

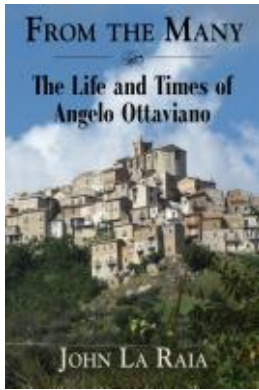
FROM THE MANY



The Life and Times of Angelo Ottaviano



JOHN LA RAIA



From the Many recounts a real life journey from the Abruzzo region of Italy through the boom times of America's early 20th century where an ambitious 17-old-year begins life in America dynamiting tunnels, finding people to emulate and marrying a beautiful young Americanized Italian woman. It is the story of a self-made man whose talents, accomplishments and associations ensured great success, but often caused painful hurt as his family assimilated into American life.

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OF
ANGELO OTTAVIANO

John La Raia

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CHAPTER 1

A MEMORY

“*W*hen I first came to this country, I had to stay over there. I slept on the floor for two nights before they let me go into New York.”

We walked along the seawall of tiny Governor’s Island, a military bastion of a bygone era, bracing ourselves against the howling wind as it whistled down the Hudson River. It takes little effort to recall the cold chilling air and even less to recall the image of my grandfather, a small man, five feet three inches tall, shorter than me at eleven years old. I remember the faint scent of his after shave lotion, the flannel shirt and suit jacket under his overcoat. His white hair, mostly gone by then, had once been brown and one of his hazel eyes constantly wept fluid, tears my brother remembers Angelo describing as having come from rubbing hot pepper on his lid, a remedy for dust irritated eyes he was duped into trying as a youth.

Only a few months earlier, he had suffered a heart attack. I felt an adult’s sense of responsibility for making sure he didn’t exert himself, knowing my mother had entrusted his care to me as she saw us out the door. As we walked he looked across the bay at Ellis Island and he spoke those two sentences, only a few words, words I have never forgotten, describing his first days in America: “When I first came to this country, I had to stay over there. I slept on the floor for two nights before they let me go into New York.”

Thinking back on that day in March of 1958, I only regret I didn’t encourage him to tell me more. “Why?” “Why were you kept over there for two days before they let you come into New York?”

I’ve asked myself that question a hundred times, why was he, unlike so many other immigrants, delayed for more than the customary few hours spent satisfying inspectors’ questions, undergoing medical exams, and clearing various other bureaucratic hurdles?

We start to grow up when we realize even those whom we thought were the bravest among us have also, at one time or another, experienced the same fears, the same nightmares, the same terrors – those dreaded things of which we never speak. It was such a moment of maturity which allowed me to see him, not as the aging man before me, but as the young man of so many years ago. In a flashing image there he was: huddled on the floor, his cockiness gone out of him, his shivering body longing for the safety of his own home. I saw a terrified seventeen year old boy haunted with the fear his long journey might have been for naught, dreading being returned to Italy as a boy never having experienced life in America. Maybe my empathetic feelings for him stifled my curiosity, kept me from asking any questions.

Over the years, recalling many times our walk along the seawall, I've tried to fill in the void of information, to imagine not only why he was detained for those first two nights, but also what life was like for him in the new world of America. The history books make it easy to understand and admire what a precarious chance the immigrants had taken; those stories are well documented. But that one lingering question about this particular man, why was he detained for two nights, leads to more and more questions about the life of Angelo Ottaviano. How did he survive his first few days, weeks, years in New York? What drove him? What compelled him in his relentless pursuit of success? And, what price did he pay for that success? The search for answers can only be taken one step at a time.

My mother, always a proud lady, insisted that I misunderstood him. It was her "unassailable" belief her father, unlike so many other Italian immigrants, never even set foot on Ellis Island. Her reasoning was simple: her father didn't sail to America in steerage. According to my mother's recollection, his was a more dignified passage, probably with second class accommodations on a ship that left not from Naples but from Cherbourg, France. Whether her "version of the story" is true or not, her conviction must be granted at least some measure of credence. Even though she tended to react emotionally when questioned about her family history and even though she was quick to take offense at even the slightest suggestion her relatives

might not have been quite as “patrician” as she was wont to believe, she did have a good memory

History books suggest many causes for the detention of immigrants as they came to the United States. Some of those reasons were serious: physical deformity, communicable disease, criminal records. Others were more mundane: no one showing up to meet the immigrant, papers not in order, miscommunication through language barriers. In the end it mattered not. The new arrival was either admitted to the United States or sent back. Every traveler knew of someone less fortunate, that person whose luck had run out on Ellis Island, the place so many had come to know as that Isle of Tears.

