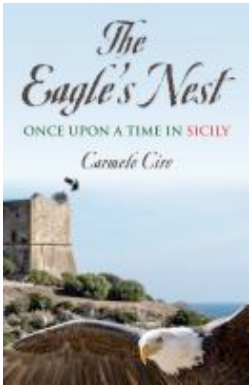
The Eagle's Nest

ONCE UPON A TIME IN SICILY

Carmelo Ciro



In this charming story, Carmelo Ciro vividly evokes his childhood in Partanna, a small and remote Sicilian mountain town overlooking Greek temples and the Mediterranean Sea. It is the 1950s - a time when Sicily was a rigid, closed, and male-dominated society. In an ancient setting of great natural beauty, inhabited by unforgettable townspeople and ruled by myth and ritual, Carmelo comes of age, and finds his identity.

The Eagle's Nest

The Eagle's Nest

Once Upon a Time in Sicily

Carmelo Ciro

ISBN 978-1-63263-360-6

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

Chapter One
A Small Sicilian Town

I grew up in a small Sicilian town. Maybe ten thousand people, but if you asked anyone in town, they would probably have said about fourteen thousand. That would have been true if they included the chickens, sheep, cows, horses, donkeys, dogs, cats, and mice that we lived with under the same roofs and often under the same covers.

Yes, life in Sicily when I was a child was crowded, and although each of us had different interests and aspirations, in one way we were alike: we all shared the same hunger. Cats were constantly meowing for food. Mice were in a continuous running race in our home; they were everywhere, but no one could find them, not even the cats. The chickens weren't afraid of the cats and would come in and out of the house as they wished, looking at me with an air of arrogance: "Hey pal, get some food for me and get out of my way." I would patiently obey, since they had the right to be demanding. They provided

eggs for the entire family and meat when they stopped making eggs. The most patient and obedient was the horse. After a long day of working, he would be tied up in his corner of the house and do his business without disturbing anyone.

A lot of Sicilian homes smelled like urine and poop when I was growing up. This was normal in the 1950s. People lived with animals, ate with them, and slept with them. We depended on the animals as they depended on us. A lot of times the line between them and us was so thin that it was hard to distinguish one from the other.

Okay, I'm exaggerating a bit. If we looked closely, we could distinguish between a pig and a priest, a rat and a banker, a cow and a mother of eight children. But being in constant contact with animals as a child, everything around me took the shape of an animal. Almost everyone that I looked at resembled an animal. The most curious thing was that many of these animals were not part of our family.

For example, I would look at a fat person and see a hippopotamus; I would look at someone with a thick, short neck and bulging eyes, and see a bullfrog; a slim and tall lady dressed in black, who looked at people from the corner of her eyes and was labeled the "easy lady," looked exactly like a snake.

Yet other people were a mix and match of household utensils and cookware. A tall, sad-looking man with a long drawn face, who always wore a black shawl around his shoulders, reminded me of an old fork with one of its tines missing; a bald fat man without a neck, whose head, accentuated by two tiny ears, was practically resting on his broad shoulders, reminded me of the huge pot that my mother used to make her sauce in every summer, to be bottled for the rest of the year; a thin lady with a long neck and elongated head, with straight brown hair cascading over her face and shoulders, looked like a walking broom.

Perhaps I associated people with animals and other things because children at that time had to use their minds to entertain themselves. They had to be creative and make their own toys, whether real or imaginary. We had little money in the fifties, but plenty of imagination. Was I sad that my parents didn't buy me toys? No, because I didn't even know what a toy store looked like, nor had I ever seen one of my friends with store-bought toys. We all made our own. They weren't perfect, but who was perfect in town? Certainly not the people. Some were rats and snakes; others were pots and forks. So what if our toys didn't look like they should? And what were they supposed to look like anyway?

For that matter, the whole town seemed somewhat surrealistic, and yet it was as real as you and me. Its name is Partanna.

