

Italian Americana

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Source: *Italian Americana*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (FALL/WINTER 1981), pp. 65-73

Published by: [Italian Americana](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29776025>

Accessed: 27-10-2015 06:13 UTC

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A Story by
MICHAEL PARENTI

Rocco would someday grow into a mountain, a hulky man who buried his feelings under layers of fat and muscle. But once he was a slender, almost frail, child who played in the yard, coddling the fretful lamb and the newborn chick.

Rocco, tell us your life story. Begin with the early years in Italy.

To tell you the truth [Rocco replies] I liked it in the old country. I didn't want to come here. I used to play with the other kids in the village and I had my grandmother there. Everything was different in those days. . . . My life? I came here in 1909 with my family. I was only seven years old but I remember it.

In the old country he had the hot bread from the brick oven, the occasional sip of goat's milk and the loving captivity of his grandmother's arms. But one day *il cugino dell'America* arrived. Half the village crowded about to meet cousin Franco who wore shiny clothes and shoes that came to a point. What kind of feet could this man have, Rocco wondered. Some weeks after the visit, Rocco's father, Gaetano, announced to his wife Naninella, "Cousin Franco's right. We shouldn't spend our lives as slaves to Don Lorenzo." So they prepared to depart for America.

Rocco's grandmother tore at herself the day his Uncle Torino dragged him to the horse and buggy.

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"No!" the boy screamed. "No, Zi Torin' I don't want to leave Nonna!"

"*U meeneen'! U meeneen'!*" His grandmother cried. Oh little one, what will happen to you. I will never see you again. I can't live with that thought. Oh, *Madonn', Madonna mia*, don't let them take him.

"*Uffa!* Mama, enough please." Zi Torino grew impatient. "I have to get him to the city by this evening with a horse that's older than you are."

I spent most of my time with my grandmother so in a way I thought of her as my mother. My real mother had to work all day in the fields with my father. I hardly ever saw my parents. They were out there seven days a week. A lot of times they had to spend months up in the hills taking care of the padrone's sheep. . . . My grandmother, she gave me all my own ways. She let me have anything I wanted. I spent more time with her than with anyone else. I was happy with her and then I had to leave.

Rocco had never seen anything like that wondrous city with its carts and stalls laden with cheeses, breads and sausages, endless rows of houses, some of them three and four stories high, smoke pouring out of a thousand chimney pots, lamps on every corner and swift teams of horses drawing carriages over cobblestoned streets, making a frightful clatter.

"Papa, is this America?"

"No, *stupido*, this is Bari," Gaetano answered as the assembled adults broke into laughter.

"We'll come back someday and visit like Franco did," Gaetano told the tiny crowd, causing them to grow quiet for a moment before the final collision of embraces and wet kisses.

"Auguri, buona fortuna."

"Buon viaggio, cara mia."

"Arrivederci, caro. Buona permanenza."

* * *

For three weeks the freighter hissed and pounded its way across the Atlantic as if the cargo of immigrants packed in its dank hulk made every wave an effort. During the trip an old man died, and for days after his burial at sea Rocco would pause by the railing and gaze into the water, half expecting to see the enshrouded body re-emerge from the depths.

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As the voyage dragged on, the toilet buckets grew fouler and the bread turned moldy. The thin soup and the occasional dish of gruel left the passengers hungry. Lice invaded their clothes and set their skins afire, while rats make brazen pathways under their bunks. Families squabbled over a few inches of space as they might over farm boundaries, while feuds and alliances developed, fed by a network of gossip in what had become a sea-borne village.

Each day Rocco's heart ached for his Nonna, and each night he would travel back to her arms only to awaken and feel the fresh grief of another morning. Then one day, at the place where the old man's body had been dispatched, he climbed the railing and jumped over the side of the ship, with only the screams of women and the shouts of crewmen clutching after him. The water flew up and smacked him hard, leaving him dazed and choking for air as the sea rushed rudely into his throat.

Much to his relief the old man came swimming toward him, his eyes bright and friendly, beckoning him down into the deep. Rocco followed effortlessly through the dark passage of water until he reached a vast luminous opening with colors more brilliant than any he had ever before seen. Standing there was his brother Rosario, smiling at him. What a wonderful, beautiful place, the boy thought. I never want to leave.

I had it in my head to get off that boat one way or another. I didn't want to live without my grandmother. So I jumped overboard. [Rocco laughs] *They said it was a miracle I didn't drown. But I think I almost did. I swear I saw my brother Rosario who was already dead two years before we left Italy. He was right there in the water with me. He told me "Go back, it's not time." I'll never forget that. It was like a dream. No, it was more real than a dream.*

I was half-drowned when some sailor jumped in after me with a rope and fished me out. Next thing I knew I woke up and there was my mother and a bunch of other ladies praying over me. In a few days when they saw I was all better, my mother lit a candle to St. Anthony and my father gave me a beating.