Whatever happened there, whether caused by luck, language, or an irritable immigration officer, each twist of fate held the immigrants powerless as they struggled to understand their surroundings. Imagine the recent arrival: frightened, unsure, and practically helpless after ten days at sea. The immigration officer stands behind his podium, dressed in a military like uniform, cap on his head, thumb in the leather belt attached to a shoulder strap running under the epaulette of his tunic. He winces at the long line of weary, unwashed arrivals, irritated his interpreter has not yet shown up. Making due with hand gestures he beckons the first man forward, straining to read the name written on the tag pinned to the immigrant’s coat. Scanning the arriving ship’s passenger manifest, a United States government form filled in at the port of embarkation in the “old country” and certified by a representative of the United States government, a State Department Vice Counsel, he matches the immigrant’s name, and mentally judges the age recorded there against the person of the very young man standing in front of him. He checks over each of the thirty answers given to the Vice Counsel at embarkation:

“Ottaviano, Angelo,” he says heavily accenting the first three letters of the surname. “Is this you?”

“Si, Si, Doctore. Me, me. Sono io, Ottaviano, Angelo,” the suddenly frightened young man answers back anxiously wondering if he can remember all the answers he gave the Vice Counsel two weeks earlier.

He thinks back, an ocean away, when he queued up to board his ship: hundreds of people impatiently waiting to embark, weary travelers, children in tow, baggage hoisted on their shoulders, darting eyes, stomachs tense with fear, their only source of knowledge to offset their anxiety are letters from relatives already in America or stories they've heard from villagers who have made the trip back and forth.

Without the luxury of time to go deeply into details, the Vice Counsel barks out his queries to Angelo and records responses: name in full; age; married or single; place of birth. Thirty questions, thirty answers. He writes as quickly as he can, making liberal use of check marks.

Like Angelo, immigrant after immigrant has given his or her well-rehearsed, exactly the same, (and apparently correct), answers.

Vice Counsel: "Where are you going?"

Angelo: "New York."

– Check mark - identical for the last ten people before him.

Vice Counsel: "Are you under contract to labor in the U.S.?"

Angelo: "No."

– Check mark - identical for the entire page of names before him.

Vice Counsel: Are you a polygamist?

Angelo: "No."

– Check mark - identical for the entire page of names before him.

Vice Counsel: Are you an anarchist?

Angelo: "No."

– Check mark - identical for the entire page of names before him.

Vice Counsel: "Are you going to join a relative or friend?"

Angelo: "uncle - mio zio."

– The answer only differs by alternatives of "cousin," "father," "husband," or "brother."

Vice Counsel: "How much money do you have?"

Angelo: "Thirty-six dollars."

– The answer varies, sometimes more but seldom less.

Ten days later, ten difficult often harrowing days, now in New York, the immigration officer armed with the vice counsel's annotated

passenger manifest, takes nothing for granted. His job is to be suspicious. He is being paid to make sure the United States is not overrun by criminals, sick people or undesirables. He quizzes Angelo, suspicious of this young man from the south of Italy. Is he coming into the country through the efforts of a labor boss, a "Dago padrone," who has snared him into a contract of servitude? Or if not that, worse yet, will he wind up on the streets as a petty hoodlum? *New York*, he thinks to himself, *has enough of them types in the Five Points to fill a ship every day back to where they come from.*

"Do you have a job waiting for you?" Angelo looks at the officer with a blank stare masking confusion. He knows the word "job." He knows his Uncle already living in New York will put him to work. But, he has been well rehearsed. Every immigrant is aware this is the question if answered incorrectly will surely lead to being detained.

