

TAKING A DIFFERENT PATH

The Courage to Follow the Path Less Taken

By Mary Dee Martoche

When Alpha Ursitti was a young girl shortly after the turn of the 20th century, her father did something extraordinary, which changed the course of her life. She, along with six brothers and sisters, were students at School 21 on Buffalo's East Side. Her father, Gerardo Ursitti, an Italian immigrant who worked hard to support his family in this new land, went into the school and spoke to the teachers of his children, no doubt struggling to communicate.

As the main support of his large family, and with limited resources, he knew he could not provide a full education for seven children, so he wanted to determine which child showed the most scholarly promise. Hands down, it was Alpha. In a time when girls, particularly in immigrant families, were thought not to need an education because they were destined to be mothers and housewives, Alpha's father chose her. She alone among her siblings went on to graduate from high school, attend Buffalo Normal School and become a teacher. How extraordinary!

Gerardo Ursitti, however, was no stranger to taking his own path. Before emigrating to America, he was a resident of Pescasseroli in Abruzzo, Italy. There he married Alpha's mother, Nunzia, began his family, and, like many of his neighbors, worked hard as a shepherd and laborer. Perhaps Ursitti and the others would have managed to survive, if not flourish, in Italy. But he, along with other residents, were Protestants, and in this very Catholic country in this very Catholic time and place, that was a hard thing to be.

Protestants could not be buried in the local cemetery, and their children could not attend the schools. The local priest was known to burn Protestant Bibles in the public square. They were discriminated against in other ways, both overt and subtle. At the insistence of the women who wanted their children to have better lives, a small group of families made the difficult and brave decision to

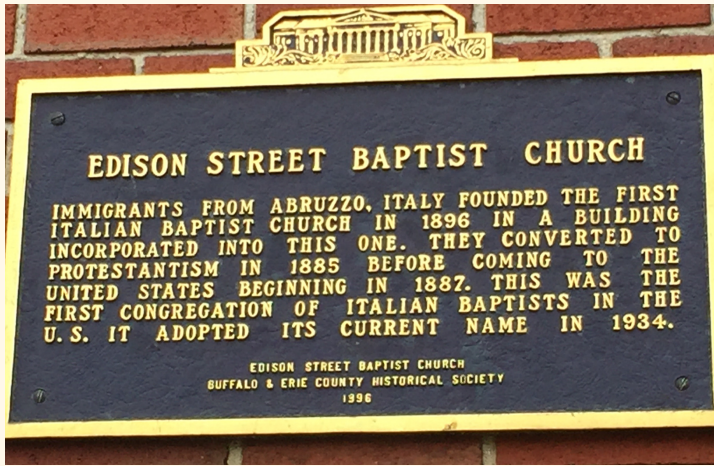
immigrate to the United States and, at the urging of a missionary, chose Buffalo, NY, as their destination.

Ship records confirm Ursitti arrived in 1888 with other men from Pescasseroli, but without his wife or family. Like many other immigrants, these men had come to earn the money to bring family members temporarily left behind. They were in some ways like many other Italian immigrants looking for a better life in the United States. However, their motivation was altogether different.

Upon arrival, Ursitti and his fellow immigrants lived in various locations around the city until they ultimately settled on the east side of Buffalo into a small area around Edison and Hickman Streets, off East Delavan Avenue. This became the part of the city where others from Abruzzo, especially around Pescasseroli, settled.

In 1905 the name of Hickman Street was changed to Roma Street because neither "h" nor "k" is used in Italian, and the sounds were difficult for the immigrants to pronounce. It is where Alpha and her siblings were born. Her father Gerardo became a leader in this enclave and established a reputation as a *padrone*, a sort of benevolent elder, urging his neighbors in Italy to follow him, welcoming them and helping them find employment.

A priority among these immigrants was the establishment of a church where they could worship without fear of condemnation or retribution. And the American Baptist Church was eager to establish its churches among immigrants. Ariel Bellondi, a young Italian studying at Colgate University, was invited to Buffalo to work with the newly arrived Italian immigrants. After a bit of a slow start, Bellondi and the Abruzzese immigrants began a long and successful relationship. Ultimately, in 1895, 34 Italian men and women were baptized into the Baptist Church. At that same ceremony, \$900 was pledged to build a church. The First Italian Baptist Church was born. And it was, in fact, the first Baptist Church in the United States established by Italian-Americans.



Until such time as the church building could become reality, a group of 15 families held organized religious events in the attic of the D’Arcangelo home on Hickman Avenue. In 1896, a chapel was built on Edison Street for \$1800. It was very small and very modest, but it was theirs. The church was dedicated on September 13, 1896, and Ariel Bellondi was called as its first pastor. In 1934, it became known as the Edison Street Baptist Church and was well supported and loved by its congregants for many generations.

Over the years, various additions and enhancements were made to the structure to more fully serve its thriving congregation. The Rev. Giovanni Battisti Castellini was the second pastor called to lead the church and was important in its growth. The congregants raised the entire structure and dug a basement by hand to allow space for

Sunday school. A bell was hung in the belfry. A gymnasium was built. Many enhancements were added by the dedicated members of the congregation, often by the work of their own hands.

For most of the 20th century, the church was an anchor for many Italian immigrants and their descendants who studied and enhanced their religious faith, played and worshiped together and became American citizens. The brave families who emigrated from Italy in search of religious freedom found the tolerance and acceptance they needed on Edison Street in Buffalo. The descendants of these pioneers have been leaders of the Western New York Community in medicine, law, education, and business. Surnames like Salterelli, Gugino, Notar, Ursitti, and Creola will certainly be familiar to many readers.

Alpha Ursitti taught physically disadvantaged children until her retirement in her 60s. She married Paul P. Creola, one of the young men championed and sponsored by her father. Ursitti helped him become a lawyer, and he maintained an office at the corner of Bailey and Kensington Avenues for many years. Descendants of that union include Hon. Marjorie C. Mix, retired Erie County Family Court judge, and her four daughters--a retired teacher, a United States federal magistrate, a college professor and a Family Court magistrate in Wisconsin. From these brave and strong-willed pioneers, a rich legacy has thrived, much to the benefit of us all.



1896



Today