There has been a lot of speculation on the meaning of its name, but it is generally agreed that its origin is Arabic. Perched in the hills of Western Sicily, surrounded by olive groves and grapevines, the town boasts a medieval castle, beautiful little churches, a cathedral, a monastery, a small museum, and many fountains.

Oh yes, water runs freely from the fountains and gets lost in the ground, yet the people of Partanna rely on water that is piped from the sources of Montescuro (which means Dark Mountain, a remote mountain far from my town). Well, during the hot summer months, the Montescuro's fresh running water is scarce and it reaches the town only two or three days per week. Therefore, the townspeople fill the reservoirs on their roofs so they have a supply at hand.

Despite this small inconvenience, Partanna is truly an ideal place to visit. The mountain air cools the evenings during the hottest summer months, and a breeze (called the Tramontana) caresses the gentle hills, bringing with it the sweetness of grapes

ready to be harvested, the pungent aroma of green olives, and the refreshing fragrance of orange and tangerine groves.

The views from Partanna transport one's senses on an idyllic voyage of beauty and tranquility. Looking down from one of the town's balconies, the valley looks like a perfect quilt with square patches of grapevines, olive groves, and tangerine orchards surrounded by the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. In the evening, when the sun's glare dissipates, you can stretch your arms and almost touch the Egadi Islands off the coast of Trapani. Under a crystalline blue sky, where sea and sky meet at the horizon in the harmony of a perfect marriage, these baby islands sleep peacefully in the serene and shining waters of the Mediterranean. Oh, how beautiful and majestic is the Mediterraneo! No wonder Ulysses got lost in it for twenty years!

In fact, the Greeks wanted to make of our island another Greece. From Taormina to Syracuse in the east, to Agrigento, Selinunte, and Segesta in the west, Sicily was as Greek as Greece. Indeed, you'll find more Greek temples and cities in Sicily than you will in Greece. From Partanna you can see the Greek temples of Selinunte and the blue Mediterranean in the background, all wrapped by the aroma of sardines, tuna, and swordfish from the sea, and by a bouquet of spices and fruits from the soil—oregano, thyme, olives, and grapes.

Since Sicily is a living paradise and has been for centuries, people from North and South, East and West, all wanted a piece of the pie. Enchanted by its beauty, they came to take something away, and they did, but they also left behind a great cultural, artistic and educational heritage—from beautiful Greek amphitheaters and temples, to the great styled palaces and culinary inventiveness of the Arabs, to the peak splendor of Sicily during the Norman times, when the island, under Emperor Frederick II, was the cultural hub of the

Mediterranean. His Scuola Siciliana (Sicilian School), provided the language and structure for the development of the Italian literary language. Like the famous German writer Goethe said: "To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything."

Chapter Six
Selinunte

The Mediterranean Sea is only 16 km away from my hometown. We could see it from any of the balconies overlooking the valley, but when I was little that was the closest that I got to it…except for one summer. My dad rented a house in Selinunte a few feet away from the beach. It was the event of the year, if not of my childhood. It was the summer of 1957 and I was seven years old.

I had been to "Acquecalde," the natural hot spring pool and spa next to the Belice River between Partanna and Montevago. Every time we went there it was fun, because we stayed in the hot pool all day, on and off, and then we had a picnic under a tree next to the pool. It was beautiful, but it wasn't the Mediterranean Sea. So when my dad told us that he had rented a house in Selinunte for two weeks, we were all overly excited.

We left at night after a week of preparing various things we needed for the beach house. At first I was wondering why we

had to leave in the middle of the night when it took only twenty minutes to get there by car. Well, it wasn't exactly a passenger car but a truck that we rented for the day, with a covered back where twenty people could be accommodated instead of the usual horse and buggy. My brother Angelo, who is eleven years older than me, had gotten his driver's license that year, hoping that one day he could drive his own Fiat. We all got in the back of the truck, except for Angelo, who was the driver, and my father, who rode in the cab with him. It was chilly and we were all wrapped in blankets. We were told not to talk, especially if the police stopped us.

