived my family rented on the fourth floor, my grandparents rented on the third and my aunt, uncle and cousins on the second. Other relatives were usually a short walk or bus ride away. The close proximity to family and friends allowed us to visit each other often. I am disheartened that my grandchildren do not know the grandchildren of my siblings. This is not by choice, but by distance. We do not live near each other and in some cases not even in the same city or town.

I laugh to myself when I hear my children arranging play dates for their children. It could range anywhere from a few hours in the home or an expensive trip to a movie theatre or Chuckie Cheese. Oh, what a difference a generation makes. In our neighborhood, a typical day

consisted of kids waking up, having a quick breakfast, and running out the door to the nearest playground, not to return home until it was time for lunch and then back outside until dinner time.

At the playground, we played countless games of baseball. Teams were chosen by two captains, usually the best players, tossing a bat to each other and then beginning from the bottom of the bat they exchanged grips hand over hand until the hands reached the top of the bat. The kid who reached the top picked first. As expected the players were selected according to talent. Those not so talented were the last to be chosen. We did not concern ourselves with bruised feelings.

We usually had one bat, and if broken we nailed the pieces back together and covered with black tape. Black tape was our savior. We had one ball to play with and after much use the stitching would come loose and the cover would begin to come apart. Black tape to the rescue. There were only a few that had hand me down baseball gloves. They were the ancient five-open finger gloves of the '40s. The gloves were usually assigned to the first baseman and one or two of the infielders. The remaining players caught bare handed. No comparison to today's structured Little League.

Not all kids played ball. Some of us worked and attempted to earn a few dollars. Many came from big families so money was scarce. The dollar was sacred and not to be spent on foolish items. So if you wanted to have a few coins in your pocket you worked for them. You delivered papers, shined shoes, worked for the neighborhood grocer or for any one who would hire you. Returning pop bottles to the grocer for two cents apiece could get you a nickel candy bar or a popsicle.

Others went to the farms to pick beans all day. I remember the early summer mornings when men, women and young children would leave their homes and walk to the Porter playground on the Lower Terrace to await the arrival of trucks that would take them to North Collins and surrounding farms to pick beans and other produce. At the end of the day, as the sun began to set, they were dropped off back to Porter playground, then making their slow walk back to their homes. I can still envision that walk home—older men and women stooped over, sweaters that offset the morning chill, now slung over their tired shoul-

ders, and a paper bag in hand containing a sample of the day's pickings, conversing in Italian, saying their "Sa Benedicas" as they reached their destinations, only to begin again the next day. Food stamps, Welfare, Medicaid or other entitlements were not available. They did what they had to do to make a living.

Traditionally we were named after our grandparents and we gave our children the names of our parents. Our grandparents were revered and when they aged and became sick their children cared for them until the end. For better or worse, today's generation has abandoned the old custom.

This was the time when ethnics married within their ethnicity. An Italian boy married an Italian girl in an Italian Catholic Church. The church was the cultural and religious center of the neighborhood. Each church conducted an annual lawn fête or festival. Rides for the kids and Italian delicacies were enjoyed by the parishioners. The churches were always open and we filled them on Sundays. The evening benedictions at St Anthony's on Court Street were conducted in Italian. Most were attended by elderly women, dressed in black, who sang the hymns in Italian. Now churches are closed, the masses are in English, and few people attend.

These are just a few stories from my generation. We each have our own memories that take us back to those glorious days of our youth. But the sights and sounds of seventy-plus years are past and not to be seen or heard again.

Essentially, we have fulfilled the legacy of our immigrant forefathers. We have multiple automobiles, expensive homes, bank accounts and investments. We raised our children in multi-diverse neighborhoods. They attend college and are established in their careers. They have assimilated and married into other ethnicities. We thought of ourselves as Italians, our grandchildren think of themselves as Americans, and they should -- because they are. This was the dream that spurred our people. But let us not forget the struggles that they endured and the prejudices they encountered. For without their dreams, hopes and hard work we would not be what we are today.