



Lisa "Luisa" Alessandra-Grisanti

There had been this yearning inside me for many years; I couldn't ignore it anymore. I wondered what happened to my family in Sicily? As I pondered the box of old Polaroid pictures of them, I wondered... were they all still alive? Did they still live there? They must have had children.... Would I be able to find them?

It had been almost 30 years since I traveled with my father and my Great Grandmother Theresa, to her hometown of Valledlunga, a small town of about 4,000 residents nestled in the center of Sicily, where we stayed for six weeks with her sister in Valledlunga as well as her youngest brother and his family in Palermo. I had lost contact with her (my) family there after Nonna passed away just two years after our trip there. I kept

thinking about those hospitable people; La Famiglia, that I stayed with in the hills of Sicily during the summer of 1976. They were so nice to me and gave me the biggest birthday party when I was turning 10 years old. Oh, the cassata cakes, not just one but MANY! Their loving attention towards me still warms my heart today when I think about it.

The memories of that time spent there were becoming more and more vivid as I can't stop thinking about my childhood trip to Sicily: a day of cherry picking, getting fruit from the garden, practicing my Italian at the dinner table as my uncle held up a fork and I blurt out "forchetta!," those long glorious dinners on the wrap around porch with the View of Mount Etna. (Seriously, I'm not kidding. It was just AMAZING to watch. The taste of Nutella for the first time (AND cappuccino).....the sweltering summer heat and the relief of gelato every day. The urge to reconnect with my family and return there swirled inside me, like the gust of the summer heat and the comforting smell of fresh bread that filled the air as the delivery truck drove down the tiny Valledlunga street and chimed a bell to signify his arrival.

I think this desire to return there became even stronger since it was during a time when my father was ill and reminiscing about the beautiful memories I had with him there, took me away (even for a minute) from the daily stressors of his health condition, hospitals and dealing with doctors. I ask myself, when did life get so busy, hectic and fast-paced? I longed to return to that joyful, carefree place inside myself and the place (literally) where simplicity, a slower pace, and a sense of family was at its core. There was that curious child playing among my Sicilian relatives where a language barrier just didn't seem to matter. That curiosity still

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beams inside me today.

That was my first and last trip to Sicily that I would take with my father and my great grandmother. I had no idea then the appreciation I would have for that trip; that it would help shape the very core of who I am, give me great pride and become an imprint on my spirit that does not give enough justice to describe in words.

And now, I simply NEEDED to return there even though there was a big question of whether I would find them coupled with waves of anxiety of traveling to Europe by myself for the first time. Sometimes, I even asked myself, am I just plain crazy for taking this trip?

Gratefully, my father's good health returned. We began talking more about our Sicily trip a long-time ago and about the family there.

So with all the determination I could muster, I began to plan my trip several months before I was to depart in June 2007. Early on in the planning, it became clear to me that I would go alone as my friends had other obligations at the time. My parents were not up for the long trip (and the summer heat) and I dodged all the people who said that a single woman just doesn't travel to Sicily alone these days. As my Nonna would say "BASTA!" Decision made, I'm going. I would return to Sicily and as part of the two and a half week trip, I would also visit Italy (the major cities) for the first time. My plan was to be in Valledlunga in June, 2007, 30 years (almost to the day) from the last time I was there as a child.

The last time I saw my family, some were living in Valledlunga and some were living in Palermo, Sicily. Since Palermo is such a big city and Valledlunga a small town, I thought I may have more of a chance of finding someone from my family in Valledlunga, especially since my Great Grandmother's sister had lived there.

Through my research, I learned that these small towns typically have very good family records that go back many years.

My travel plans started to fall into place. I would visit Italy first (oh, I had always wanted to see the Trevi Fountain and the Coliseum in Rome, and the Statue of David in Florence, and of course, St. Mark's Square in Venice) and I was excited about visiting Italy but getting to Sicily was a pilgrimage, a drive in me so powerful even my fear of flying couldn't stop me. I NEEDED to get back to Sicily.

Valledlunga, Sicily was not a tourist town so finding a place to stay close by took a bit of research and I guess, serendipity. I found a woman (Rosemarie) who ran a B&B and one of the biggest wine estates in all of Sicily. She knew people. Yes, people in the small place of Valledlunga....people like the Town Historian who could probably help me find my family. Within a few weeks of planning, I had a place to stay only a mile drive from Valledlunga, I had an interpreter and a driver to pick me up at the Palermo airport.

After sightseeing in Italy, I would only have four days in Valledlunga, Sicily. While I was there, I would also visit Serradifalco (just an hour from Valledlunga), the birthplace of my mother's father.

When I arrived at the Palermo airport, I felt this surge of my true sense of purpose for being there but not able to identify what it was yet. Seeing the sign "Valledlunga" after the 80 minute ride from the Palermo airport was a sweet sight.

Rosemarie greeted me upon arrival of her B&B. We had dinner together in her dining room and we talked about why I came there and my times remembered from the last time I was in Valledlunga.