America's principles of civil liberties when pitted against its thirst for cheap labor presented a dilemma for the immigrant: it was wrong to answer he already had a job, but equally wrong to say he did not. Congress had passed a law in 1885 making it illegal for a person to enter the country if he had already signed a labor contract to work in the United States. What in earlier times might have been called a contract of indentured service now was illegal. So an immigrant was not allowed to be employed before arriving. But once in American he had to immediately be ready and able to find a job or he risked being deported for not being able to support himself.

Not only was this delicate balance of legal and illegal labor confusing for the immigrant, it also caused a dilemma for the inspecting immigration officer. When the new arrival answered he had no job, the officer was left to his own discretion making a quick decision: strapping, healthy young men, who looked as if they would have no trouble digging a ditch or hefting a hod of bricks, were passed quickly. Others, especially if they had no credible sponsor like an uncle or an older brother, were judged to be at risk of becoming a public charge, likely to wind up living off the dole or, worse yet, susceptible to being lured into a life of crime – this being an especially lurid possibility for unescorted single women who might be forced into prostitution. These unfortunate souls were more than likely deported, sent back on the same ship which had brought them.

“Do you have a job waiting for you? Come on now tell me.”
Angelo blurted out ... “Mio Zio, my uncle ... he come for me.”

Angelo's fate, like that of every other immigrant, might just have depended on how the immigration officer felt. Like many in public service, they were overworked and paid little. We may never know the exact circumstances of that particular day when Angelo first arrived, but we do know after considering his age, his health, and his financial status, the officer decided Angelo Ottaviano was to be detained before being allowed to enter the United States.

The best guess, although the least dramatic, is Angelo was probably forced to wait for someone to come and vouch for him. And without proof or direct evidence there will always remain a conflict between what my grandfather had told me that winter's day along the seawall on Governor's Island and what my mother dearly believed to be the circumstances of her immigrant father's arrival.

How accurate was either account? I wanted to know the truth but that truth would forever remain hidden unless I researched deeper into the archives of immigration history. And my research, my search for the truth, became somewhat of an obsession for that eleven year old grandson now grown far beyond maturity. With time available and a passion for learning about our Italian family heritage, I delved deeply into every available record, attempting to replace stories and recollection with specifics. But as any researcher knows, once begun, the quest quickly leads to an avalanche of information. Facts emerge that conflict with what was once held dear, or rather, with what one never had reason to question. More research leads to the ambiguities of “could have been” while at the same time, never challenged “for certain” fade into sure doubt.

Research did prove that my mother's circumstantial knowledge was correct: ships' passengers who sailed in second or first class cabins disembarked at the piers on the Hudson River. They were not normally required to undergo further processing at Ellis Island. In my mother's version, the fictitious dramatization written above depicting Angelo's meeting with the Immigration Officer, would have been much less spectacular, much more routine: a young, well-dressed

man steps down the gangplank at a Hudson River pier and sees his uncle waiting for him on the tarmac. The two men embrace, exchange pleasantries and ride off into Manhattan worrying only about how they will celebrate Angelo's safe arrival. Those other poor souls on Angelo's ship, those who made the passage in ship's steerage or third class compartments, are transferred to barges and carried a few more miles down the Hudson River to the immigration station where more thorough examination awaits them.

Who can guess? Whose version of the story is correct? At least one piece of evidence, or more accurately lack of evidence, supported my mother's version: for as much research as I had done, I had not been able to find one "Angelo Ottaviano" from Fresagrandinaria, in the list of immigrants who came through Ellis Island. This puzzle was becoming increasingly difficult to solve.

In digging still deeper, yet another piece of Ellis Island history served to confuse the issue further. On June 14, 1897 the immigration station on Ellis Island was completely destroyed by fire. Thankfully there were no deaths but records dating from 1855 on were lost.

The federal government, forced with responsibility for processing an ever growing number of immigrants, immediately ordered the immigration center rebuilt. Construction proceeded rapidly and on December 17, 1900, the Ellis Island Main Building reopened receiving and processing 2,251 new arrivals.

Destructive fires, destroyed records, an immigration station shuttered for more than three years, the recollection of my grandfather pointing to those then abandoned buildings on Ellis Island across the bay, all seemed to suggest only one possibility: with Ellis Island reopening on December 17, 1900 there were only a very few days left in that year (1900 was the year everyone agreed he immigrated) when Angelo could have disembarked in New York. He either arrived in the two weeks after December 17, 1900 or he did not arrive in that year at all.