During the drive I found out that we left at night because the truck was built to transport merchandise, not fifteen people. If the police stopped us, they could revoke my brother's license and give us a ticket. So we all sat quietly, praying that no one would dare to ruin our beloved vacation. The Fiat Leoncino snuck out of town and through the valleys in the dark, like a thief with a sack of jewels on his back. Inside the air was hot and we were starting to sweat, but no one dared to push back the tarp that covered the back of the truck to let in some cool air; we preferred to suffer rather than jeopardize our vacation.

Halfway there the truck started to slow down. We got scared. Were the police stopping us? We hoped it was simply a stop sign. When the truck came to a complete halt, we heard a voice saying, " Patente e libretto." (Driver's license and registration.)

No luck, the police! In the dark I couldn't see my family's expressions, but I could feel their extreme disappointment, as deep as mine. We had been caught like a bunch of children with our hands in the cookie jar. Shame on us, but what else could we have done? If we had followed the law, the truck could only have carried two people at a time, that's including the driver; to transport fifteen people would have taken fifteen trips back and

forth, a full day of driving, and thousands of lire for gasoline. Impossible. So we took a chance by breaking the law, and now we had to pay.

What was going to happen? Were they going to take the truck away, leaving us stuck in the middle of nowhere at midnight? Or would they suspend my brother's driver license and, with it, his aspiration to drive his own truck someday? And, on top of everything else, how much of a fine would we have to pay?

Those were some of the questions that went through my mind. But my major concern was that our dream vacation was over before it started. The distant blue sea that I had often admired from my hometown would remain just an optical illusion or perhaps a dream. Tomorrow I would wake up in my room to the sounds of street vendors and the ladies in the courtyard, to the voices of Donna Nina, Signora Margherita, Signora Antonietta, La Za Ciccia, and my mother, who were always chatting as they hung clothes on lines across the courtyard. And by the old man Nunzio Salemi, who upon exiting his one-room home, holding his cane in the air, would start screaming: "Chi cazzu ci fannu tutti sti nachi ni lu curtigghiu!?" (What the hell are all these swings doing here in the middle of the courtyard?) Then, taking out his pocketknife, he would cut one or two of the clotheslines to clear his way. The ladies would howl, seeing their clean clothes and intimate lingerie dragging on the dirty ground, while the chickens happily roamed about, pecking at worms or a bread crumb here and there.

I would not wake up in front of the Mediterranean Sea, with its big ships cruising at the horizon and stopping at the most exotic ports in the world, where ladies rode bicycles dressed in white pants and did their shopping wearing colorful hats. No, my sailboat would remain in the courtyard, its

perennial white sheets blowing gently in the air. Selinunte and its big ships were out of sight.

With these sad thoughts brewing in my brain, I tried to wipe away my sweat and fears without making the slightest sound. Then I heard steps approaching the back of the truck and we all held our breath. It was the end of our journey. Up went the tarp, a bright light flashed into my eyes, and I raised my arms in surrender (something I had seen many times before in American films). It worked and they did not shoot me. The man started to laugh and then, in a Sicilian accent, called his colleague over.

"Minchia, veni e talia. Mezzu paisi c'e' 'ca!" (Shit, come and look. There is half of a town back here!)

My brother tried to explain that we were one family and that it was the vacation of our lifetime. He pleaded with them to let us go, that we were honest, hard working people, and that we had never done any harm to anyone. The policemen seemed to be listening while my brother presented his case. Then they walked a few steps away to deliberate. Our future rested in the hands of these two men. After a few moments, they returned to render their verdict. Now was the moment of judgment, the moment of truth.

"Pi stasira itivinni, itivi a divertiri!" (For tonight, you can go and have fun!)

We could not believe our ears. They let us go without a fine!

We spent the next ten minutes singing Sicilian songs ("Ciuri, Ciuri" and "Vitti 'Na Crozza"), laughing, and clapping hands. Selinunte was no longer a mirage. We could smell its waters, see the fish swimming in it.

