

***ITALIAN AMERICANS: IERI, OGGI E DOMANI***

By Dona De Sanctis

“All things change and nothing lasts forever,” the sages tell us. More than 125 years have passed since 1880 and the beginning of the tidal wave that brought an estimated 5 million Italians to the shores of America. How have we changed over the generations? And have these changes compromised our chances of surviving as a recognizable ethnic group in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? The answers might surprise you.

**IERI**

Even the most casual glance at our history in America will reveal that yesterday’s Italian Americans were very different from us. This first generation of Americans of Italian heritage arrived here as young adults or children, whose ties to their Italian roots were understandably much stronger than ours could ever be.

Ironically, however, most of our ancestors didn’t consider themselves “Italian.” Instead, their loyalty and identity were bound up with the towns and villages in southern Italy where their families had lived for centuries.

When they arrived in America, they tried to recreate their *paese* or town by settling in Little Italys made up of *paesani* from the same place. There they kept their local traditions, celebrated their patron saints’ feast days and spoke their familiar dialects.

Most of these communities also formed mutual aid societies whose purpose was to help immigrants from the same town or region with jobs, housing and financial support in case of illness or injury. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, New York City alone had about 2,000 of these

Italian societies.

Despite these efforts, the first Italian Americans were not successful in passing on a strong identification with their ancestral villages and towns to their children. There are many social and political reasons for this, but simply put, the melting pot was at full boil, especially in the American classroom.

There the teachers, largely of Irish and English heritage, were given the Herculean task of turning millions of Italian immigrant children into full-fledged Americans. Consequently, they drilled this second generation of Italian Americans on English grammar, U.S. history, geography and literature and discouraged them from learning anything about Italy, its language or culture.

The children of the early immigrants didn't learn much about Italy at home either. Most parents realized early on how important learning English and "being" American was for their children's future. Even though they spoke Italian or, more commonly, a dialect at home, they encouraged their children to answer in English with the bittersweet result that parent and child literally did not speak the same language.

## **OGGI**

Despite this powerful cultural immersion in American language and culture, the children of these early immigrants managed to grow up with a strong but highly personal Italian identity. They associated being "Italian" with their own family's history, customs and traditions and when they had their own children they repeated the family stories about the terrible ocean crossing, the hard life in now-vanished Little Italys and the struggles their parents faced during those early years in America.

Their children, now third-generation Italian Americans, often grew up living near their immigrant grandparents as well as aunts, uncles and cousins. They watched the rituals

associated with making a grandfather's homemade wine or a mother's special recipe for tomato sauce. They were part of warm family holidays and Sunday dinners that lasted three hours with 20 relatives of all ages around the table.

After World War II, the children and grandchildren of the early immigrants traveled frequently to Italy, but they visited Rome, Florence and Venice rather than their families' towns and villages. They tried to teach themselves Italian but often grew discouraged by the grammatical complexities of Italian, the most difficult of the five Romance languages to master.

They joined Italian American organizations, pasted stickers of Italian flags on their car bumpers and bought tee-shirts and lapel pins of the Italian flag to proclaim their pride in their Italian heritage.

But as Robert Viscusi, president of the Italian American Writers Association, notes in his essay, *"My Grandmother's Basil Plant and the Tragedies of Homework,"* "The things one remembers from childhood do not, all by themselves, constitute an effective heritage.... To claim a heritage, one requires not only feelings but knowledge."

Such knowledge was hard to come by, however. Italian Americans are the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States, but have long been a largely invisible minority, whose history and heroes are not found in school text books, television documentaries or Hollywood movies. Rarely was Italian offered as a foreign language in public or private high schools.

To further complicate matters, as the third generation of Italian Americans prospered in the 1960s and 1970s, they tended to move away from their families and Italian neighborhoods. Their immigrant grandparents were long gone. Their own parents sold the family home and moved south.

More and more frequently, marriage with people of different ethnic backgrounds became

the norm. Before World War II, for example, most Italian Americans had four Italian grandparents. By the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most people of Italian heritage could count only one or at the most two such grandparents. The melting pot had done its work.

## **DOMANI**

Or had it? Given this scenario, it would be logical to assume that the fourth generation of Italian Americans would have little to no identification with their long-ago Italian roots.

Amazingly, just the opposite proves to be the case.

As America entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that Americans of Italian descent identify more strongly with their heritage than any other group of European ancestry.

Italian Americans are the only European group whose number increased between the U.S. census of 1990 and the one held in the year 2000. In the 1990 census, 14.7 million people claimed Italian ancestry. Ten years later that number increased by exactly one million people to 15.7 million. Conversely, the number of Americans claiming German, Irish, English or Polish descent dropped from 128 million in 1990 to 108 million in 2000.

At the same time, a study from the Sons of Italy revealed that Italian was becoming the fastest-growing European language in American high schools and colleges. Between 1998 and 2002, enrollment in Italian grew by nearly 30 percent in U.S. institutions of higher education, and is growing faster than the enrollment rates for Spanish, French, and German, which increased by 14, 12.5 and 1.5 percent, respectively. And this year, for the first time in its history, the College Board launched an Advanced Placement program in Italian for gifted high school students.

**AND YET.....**

Strong as this cultural identification appears to be, Italian Americans are far from being as united as people of African, Jewish, Asian or Hispanic heritage. And because we have no unity, we have no power.

We are powerless to stop the stereotyping that has made people of Italian heritage the butt of jokes and tasteless entertainment. We are powerless to demand the respect we have earned as useful and talented contributors to society. We are powerless to insist that Italian American studies be as much a part of American education as the study of other ethnic, racial and religious groups that helped build America.

The result is that Columbus Day is under assault, with a growing number of states planning to change the name of the holiday, HBO is planning to launch the sixth season of *The Sopranos* in March and our children are learning more about the history of slavery than they are about the Great Migration and the contributions of Italians and other European immigrants to the United States.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Ironically, against all odds, Italian Americans have managed to keep their heritage alive, but it lives in the personal Little Italy of their hearts. Like the early Italians in America, we have become too attached to our personal family heritage—our psychological *paese*-- and are missing the big picture of who we are as a people.

How can we change this? For starters, we can learn about the major Italian American organizations like the Sons of Italy and its Commission for Social Justice, the National Italian American Foundation or Unico National.

We can join one (or more) of these organizations and give it our support. In other words, we can do what other more organized ethnic, racial and religious communities do. We can put our money where our heart is.

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