I scoured every digitized list of every passenger manifest for every ship that discharged immigrants in New York City between December 17 and December 31 in the year 1900 – and there were

thousands who arrived during those fifteen days – but I could find no record of the young Angelo Ottaviano from Fresagrandinaria.

An assumed name? Illegible handwriting on the ship's manifest? Incorrect dates? Mistakes in transcribing names to digitized records? It may have been any of those or a hundred other possibilities – the more I searched, the more frustrating the puzzle became.

I trusted my mother's recollections; she always had a natural inclination for wanting to be right. But I still stuck to my own memory too of my grandfather's story, (he also found it hard to ever be wrong). He said he spent two nights awaiting entry, "... sleeping on the floor... over there, over there," pointing at Ellis Island. Somewhere between these conflicting stories I had to find the truth.

CHAPTER 2

FAMILY HISTORIES

When we were growing up my brothers and I knew all of our grandparents had come from Italy. We were also keenly aware of what region of Italy they had called home. Angelo Ottaviano was born in a small village in Abruzzo's Chieti province. The name of that village, Fresagrandinaria, (pronounced Frays-a-gran-de-na-reea) flows so melodic off the tongue that it must have been derived from a poem or the lyrics of a song. Angelo's wife, Antonia, later Antonetta, and finally Antoinette Papio, as she, like her name over time, became more properly middle class American, was born in Polla in the Campagna region near the city of Salerno; she came to America with her family in 1892 when she was three years old.

Of my father's lineage, we knew less. But we were well versed in how his father, Giovanni Battista La Raia, had left Laurenzana in the province of Potenza, Basilicata region by himself at the age of 17, arriving in New York in 1887. He worked in lower Manhattan as a carpenter building church pews and he saved enough money to quickly bring his mother and sister to New York. Incredibly hard-working, he eventually bought the apartment building at number 3 King Street where he and his wife lived with their children. The woman he married, Luisa Errico, emigrated with her family in 1885 as a five year old child from the Basilicata town of Rusti. Hers was a shorter and sadder life. She died from complications of epilepsy in 1912 leaving seven children.¹

Luisa's father, Ferdinando, was a tailor. Antonia's father a coal dealer. Their mothers, Maria Angela and Lucia, both strong and resilient women, were widowed young but became rocks of strength for their families.

No matter where they had come from, we knew our forebears began their lives in America with little more than ambition and a fervent desire to make something of themselves. They worked very

hard; they saved their money and had but one goal: raise good families in America. Education, in both mind and manner, the American equivalent of the Italian *ben educato*, was pursued as the pinnacle of accomplishment for their children and its achievement was enforced with a sense of ever stiffening pride. That pride, often at a cost, forged the everyday expectations for measuring both themselves and their offspring.

Unfortunately, by the time I was three years old, they were all gone except for my grandfather, Angelo and a few of the relatives – our great uncles and aunts – who had also made the journey across the ocean and had settled around New York. The Ottaviano were in the Bronx, the Papio in Lodi, New Jersey and most of the La Raia family in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

For us, family history wasn't considered anything special. It wasn't formalized in an heirloom Bible or kept alive in hallowed traditions. Our grandparents had arrived here to become Americans. They spoke English in the home and raised their kids to be good citizens who went to school, accepted responsibility, married and raised good families. Their focus was on the future. Life itself was about the future and the future need be your only concern.

But those of us who have benefitted so greatly from our grandparents' accomplishments do have to look to the past. To appreciate them we have to ponder, more marvel, at how much courage it took for those people to leave everything, saying goodbye to family and home. And when we consider that many more millions of their countrymen opted to stay in the old country, we are compelled to ask, "Why?" Why? Why did they leave?

