Non Parlo Italiano: Part 1

Mary Saracino (June 02, 2008)

This is Part 1 of a four part essay entilted "Non Parlo Italiano" about the ways in which assimilation impacted my ability, as a second generation Italian American, to learn my Italian grandparents' mother tongue.

“Non parlo Italiano,” I confessed to a man at the bus depot in Siena, Italy after he asked a question to which I could neither interpret nor respond.

"Non?!" he replied incredulously. His dark eyes searched mine. His face revealed confusion, betrayal. He'd been misled by my coarse, thick hair, my light olive-toned skin, my distinctly Italian profile.

“No,” I repeated, shaking my head, shrugging my shoulders slightly. “Non capisco. Mi dispiace.” I’m sorry.

In so many ways, I am sorry.

I cannot speak Italian even though I’m the granddaughter of Italian immigrants. The language of my paternal and maternal grandmothers and grandfathers was discarded, like garbage or useless clutter, into the streets of my American hometown. The essence of their humanity was tagged for pick up, hauled away, carelessly tossed into a landfill that was by then, already bursting with the cast-off culture of a multitude of immigrants from Italy and other countries.

Behind the confines of locked doors and closed windows, my grandparents resisted assimilation. They harbored remnants of how it had been before they sailed away. In their American kitchens, their living rooms, their bedrooms, they let loose their memories in the tongues of their long-lost mothers. Up town, at the market, at the government office, at the school, their attempts at English would betray them. Shame would emerge in the cadence of their splintered words, whole strings of sentences and paragraphs unintelligible to their new neighbors. Broken English, the Americani scoffed; to their ears, the immigrants’ speech was as dissonant as screeching brakes. Why didn’t they just get back on the boat and go home? Filthy guineas. Stupid garlic-eaters. The disparaging names cut deeply. My grandparents, and their compatriots, turned away, pretended not to care, even as their children took note and quickly learned a different way. All that remained was the stigma of the Italian accents, thick with mystery, hinting of a place and time lost to their daughters, their sons, their grandchildren.

My father’s parents, Pietro and Immocolata, were born in Castellaneta, in the southern Italian province of Puglia. They arrived at Ellis Island on July 6, 1920. My mother’s parents, Francesco and Fiora, immigrated from Castlenouva di Garfagnana, in the northern Italian province of Tuscany. They began their life in America in 1913. My grandparents were young and hopeful. Poverty drove them from the arms of their mothers and fathers; desperation forced them to risk the voyage away from a way of life their families had known for innumerable generations. The Italian dialect of their respective provinces danced on their tongues. Although my mother and father were both born in America, it was not English that first tumbled from their lips, but rather the vernacular music of their regional Italian dialects.

My father’s father possessed a rudimentary command of his native Apulian language enabling him to read and write at a basic level, and so his acculturation to English was less troublesome. My father’s mother was illiterate. Her fate as a farmer’s daughter had kept her out of school. The female arts of tending and mending didn’t require mastery of syntax and verb conjugations. Even in America my grandmother managed her household by sending her English-speaking children on grocery-shopping errands or, when she was forced to go by herself, by identifying labels on the items that lined the shelves of her local A& P. The image of plump tomatoes on canned goods was all she needed to know that she’d found the exact thing she required in order to make supper for her family. While my grandmother learned to speak English, she never mastered it. Conversations with her were always peppered with extra vowels, adding a melodic motif to her American language skills.

In 1924, after four years of trying to navigate the ways of her adopted country, my grandmother returned to southern Italy with her three children. My father was four years old then; his sister Filaberta was three; his brother, Mario, was two. Immacolata went home to her sisters and brothers in Castellaneta. Reclaiming her motherland, and her mother tongue, she and her children lived in the region of her birth for seven years before her husband called them back to America in 1931. Mussolini's fascist forces were on the rise and my grandfather Pietro feared for the welfare of his wife and children. If they remained in Italy, my father, who was then eleven, would soon be conscripted into one of Il Duce's youth groups. Pietro paid for passage and, once again, my grandmother crossed the Atlantic in steerage, this time with five children in tow (my grandfather had visited her in Italy twice during their separation; each time she conceived a child). In America, my grandmother settled her growing family into the modest house that her husband had bought on a shaded street in the working-class section of Seneca Falls, the small western New York State town that had become home to many Irish and Italian immigrants.

My father straddled the cusp of his teenage years when his family returned to America. Although he was born in Seneca Falls in 1920, Italy was his native country, culturally, spiritually, and ethnically. Whether in the womb of his transplanted Italian household in western New York or in Castellaneta in the arms of his mother's relatives, my father had been nursed on fava beans, greens, eggplant, and southern Italian Catholicism. In Apulia, my father grew under the hot sun, playing soccer with his younger brother Mario by day, chasing his dreams each night. Despite his American citizenship, my father didn't learn English until after he returned from Castellaneta to Seneca Falls. By then he was accustomed to rolling consonants, prancing vowels. English chaffed against the roof of his mouth, caught in the back of his throat. In his adoptive country, he would learn the language of America as a schoolboy, immersed in classrooms led by the Sisters of St. Joseph at St. Patrick's parochial school in Seneca Falls, NY.

By the time I was born in 1954, my father rarely spoke the southern dialect of his youth. Except for a few phrases and idioms I was able to cull from Sunday afternoon dinner conversations at Immacolata and Pietro's house, the tongue of my southern Italian forebears was silenced in me as well.

--- To be continued

Source URL: http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/life-people/article/non-parlo-italiano-part-1

Links
[1] http://www.iitaly.org/files/nonparlo011212384662jpg