

SEMPRE AVANTI: February column

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IT'S ONLY A MOVIE

Why is it so difficult for the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) and other Italian-American advocacy organizations to convince the media, the general public and even a discouraging number of fellow Italian Americans that it is wrong to stereotype people of Italian heritage?

The struggle to put an end to the entertainment industry's typecasting of Italian Americans as boorish and/or violent people has been waged since the early 1970s and yet the stereotyping is more prevalent than ever. Why is that?

THE WHITE MAJORITY

Part of the reason is that as European Americans, we are considered members of the protected white majority. As such, it is assumed that we do not suffer prejudice or discrimination in housing, employment and education. No discrimination? Then no sympathy when we protest in the media about programs like "The Sopranos" or movies like "Shark Tale." "You've made it," is the typical response. "What are you complaining about? It's only a movie."

They have a point. We have made it. Italian Americans are this nation's biggest success story. We came here with nothing and dug the ditches, built the railroads, sewed in sweatshops and did all the other menial jobs that the more established Americans turned down.

We didn't speak the language, we often couldn't read or write and we knew nothing about city life, having lived for centuries in country towns and villages. And yet, in fewer than three generations, we have become doctors, lawyers, captains of industry, mayors, governors, senators and even U.S. Supreme Court justices. But the tarnished image of us as ignorant and ill-mannered people persists. In that sense, we have the worst of both worlds. We are part of the "white majority" and yet we are marginalized by society in a more subtle way than our immigrant ancestors were, but marginalized all the same.

THE MAFIA'S SHADOW

Proof that Italian Americans are a separate subset of society came last year when for only the second time in history an Italian American was nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Early on the morning of Oct. 31, 2005, President George W. Bush announced that Federal Court Judge Samuel A. Alito was his choice.

Within hours, the media dubbed him "Scalito," implying that he shared the same conservative ideology as the lone Italian American on the court, Justice Antonin Scalia, and would vote in lock step with him on such controversial issues as abortion and racial quotas.

There are two Jewish justices on the Supreme Court: Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer. What do you think would have been the reaction if the newspapers had given one of them a nickname that played off their Jewish heritage?

The day after the nomination, a document of mysterious origins, later traced to the Democratic National Committee, began circulating in Washington, D.C. and in the media. It had 17 talking points for opponents of Alito to use against him when talking to the press.

High on the list was a reference to a Mafia trial he lost in 1989 when he was U.S. Attorney in New Jersey. On trial were 20 members of the Lucchese gang, all of whom the jury acquitted because, they later confessed, they found trying 20 defendants at the same time too confusing.

The document didn't mention that the trial was already well underway when Alito inherited it. Yet the trial was referred to in countless news stories and television programs. National Public Radio's Nina Totenberg, who covers the Supreme Court for the popular NPR shows, "The Morning Show" and the evening program "All Things Considered," referred to Alito's "embarrassing loss of a Mafia trial" in every one of her stories on the nomination day after day for more than a week.

Is it paranoid to think that the frequent references to that trial were intended to plant in the public's mind the suspicion that Judge Alito was "soft" on the Mafia? Or was it perhaps intended as a subtle reminder that as an Italian American, he bears our collective shame of having the Mafia as part of our history? In any event, neither Totenberg nor Judge Alito's opponents in the media ever mentioned that the following year he successfully prosecuted members of the Genovese crime syndicate.

Disrespect for Judge Alito's heritage soon became blatant. Three days after the nomination was announced, the nationally syndicated radio and TV talk show "Imus in the Morning" characterized Alito as a "meat ball-sucking wop" and "a God-fearing Guido." "What is Bush doing?" joked Imus producer Bernard McQuirk on the Nov. 2 show. "(Is he) interpreting the Constitution or mixing concrete?"

Soon the political cartoonists joined in, with Pat Oliphant leading the pack. The nationally syndicated cartoonist, whose work is published in more than 400 newspapers coast to coast, ran a cartoon showing three faces. The first was labeled "Alito," the second "Scalia" and the third, which morphed the two faces together, was labeled "Scalito."