The saga is not so mysterious that there are not many stories. In Angelo's case we have to give much credence to my mother's dignified, respectful version of why her father emigrated. She always insisted, and a bit of research proved her correct, that her father's family was not starving or hopelessly destitute. Angelo's father, Felice Ottaviano, was a proprietor, a land owner. A few kilometers outside Fresagrandinaria, he had a generous parcel of land where the family grazed sheep and grew olives. We can only speculate how well they lived but Felice and Maria Longhi Ottaviano raised six boys

and two girls to maturity. Angelo was the second born son and it was my mother's contention that for her father, as the second son, inheriting the family land would have been all but impossible, and so he sought his fortune in America.

That argument by itself is not difficult to accept. Except I never heard Angelo himself ever claim lack of inheritance as an excuse for leaving. In fact, I don't ever remember him saying why he left. For him it would have been easier to explain, if he indeed ever felt the need to explain why he had chosen to do anything, that he came to America because it was his future, and Abruzzo, the land of his forebears, was his past.

Among the very few documents left from Angelo's own records, there is a copy of Felice Ottaviano's last will and testament. It supports my mother's contentions about wealth: Felice had prospered enough to have a notary make out a fairly lengthy will before he died. But, contrary to my mother's assertions, in that testament he bequeathed his land, in equal parts to all of his six sons. Each of them, Basso, Angelo, Adamo, Antonio, Attanasio, and Gelsomino, were to have a portion of the family estate. His daughters too, Candida and Nicolina, were left money. By all available accounts, the Ottaviano family of Fresagrandinaria was a family of some means.

Means or no means, being able to resolve the question of why Angelo would have forsaken his inheritance, why he would have given up title to family land, probably lies more obscurely in the fact that his father's will was written in 1909. Felice Ottaviano was dying at the age of 55, an event his sons never expected or at least hoped would not happen for many years into the future. But impatiently, Angelo had left home to seek his fortune in America nine years earlier. He may have thought at the time that he would someday return. Or he may not have been interested at all in waiting for a parcel of land he would have to share with his brothers.

CHAPTER 3

FINDING ROOTS

*W*e can read the descriptions of hardship, sickness and sheer terror which the immigrants experienced on their sea voyages. But we can only guess at what it was like for Angelo.

No doubt, he was a tough young man. If he was frightened or even sick, it is doubtful he shared those thoughts with anyone. I remember him telling me, maybe more like bragging to me, when I was six years old and hospitalized for a few days with a stomach ailment, that in his entire life he had never spent a single day in the hospital. I don't recall feeling discouraged but I do recollect thinking of him as an indestructible superman with a record I would never be able to duplicate.

What could it have been like for that young man, the seventeen year old immigrant? How could we even begin to imagine the doubts, the courage, and ultimately, the sheer determination, it must have taken for him to leave his home, leave his family, leave almost everything and everyone he had ever known, to sail for ten days across three thousand miles of ocean? Try for a moment to imagine the rural Abruzzese youth saying goodbye to his mother, father, five brothers and two sisters. He wasn't sentimental. Maybe he shrugged it all off, told the local priest he didn't need a mass said for his safe passage. And maybe he spent his last few hours complaining to his father about the difficulty he had in obtaining his "nulla osta," the papers required of all émigrés which included their birth certificate and statements that they had no criminal record nor had they shirked their obligatory military duty. Walking away from Fresagrandinaria, with just a straw valise in one hand and maybe a pack of food for the journey in the other, he was full of naive confidence. He had likely told one and all who were interested that he'd be back in a few years. He'd be back as a rich man with pockets full of money. Like the great Italian explorer from Genoa, he too was going to discover America.

Whatever he said and whatever he felt, he walked down past the communal fountain where the village women came for water every day. He made the sign of the cross as he traversed the shadow of the Chiesa San Salvatore, the village church where he was baptized. Taking one last look back up the mountain where Fresagrandinaria is perched, he rode a mule down to the Trigno River following it past San Salvo for the 15 kilometers or so until he came to Vasto, the big city on the coast. There he said goodbye to one or two of his brothers, left them with the mule, and boarded a train.

*I*mmigration, ocean crossings, Ellis Island, labor gangs ... for the four million Italians who came here between 1885 and 1927 those are the words which recall the beginnings of their American heritage, which recount the well documented stories and the common experiences. So let's jump forward. Jump to 1948, to an Italian nation trying to recover from the Second World War which had left much of the country devastated and impoverished. That, for me, is where the chronicle of this particular story began to form. That is where, in recorded memories, I began to find the roots of our family tree located in the small Italian village which Angelo Ottaviano had left forty eight years earlier.

