



Uncovering My Mafia Roots

Joey Skee (February 10, 2008)

5 Reputed Mafiosi and 11 Others Indicted Here for Criminal Contempt



THE NEW YORK TIMES: THE PATRICK A. BURNES
Witnesses awaiting arraignment were kept behind a chain at the 42d Precinct in the Bronx. At far right is John (Gentleman Johnny) Masella, one of five reputed Mafiosi present. He was indicted on 91 charges of contempt.

What do you do when you discover an unsavory fact from your family history?

Last week's mass arrest of some eighty odd mafiosi in the United States and Italy has prompted me to come clean on my own mob connections.

Strange as it may seem to some, I'm a "Brooklyn Italian" (born in 1955) who never experienced any mafia presence growing up. On my block, there was no mobbed-up social club, no wiseguy wannabes congregating on street corners, no annual street festa to the Virgin Mary with the ritual passeggiata of the neighborhood Don and his family. Part of that had to do with the fact that my post-World War II immigrant parents chose not to settle in any of New York City's established or emerging Little Italies like Harlem or Bensonhurst. The lack of any significant Abruzzese and Lazio communities in the city left them free to explore mixed (white) communities in Brooklyn's Flatlands area well beyond the entrenched ethnic enclaves. It was only as a young scholar beginning my ethnographic research on Italian-American vernacular culture in New York that I encountered mafiosi of various



stripes.

Imagine my surprise when I uncovered a relative associated with the Genovese crime family in a 1969 New York Times article titled “5 Reputed Mafiosi and 11 Others Indicted Here for Criminal Contempt.” I had long been using the online database of The New York Times to search for historical materials pertaining to various Italian-American communities, practices, and historical events. It’s truly a phenomenal tool. (I look forward to the day we’re able to search online the treasure trove that is the old *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.)

On a whim, I typed in “SCIORRA” for articles dating from 1851 to the early 1980s when my actress sister Annabella and I started being cited or quoted in the paper. The first article, “BUISNESS TROUBLES” from October 10, 1908, was a list of judications which included \$60 paid to G[iuseppe] Sciorra by debtor R. Natale. For nine years my father’s Uncle Albert (translation into American: his cousin twice removed) dominated the published accounts, from the purchase of a diner at 184th Street and Broadway in 1947, to his charitable contributions to the needy in 1952 and 1954, to the death of his one-year-old daughter Cathy Rice in 1956.

And then, on April 10, 1969, there he was:

Enrico Sciorra, 59, wholesaler, 2465 Tratman Avenue, the Bronx.

The reporter’s lead sentence stated that “sixteen defiant witnesses,” including “reputed Mafiosi” Carmine “Mr. Gibbs” Tramunti, John “Gentleman Johnny” Masiello (you can look ‘em up), among three others, were being held on contempt charges after refusing to answer questions of a grand jury about “loansharking, gambling, and the inroads of organized crime into legitimate business.”

I was shocked to find my father’s name listed in the paper even though I knew it wasn’t him. My dad was a 47-year-old veterinarian living in Wethersfield, Connecticut at the time.

I asked him about his criminal doppelganger and he confirmed it was a relative, in fact, Uncle Al’s brother. My dad recalled his uncle bemoaning the fact that he repeatedly was called to the police station to post bail for his connected sibling. My father told me of starting work as a federal veterinarian for the Department of Agriculture at a Manhattan meatpacking plant when a slaughterhouse butcher queried him about his name: “Hey doc, you related to Enrico Sciorra, the bookie?” The plant was a regular stop where my dad’s relative collected bets.

While I knew Uncle Al and Aunt Alice – visiting them in their pristine Washington Heights apartment was insufferable childhood torture – I never met or heard of the other Enrico Sciorra. My father never hid the fact that we had a connected relative; he simply wasn’t a presence in our lives. And now here he was making his presence known in the digital world.

In their success in leaving the slums, the previous generation of Italian Americans struggled to rid themselves of the taint of such social pathologies as hyper sexuality and criminality. Given that background, it’s understandable that mediated mafia like *The Sopranos* drives older Italian Americans, especially professional ethnics, apoplectic. But that’s not my reality. I was never denied a job or advancement because my name ended in a vowel. I never has some corporate representative in some southern state ask me if was in the mafia after spelling my last name.

Why blog about this disreputable relative? I’m certainly not compelled to honor some ethnic code of silence, burying my family’s complicated and occasionally unsavory past for the celebratory cult of personalities of inventors, sportspeople, and businesspeople that is Italian-American ethnic boosterism. I’m inspired by the director Alex Halpern’s documentary film *Nine Good Teeth* and Karen Tintori’s memoir *Unto the Daughters*, in which sexual peccadilloes, honor killings, and mafia affiliations of family members are revealed to the general public. This is not about exhibitionism or titillation but about being honest about the past, our individual and collective histories, and creating something new out of old wounds.



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