We arrived around 12:30 a.m., and by the time my family got things situated in the vacation house it was way past one o'clock. We went to bed excited and ready to get up as soon as

the first light filtered through the house. At nine o'clock I woke up. My family and cousins had been up for a while and my coffee and milk were ready. I ate in a hurry and asked my dad if I could go to the little piazza (town square) across from our home to get a closer view of the sea. My dad agreed, as long as I stayed seated at the bench where he could see me from our beach home.

I ran to the piazza and could not believe what was in front of me. The turquoise Mediterranean Sea, placid and serene, lay shining before me like satin. I remained mesmerized by her natural beauty, attracted like a tiny atom to a larger field of energy, creating an immediate bond between us and an exhilarating joy in my heart. Face to face with her, I immediately realized that she had the intoxicating charm of a beautiful, sensual mermaid, whose singing voice was a magical invitation to join in exploring her world.

As I was contemplating the magnificent spectacle in front of me, my brother Baldo came over to tell me to put on my swimsuit because we were going to the beach. We both ran home, got our suits on, and with my family, aunt, and cousins walked down a little dirt path that took us directly to the beach. The sand was grainy and already warm. We rushed to touch the water that was gently slapping against the rocks and then filtrating through the dark yellow sand. Hundreds of tiny fish were swimming around the rocks with such fast reflexes that they would dart away in a fraction of a second at the smallest sound. Our natural instinct was to run deeper into the water to try to grab some, but as soon as we threw our hands in the water they were gone.

So we decided to sit still on one of the rocks, wait for them to hide under it, and then strike. Baldo tried first but came up with empty hands. Then I put my hand under the rock, grabbed

something, and screamed in pain. When I pulled my hand out, a dark prickly ball was stuck to my palm. I called for help.

My older brother Vito came over and told me that it was a sea urchin. He went back to get a knife and holding my hand still, he grabbed the urchin and pulled it out. I screamed once again. Then Vito squeezed a lemon on my injured hand and I screamed even louder. He opened the urchin with the knife and showed me and Baldo the inside, which resembled the yolk of an egg. Vito squeezed some lemon juice on it and slurped it down his mouth.

He said, "Ora un ti fara' chiu' mali." (Now it will never hurt you again.)

The rest of the morning we played in the water, splashing each other, and then we lay on the beach, letting the waves caress our feet or digging holes until we were covered to the neck in sand. When Baldo covered my body with only my head sticking out, I was facing north. On my left was the sea: straight ahead and to my right rested the splendor of ancient Selinunte with its Greek temples and ruins. The golden, massive colonnades on which flocks of birds made their nests, were elevated high in the sky.

As I was admiring the impressive sight I imagined myself back in time, 2,800 years earlier, when the Greeks touched the shores of Selinunte to create a large and spectacular city. Those temples, along with Mount Olympus in Greece, were the most sacred places in the Western world. All of the great Greek minds, whose philosophy and teaching became the basis of modern society, were distantly related to me. I had heard of Aristotle, Plato, and Homer whenever my dad's best friend, Professor Sapienza, came to visit us. Now these imposing structures created and built by the Greeks, many still standing perfectly after so many hundreds of years, gave me a feeling of immortality. Those pillars that housed the Greek gods were

sacred then and even more so now, for they represented the backbone of our society—an eternally present past that always gave me security and a sense of well being.

Lunch the first day was on the beach. My parents had a large umbrella under which the ladies were seated. A tray of warm lasagna was dished out on pretty ceramic dishes. I finished it in no time, waiting for the watermelon to be cut. When everyone was finished, my papa dug the watermelon from the sand, washed it off with seawater, and then placed it on a large dish. He cut the two ends first, and as the watermelon was firmly standing up, he passed the knife from one end to the other in a straight line, staying about four inches away from the center. When the fruit was cut, he made a small incision around the edge of the slices at the top. He then gently tapped the slices, which fell away on the large dish and left standing the middle part of the melon, the sweetest part called "il cuore" (the heart). It was then sliced into smaller circles for each of us.