His daughter, my mother, had married the son of an Italian immigrant and the two of them, by most measures, had already drunk fully from the cup of American opportunity. They were both university graduates and my father, a lieutenant colonel in the United States Army was stationed with US Occupation Forces in Germany. On a vacation trip to see the ancestral homes of their parents, they drove a 1940 Cadillac south through the Brenner Pass into Italy, on a journey to explore their heritage.

What a home coming it must have been. When that big black Cadillac climbed the steep hill approaching Fresagrandinaria and my mother found her uncles, aunts, cousins and probably most of the other 2000 or so villagers waiting to greet them, what a celebration must have occurred. She had met some of them when they were in the United States at one time or another during her childhood and if she couldn't quite remember them, she had at least heard many,

many stories about them. Of her five paternal uncles, two of them, like many Italians, had returned home to Fresagrandinaria. They returned with some money and undoubtedly with boastful stories of how well off their brothers in America were doing, especially their brother Angelo.

On that beautiful 1948 autumn day in Fresagrandinaria, more cousins than my mother ever knew she had, all gathered around their “cugini americani.” Zia (aunt) Candida, the oldest of the siblings had stayed close to her younger brother in the United States, whom she still loved dearly, through letters and photographs. Even though they had never met in person, my mother knew her aunt well through those letters, and, of course, through stories from her father. She was a strong, resilient but unfortunate woman who had lost seven of her own children to the great influenza epidemic of 1918. But on that day in 1948 all the sorrow and hardships were put aside and everyone basked in the radiance of the immigrants’ dream, now come to life in front of them.

Amidst all the celebration and joy, there was a camera. Mom and Dad took pictures, small black and white pictures, on a view finder Leica, preserving memories of that wonderful reunion. It was only great fortune more than 50 years later in 1999, when we were cleaning out my parents’ home, that I found those pictures. They were stacked in a small pile with many other things in a dresser drawer, treasures which could have just as easily been thrown away.

Even more fortunate, each picture was captioned with notes. My mother had jotted some names: “Uncle Adam,” “Aunt Candida,” “Uncle Adam’s second son.” They are brief little notes written on the back of tiny two inch by two inch photographs – small – but what beautiful stories they tell. They shout out the joy of a homecoming in the thousand words not written.

The men all wear suit jackets, the wives and fiancées of the cousins are dressed in what must be their Sunday best with starched collars and white sashes. Aunt Candida poses in one photo wearing my mother’s fur collared coat and a stylishly veiled hat – undoubtedly my mother’s best too; she wasn’t so Americanized that she didn’t understand the need to create the “bella figura,” for her Italian family. But Aunt Candida seemed to know a few things as well about making

a good impression. She strikes a formal pose with that veil pulled down fashionably under her nose knowing without a doubt her niece would be sending this photograph home to her father that long ago departed brother who Candida hadn't seen in 48 years.

Curiously, in several of the pictures there is a little child. He couldn't have been any older than two – coincidentally the same age as I was in 1948. My mother never recorded the child's name, but in those pictures where Uncle Adamo is holding him, she wrote, "Uncle Adamo's son's child."

Fifty-six years later, in 2004, I looked at those pictures fascinated by what possibilities could exist. Was there still a cousin in that small village? That little baby, "Uncle Adamo's son's child," almost certainly the same age as me, was he still living in Fresagrandinaria? The thoughts were tantalizing but the chances seemed remote. Italy had experienced post war migrations. Thousands from the countryside left for the cities, departing the south in droves and heading north for factory jobs in Turin or Milan or for opportunities in Germany and France. They went where they could make a living. Whereas Fresagrandinaria had a population of 2,000 in 1948, in 2004 only 900 citizens remained. But still, pondering the possibility of having cousins among those 900 was exciting. After all, it isn't uncommon to hear of people finding their relatives in remote Italian villages. Maybe, just maybe, I could do the same.

While you may dream your dreams and plan your journeys, all with the best of intentions, life still makes its own demands. Consequently, in looking back, you wish you had spent more time listening; you wish you had asked more questions. When the older generations pass on, the legacy of information, the stories, the background – it all goes with them. The past slips away into generalities and vagueness.