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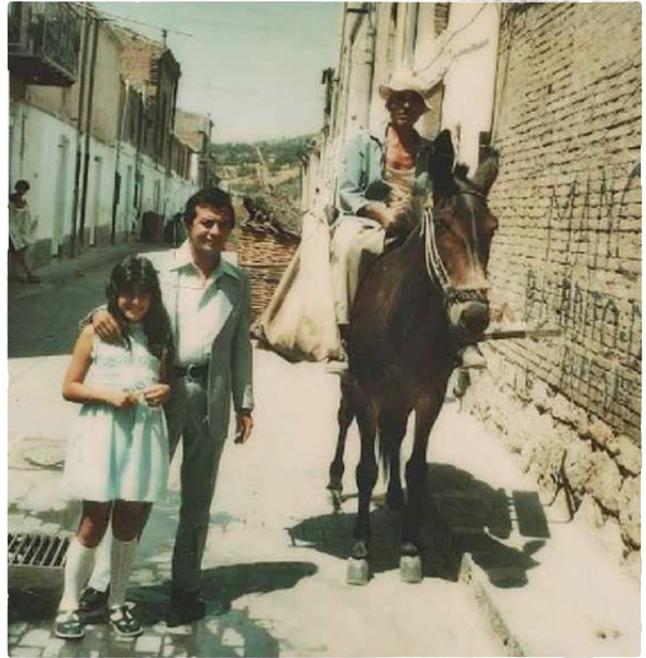
The next morning, less than 24 hours after my arrival into Vallelunga, as Rosemarie drove me into town, she said to me confidently, “we are going to find your family.” Driving into town, I smiled that not a whole lot has changed here in 30 years (maybe more cars on the street). There were still curtains on the doors to help cool the houses in the summer heat.

We didn’t waste any time, and went right to the Town Historian’s office. There I was, with a Polaroid picture of my great grandmother, her sister and myself at 10 years old. Rosemarie introduced me to my interpreter Francesca, a college student. (I know some Italian but wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything.) As I walked in, I felt so happy and grateful for all who were present (including the town priest) and that they knew how important this was to me. They were going to help me.

The historian went to a shelf that was filled with thick books. He removed one and went to the chapter marked “Battaglia.” As he went page by page, he started methodically write on a large sheet of paper while talking fast. Francesca would interpret as I anxiously kept saying “what did he say?” I knew we were getting somewhere.

He started with two generations behind my great grandmother back to the 1800s and as he turned more pages, there was more interpretation, more revealed and his writing of names and birthdates on the family tree kept branching out like a long trail of grape vines until he got to the names of the generation that still lived there. YES! STILL LIVED THERE.

So after two hours, he pointed to a name, looked at his watch and said to the interpreter “He is working in his store. I went to school with him and know him very well. ”



Lisa’s 1st trip to Sicily with Dad,
Frank (Chickie) Grisanti. 1970s

We thanked the historian and the town priest. Grazie Tutti!! Thank you very much. And I left with the large sheet of paper with my family tree of my great grandmother, warmth in my heart and the excitement of finding my family, maybe in minutes. Francesca took me to the store but it was closed! “Not to worry,” she said, they are not back yet from siesta. We will try again shortly.” I asked her to take me to the street where my great grandmother’s sister lived (where I stayed when I was a child during that summer trip). We did and as we walked down the narrow brick street, some elderly residents hanging their clothes on clothes lines and watering their plants knew that I was not a local. Seems like everyone knows everyone in this small town.

So, they asked Francesca and she told them why I was there. I showed them the photo of me, my Great Grandmother and her sister. They smiled and hugged

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me. Several had known both of them. Those memories of my childhood trip here, playing on this very street, were in full color now as I looked over to a brick wall spray painted red - something in Italian, the same wall where the neighbors lined up so I could take one of those Polaroid pictures 30 years ago.

We returned to the clothing store where Franco worked (the grandson of my Great Grandmother's sister). We walked in and he was at the register. The interpreter began telling him who I was and why I was there. When he looked up, I remember everything going in slow motion. He stopped in mid-transaction as his wife entered from the back of the store, excitedly speaking in Italian. Then, everything starting moving very quickly, words, hand gestures, etc. This is where I begin to find my family.

Within a day, the rest of my family was driving up from Palermo. The next morning Franco came to my B&B and said someone outside wanted to see me. As I approached the bench, I could see an old man (in his 80s) sitting there with someone I recognized as a child (his son Pippo). As I approached them, I now recognized the old man. He was my great grandmother's youngest brother, who we also stayed with in Palermo during my childhood trip. He had tears in his eyes, and we embraced. It was a glorious and defining moment. Something had been missing and it was found and this is how we both felt without having to communicate it. I could see Franco and Pippo both having a quiet moment of appreciation for this.

Lunch that day in Vallelunga at Franco's home with all my family members

was grand. I made sure the interpreter came with me so no conversation was lost in translation. With every bite of my pasta, I'm savoring my time here and every bit of catching up on years lost. In my head, I can hear my great grandmother saying "mangia!" I called Dad who took turns on the phone with family members, and I can hear the smile in his voice. Pippo told me that I had brought joy to his father by coming here. And the joy was felt among all at that lunch table for something lost, but now found.

And now, as I depart in two days (at the time of this writing) for my third trip back to Sicily to see my family, this is not only a vacation for me but a journey that feeds my soul. This memory gives honor for the gift of famiglia, to my ancestors, my great grandmother Theresa, my father Frank, my mother Louise's mother & father, and all my relatives in Sicily. It has proven true for me, the saying that goes something like "you don't know who you are until you know where you came from." Reconnecting to my family and my roots gives me fulfillment that I had been longing for and a sense of pride of knowing where I came from.



Lisa enjoying dinner with her Sicilian family