* * *

His attempt on the boat was Rocco's last leap to freedom. When they yoked him onto dry land he held in line, pulling his load until he no longer dreamed of the far-off village.

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Everytime Gaetano and Naninella spawned another mouth, Rocco would have to work harder, lifting kegs of ice, hauling sacks of coal, resenting his smart-ass brothers, his squabbling sisters and Naninella who forgot him for the young ones. And all the while he hated school where he was prodded into sullen attention by the taunts of the teacher. "You little greenhorn, learn to speak English. Eeengaleesha!"

In the afternoon when the others skipped free from the school-yard, he would drag himself back to work, up the tenement stairs with the coal dust burning his eyes, until supper and nighttime exhaustion claimed him, leaving him just enough breath to repeat another day.

By the time I was ten I was getting up at six in the morning and working till 8 a.m. Then I had to go to school. After school, back to work until seven at night. On Saturday I worked from 6 a.m. to midnight, and on Sunday from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. — that was supposed to be a half a day.

I was three times in kindergarten and one year in 1A because I could hardly speak English. And I only made it to 5B by the time I was fourteen because I was too damn tired to learn to read or write very good. I fell asleep in class once and the teacher dumped water on me, so I took the ink well out of the desk and threw it at her. That was in 3B. So they said I was a bad kid. After that the teachers had it in for me even more.

The only teacher that got around me was Miss Booth because she saw me carry ice a few times on 110th Street and she asked, "How come you're carrying ice at your age?" and I said, "I got to work. My father can't afford a man. There's seven of us at home to feed." So she saw I wasn't really a bad kid. She saw I was no good in school really on account of I had to work.

That Miss Booth. She knew how to get around me. She got me to wash the blackboard. Anything she wanted, I did because she showed she cared about me.

At the age of fourteen he was able to get expelled from school — for striking a teacher who had attempted to flog him. As a reward his parents put him to work full-time on the ice wagon.

* * *

As he grew into manhood Rocco discovered America. With the small salary his father now gave him he bought some dapper clothes and a fedora and made his entrance into the jazz age, learning all the latest ballroom steps, cutting the kind of figure that horrified Naninella,

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for here were the unmistakable signs of the American corruption, when children defied their parents by squandering their earnings and dressing like dandies. To save his soul, and, more importantly, his money, she hurled herself against him one Saturday night, shoving him into a back room and barricading the door, shouting up to her saints to seal the fortress, urging Gaetano to add his unconvincing threats. But Rocco, vowing he was nobody's prisoner, sneaked down the fire escape to be greeted by the cheers and hoots of his waiting companions who raced off with him for a night of freedom. *Charle-ston, Charle-ston, let's do the charle-ston.*

In those days we went to dance halls. My favorites were Rose-land, Tangoland and Dreamland. I learned the tango and the waltz. I used to have a swell time. Once a bunch of us drove up to Stamford, Connecticut, and I entered the Charleston contest and won first prize. So I consider myself to this day the Charleston champion of Stamford, Connecticut, although I suppose nobody up there remembers me for that.

In time he found courage to start talking to the girl down the block who always greeted him with a friendly smile. Italian girl with blue eyes. Mema's hands were sticky and she couldn't dance very well, but he found himself liking her more and more. After a month of dating, he dared to kiss her, a bumping of virgin mouths in the tenement hallway.

Naturally I didn't rush things on account of I had a lot of respect for her. . . . I was almost twenty-one and was keeping company two years with her and my father was telling me I had to be home by nine o'clock and my mother was still getting all upset when I went out at night. That's how come I got married. I wanted to run my own life.

The early years of marriage were better than living at home, but as his brothers and sisters married off in quick succession and old Gaetano dropped under the weight of coal and ice into illness, Rocco was called to account once more.

"Who else is there," Naninella said, "if not the oldest son. *Figlio mio*, you take over your father's share and even though it's hard and doesn't pay much, we'll be able to live on it."

So nothing changed even when Rocco had become head of his house and boss of the business, doing the work of two, while Gaetano grinned innocently at him and Naninella served him gratefully and fearfully and Mema gave birth to a boy, Tot, who for a moment enchanted Rocco, but who once more stole the bread from his mouth and skipped free while Rocco strained his back in harness. Tot was

the cruelest, for his eyes were even bluer than Mema's, blue as the open sea and soft with life. Rocco felt a tinge of resentment every time he looked at the child who would fling himself over the side of his crib, climbing the forbidden heights into their bed, until Rocco would growl and Mema would shoo Tot away but not before placing her heart in his tiny hands — a snack for the journey back to his lonely room.