The sun was scorching hot. Papa wanted everyone home for a nap. My brother Baldo and I pleaded with him to let us stay at the beach, since it was our first day there and we were having a ball. My dad insisted that we go home, but my older brothers persuaded my father to let us stay. They would watch us. My dad agreed, as long as we stayed always together, even in the water, and didn't go in deeper than our stomachs. We also had to wait an hour and thirty minutes after eating before going back in, because of digestion issues.

It was a deal. Everyone left except my brothers and me. The water was crystal clear and as still as a pool. We waited the promised hour and a half before going back in. We lay on our stomachs on the hot sand to absorb as much sun as possible. We wanted to get burned black. We didn't even know what sun lotion was. My salty dry skin started to tickle under the merciless rays and a lazy feeling came over me, leaving me

submissive to the powerful forces of nature that surrounded me. The beach now seemed deserted. Everyone had gone home for lunch. I didn't see my brothers in front of me, and I was too tired to turn around and look for them. My eyes were getting hazy and heavy. I tried to keep them open, fighting against a feeling stronger than me. The gentle splashing of the water against the rocks, and the sensation of the smallest waves caressing my feet and then retreating like in a "catch me if you can game," put me in a state of total relaxation and abandonment. Having pleasantly lost the game, I finally surrendered to the force and splendor of Mother Nature and fell asleep.

At about three thirty, my brothers woke me up. I had slept for an hour and a half. My back was burning but not excessively. We all ran in the sea. The fresh salty water invigorated me. We played games splashing each other and tried once more to catch the little fish swimming serenely around us. We stayed in the water until my papa came to get us, around five o'clock. He wanted us home to wash off and eat a snack, and then later we would all go to the fish market to buy some fresh sardines. We all listened to papa, took the umbrella and the bags from under it, and headed home. After showering we put on clean clothes, ate a piece of dark bread with local peppered pecorino cheese, and told each other how enchanting Selinunte was.

Around six thirty we all took a walk to the fish market down the road. The fishing boats had just pulled in and a dozen crates of various fish, some still jumping, were lined up ready to be sold. We looked at all of them and then my dad bought a case of sardines, which weighed roughly 2 ½ kg (a little over five pounds). Back home we started a fire in the portable barbecue on a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean.

We grilled the sardines and placed them on two large ceramic dishes from Sciacca (a city in southwest Sicily famous for its beautiful hand-made ceramics). We covered them with "ammoglio" (a vinaigrette made of garlic crushed in a mortar, extra virgin olive oil, fresh lemon juice, and a sprinkle of oregano, salt, and pepper). We ate the mouth-watering grilled sardines under a bright moon that shone on the tranquil Mediterranean, a memory that still soothes me every time I think about it. Even today, after many years, whenever I eat sardines with garlic and lemon, I associate the taste and smell with the first time I went to Selinunte. The memories of those days are as sweet today as they were then, sitting on that balcony with papa, mama, and the rest of the family.

After dinner we went for a stroll on the main street to get an ice cream and then we all went to bed. When I lay down on my back, I felt as if a knife had pierced my skin and hot blood was gushing out. I tried to sleep on my side but I couldn't stay in that position for long. I felt feverish and started to shiver. My skin felt as hot as the sun that had been shining in the Sicilian sky at two o'clock that afternoon—and yet a sensation of coldness pervaded inside my body. The strong light absorbed by my skin was now like a fiery and sparkling coal that practically lit the dark room I shared with my brothers.

I saw bright stars and started to cry from the pain. Papa and mama came to see what was wrong. When my mother looked at my back, I knew from her expression that something was seriously wrong. They told me to put on my pants and shoes but no shirt. They took me to an emergency room up the street where the nurse, realizing the gravity of the situation, told my papa to take me right away to the hospital in Castelvetrano or Partanna. My father decided to take me to Partanna, since it was home. With Angelo driving the rented truck, mom, dad, and I headed back to town. My Aunt Bettina and her girls would take

care of the rest of the family while we were gone. During the trip I was dripping from the fever like an ice cube next to a fire.