The caricature of Justice Scalia, by the way, had a five o'clock shadow, bulbous nose and menacing stare. It bore a striking resemblance to Al Capone, a coincidence one suspects that is not entirely by chance.

Italian-American organizations immediately took action. OSIA and its CSJ as well as the NIAF placed ads in the New York Times, commending the president on his choice. Along with other organizations, they also issued official statements and press releases criticizing the "Scalito" tag and wishing Alito success.

A QUESTION OF RESPECT

What is revealing about the media and public reaction to the Alito nomination is the prominence his Italian roots received and the disrespectful way those roots were treated.

Justice Alito is the son of an Italian immigrant from Calabria and an Italian-American mother of Basilicata origin. Both parents put themselves through college. His mother became a school principal while his father directed the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services.

Alito was educated at Princeton and Yale and after a long career as a U.S. attorney, was unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate 15 years ago when he was nominated to the federal bench by then-President George H. Bush.

There is something wrong — very, very wrong — when the ethnic heritage of such a man is not treated with respect. The manner in which Judge Sam Alito's Italian roots were alluded to proves that it isn't "just a movie." These harmful stereotypes pervade every level of our society and are even directed at an Italian American nominated to serve on the highest court in the land.

So the question isn't "Are these stereotypes causing discrimination against Italian Americans?" Maybe they do. The CSJ receives several letters every year from Italian Americans, who claim to have been discriminated against at work, but proving this is lengthy and costly. Even if Italian Americans were not discriminated against, stereotyping them is still wrong and even harmful.

The popular stereotypes overshadow the very real achievements and contributions of Italian Americans, causing people who make documentaries, produce television programs and write books to overlook Italian Americans entirely.

One recent example is found in the new book, "Character is Destiny," by Sen. John McCain and co-author Mark Salter. They profile 36 people who "put honor and the demands of conscience above all else." They include Joan of Arc, Charles Darwin and Nelson Mandela, but did not choose any Italian or Italian American.

Among likely candidates overlooked were: Captain Rocky Versace, an Army officer whose heroics as a POW in Vietnam earned him a posthumous Medal of Honor; Father Geno Baroni, who marched with Martin Luther King and helped inner city communities and Justice John Sirica, who stood up to the Nixon White House in the Watergate scandal.

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Disrespect for Italian-American heritage affects Italian Americans of all walks of life. For example:

- Recently a Connecticut court upheld the guilty verdict of a man charged with libeling the Waterbury Lega Siciliana Social Club by alleging its members were affiliated with the Mafia. His fine? \$1.
- For the second consecutive year in Bergen County, N.J., the New Milford public school system dropped Columbus Day and replaced it with three days off for Jewish holidays. Italian Americans number 1.5 million in New Jersey or fully 18 percent of the total population.

- The Disney Magic Cruise Ship had a shipboard production that played all last year before affluent cruise guests. “Twice Charmed,” a re-working of the Cinderella story that prominently features “an evil Fairy Godfather named Franco DiFortunato.”

- Nicky Deuce, a new children’s book aimed at the teen market, introduces a boy, who leaves his upper-middle-class family to spend the summer with his blue-collar Italian-American relatives in Brooklyn where his uncle teaches him “how to be a goomba.” It is written by Steve Schirripa who plays Bobby Bacala on “The Sopranos.” The first of a projected series, the book is also being considered for a movie.

- When the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), noted for its cultural programming, produced a documentary on the famous Florentine dynasty that helped launch the Renaissance, it was called “The Medicis: Godfathers of the Renaissance” and presented members of this famous family of art patrons and bankers as felons.

Still think it’s only a movie?

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice. A free hardcover Italian/English dictionary is offered free to the first 100 readers of this column who join the CSJ. Send your check for \$25 payable to the CSJ to: Sons of Italy CSJ, 219 E Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20002.

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