Everyone fell upon Tot with embraces. And Mema had eyes only for Tot, while Rocco lived inside his lonely mountain, protecting himself from pain of betrayal beneath rolls of fat and muscle.

* * *

As the years went on, the housewives and the stores bought less ice, causing Rocco to work harder just to keep from going under. It was Hard Times when men stood on corners, hands in their pockets and caps on their heads. One day Carlo-Geese came by and told him he should start playing it smart and learn a new business, and if Rocco took care of Carlo, then Carlo would take care of Rocco. So Rocco moved from building to building with a barrel of ice melting on his shoulder and his pockets stuffed with number slips and money, making the old job a front for the new.

No more working like a sucker, busting your ass for peanuts, Rocco figured. Give the people what they want like Al Capone says and make a little something for yourself. Now he would walk down the street and feel like *somebody*.

“Rocco, what number come out?”

“Rocco, where the hell you been?”

“Rocco, c'mere and have a drink.”

He liked to sit in the room behind Funzi's barbershop on Sundays, drinking homemade wine and playing pinnocle with the other men, arguing about Mussolini and Roosevelt.

The ice business got wiped out by the refrigerators and the Depression, so I went full time into numbers. I got thirty percent on the slips I turned in. Then after awhile I got about ten other guys working for me, some Italian, some Jewish. I got five percent of their book and naturally I had to give a cut to Carlo-Geese. The rest went downtown.

It was during the Depression. People couldn't afford to eat and me I had two cars on the street, a Chevy and a sports car.

One day Rudy the cop stopped by and told him he was hot.

“Why me?” Rocco asked.

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"I don't know nothing," Rudy said. "There's talk about a clean-up and the finger's on you and a few others. Maybe you don't kick in enough or your're small enough for a pinch. Maybe you're a sacrifice play. You figure it out. I'm just telling you to lay low."

An hour later a car pulled up to the curb and two big red-faced plain-clothesmen pushed Rocco into the back seat and took him to the precinct station where they slammed him against the wall, found the slips and shoved him into a cell.

Irish bastards, Rocco said through his teeth. Real Dick Tracys looking to win medals. Through the night he waited for the people on 116th Street to bail him out. Maybe they're throwing me to the wolves, he thought, and his anger dissolved into anxiety. I might be in here for awhile.

Mema was washing clothes in the kitchen when her sister Grida came running up the stairs shouting, "The bulls pinched Rocco! The bulls pinched Rocco!"

Mema rushed to see Carlo-Geese who said he couldn't do anything, then to Rudy the cop who shrugged and said, "I *told* him," then to the police station where they said, "Yeah, we got your husband. You can have him if you dig up a hundred dollars." She got fifty from Carlo, took the thirty-five she had hidden in a tin can in the kitchen and brought it all to the sergeant who called in the lieutenant.

"This is all I could get," she pleaded.

"Come back tomorrow and you can have your husband," the lieutenant said and folded the money into his pocket.

The bulls took me to one side and said they would spring me if I quit the numbers racket. If I didn't, they said they would send me up for a year. They said everything was hot because there was going to be an election and Mayor LaGuardia had to show he was cleaning up the city. So naturally they wound up going after the little fish like me not the big ones that paid them big. I never had no use for LaGuardia.

When he saw Mema in the precinct station he could feel himself choke up. But the more tearful she became, the gruffer he spoke to her, shrugging off her questions and cursing the bulls.

Rocco sold his two cars and got a job in a factory, only to be laid off after three months. He worked for awhile as a plumber's helper but the plumber retired, then as a clean-up man in a printing shop until it closed down. He would spend his days walking the streets looking for work and his evenings sitting at home, wrapped in a chill panic, unwilling to talk to anyone. Finally he got a bartender's job

at Mandy Lou's, a dollar a night plus tips, twelve hours a day, four in the afternoon to four in the morning, seven days a week until his feet ached and his back throbbed. There's a Depression on, what can you do, he said, swallowing the knot in his throat and once more fitting himself into harness.

When Gaetano died he borrowed money for a decent funeral. You have to do the right thing. It doesn't look good otherwise. The old man wasn't bad. Nobody lives forever.

One afternoon soon after the funeral, he slumped into a sofa chair for a quick nap before work.

"Daddy," Tot was sitting on the floor with the Sunday comics before him. "I'm going to school soon to learn how to read." The boy's eyes were wide and his voice hesitant as he spoke to the Mountain. It was one of those rare moments they found themselves alone together.

"That's nice," Rocco said, closing his eyes and preparing to doze.

That's my life. When you think about it, what the hell is there to tell? [Rocco shrugs] I was born on the other side and my family brought me here when I was a kid. I had to work like a horse all my life and I'm still working like a horse. I figure the only rest I'll get is when I go see my brother Rosario again.