When we got to the hospital the doctor took my temperature and it was 40 C (104 F). He gave me a shot to break the fever and told my dad that I had sun poisoning and needed to stay away from any source of light. To fight the infection, I needed cold towels applied to my back and a daily injection. Although I was severely burned, the doctor said I would be okay in a week or two if my parents followed his directions. I wanted to go back to Selinunte that same night, but my mother thought it best if we slept at home, minutes away from the hospital.

We went home at around one a.m. I could not fall asleep. My father pulled a bucket of fresh water from the well and my mom wet a small towel in it and gently sponged my back. I screamed from the pain. They tried to calm me down by saying that the first towel hurt the most and the next ones would be less painful. What they said was true, and little by little I started to relax until I fell asleep.

The following day I woke up very late. All the neighbors came to see me. My back felt better, but I still needed to have a shot for the next five days and stay away from direct sunlight for two weeks. *My Lord*, I said to myself, *that is the length of our stay in Selinunte, which means no more playing on the beach or in the water! My vacation is over! Why did my parents have to take me to the doctor?*

In my hometown only a few people went to doctors when they were sick. It was usually an illiterate person who cured the maladies of the ill. Some of these healers had special powers in their hands. By placing their palms on a child's stomach, they could cure the child of worms. Our neighbor Donna Ciccia was the "roto-rooter" for children. She cleared their colons when they were constipated. The tool she used was her metal hair

barrette. Another neighbor, Donna Nina, was the nurse of the courtyard. She was a big lady with no children. She wore a red scarf on her head all the time, with signs of a beard on her face, as strong as pig's hair, which she meticulously shaved every morning.

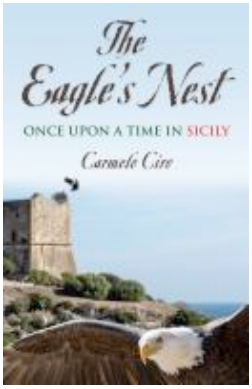
She came to my room at around four o'clock holding a syringe, her squinting eyes searching for me as she said, "Dunne', dunne' Carmiluzzu?" (Where is, where is little Carmelo?).

If I was right under her eyes and she couldn't see me, how could she give me the needle? I was terrified of them, but especially in the hands of Donna Nina. While both of my parents held me still, she managed to stick that cold piece of steel into my buttocks. I cried not so much from the pain, which was far less than my burning back, but from the whole ordeal. Soon after her husband came over, reciting the same phrase he always said: "Unu di sti jorna ti mettu 'nta li vertuli e ti portu a la Casa Bianca, a Washington." (One of these days I'll put you on my mule and take you to the White House in Washington.) Perhaps that was a dream that accompanied him until the day he died.

We stayed home for the next two days. On the third day I felt well enough that my parents decided to go back to the beach house. My brother had returned the truck, so we took the train from Partanna to Selinunte. I had two more days of injections that were going to be administered by the "guardia medica" (the nurse or quasi-nurse) from the emergency room. The train ride was fun and in twenty-five minutes we arrived at the station in Selinunte. From there it was a five-minute walk to the house. My brothers, aunt, and cousins were happy to see me back. For the next few days I didn't even look at the sky, fearful that my eyes would get burnt just like my back. I happily stayed inside, occasionally taking a quick peek at the majestic Mediterranean

that now looked aquamarine, now deep blue, now translucent silver, now meadow green. She was a true queen of Earth, a mother that nourished every living thing, always there to embrace and seduce both young and old.

We left Selinunte transformed by her beauty. No other place on Earth had that magic spell—the power to change insecurity and vulnerability into a soothing sense of well being and immortality. My pain had vanished like a small wave; my mind had opened up like a blue sky after a storm.



In this charming story, Carmelo Ciro vividly evokes his childhood in Partanna, a small and remote Sicilian mountain town overlooking Greek temples and the Mediterranean Sea. It is the 1950s - a time when Sicily was a rigid, closed, and male-dominated society. In an ancient setting of great natural beauty, inhabited by unforgettable townspeople and ruled by myth and ritual, Carmelo comes of age, and finds his identity.

The Eagle's Nest