Yet, fortunately for me, I still had those pictures. I had my memories too. I could recall my mother and my uncles talking about their father's village. In the early 1950's I remember helping my mother carry packages to the post office. They were brown paper wrapped boxes of old clothes. She was sending them ... where? That

was a good question. Where had she been sending them? It was only so many decades later, after finding those pictures and seeing those black and white images, I realized the only logical destination for those packages was Fresagrandinaria. There just weren't any other family connections back in Italy. Her own mother, Antoinette Papio, had immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was only three years old. My father's knowledge of his father's home town extended little beyond the name of the village itself. There were no solid connections anywhere else but Fresagrandinaria. Maybe some of my old clothes sent in those parcels actually wound up being worn by that baby, that son of Adamo's son.

More began to make sense as those little black and white pictures from 1948 began to weave a whole cloth from the many fragments of stories heard in my youth. The uncles and aunts sorted themselves into their proper branch of the family tree whereas before they tended to mingle together leaving me never quite sure who was who. Was Uncle Nick from the Ottaviano branch or the Papio family on my maternal grandmother's side? Was Gelsomino the one they called Barratia? Or was that just a story made up to aggravate my mother as it always seemed to do whenever it was told? How many of Angelo's brothers came to the United States and how many of them returned to Fresa? Who were the two uncles my mother visited at their bedsides in 1958 while they lay dying in New York City hospitals? Curiosity, when given the time, builds a great desire to find answers.

Even though we had been to Italy several times, Jackie and I never ventured farther south on the Adriatic coast than Fano in the Marche region. But with each trip we promised ourselves one day we would slip away to Abruzzo and make this dream come true: we would visit Fresagrandinaria. That promise gave me incentive over the years to keep studying my Italian lessons. I knew that one day, someday, if we ever did get to Fresa, the abbreviated name of Fresagrandinaria used by the locals, if I ever wanted to have an intelligent conversation in the church, at the municipio[†], or even at a

[†] Municipio – town hall

bar, if family ties were ever going to be reconnected across the miles and decades, I would have to ask questions in the native tongue.

Our own children, Andy and Christina, grew up as travelers too. We encouraged their interest in new places when they were young and they made three trips to Italy before graduating from college. After they were married, Andy and his wife, Felicia, had visited Spoleto twice and made a very noble gesture in November of 2004 when they asked Jackie and me if we would like to share a villa with them and 12 of their best friends in that beautiful Umbrian city. Wow! Yes, of course we would.

We had been to Umbria before and had a great time seeing its green hills and visiting its beautiful cities. But I suspect it wasn't more than a couple minutes after we told Andy, "Yes, we'd love to..." I began hatching the plan, figuring the strategy. This would be the time. I checked the maps. Spoleto was in the center of the Italian peninsula, north of Rome, equidistant from the east and west coasts. A perfect location – a couple of hours drive through the Marche region over to the Adriatic Sea, then you hook up with the A-14 Autostrada, drive along the beautiful coast and there it was – Abruzzo. Another hour, two at the most, and we'd reach the city of Vasto. From there it was just a few miles inland to Fresa. We could do it. Jackie was all for it. I asked Andy if he would like to see his great grandfather's village and he didn't hesitate for a second before saying yes. We would rent a car in Spoleto and make the trip. The plan was fixed. The details would all fall into place.

With a couple of months to prepare I began studying my Berlitz Italian tapes in earnest. Commuting home from work every night gave me a solid hour of practice listening to cassettes whose lessons I could almost recite verbatim. But that didn't mean I could always manipulate those same words outside the context of the perfectly staged encounters with the Berlitz characters as they exaggerated their vowels and enunciated words precisely while they chatted at train stations and restaurants. Like any would be traveler, before encountering the sobering and confusing reality of true "total language immersion," I was feeling pretty confident.

More than the ability to stumble through a few questions and answers in the native tongue, I had the beautiful treasure of all those little black and white photos. They would be the “aces” of my communications skill pack. With a little luck, that album would make a connection with someone in the village, someone who would know if there were any cousins still around. I slipped the photos into the vinyl jackets of a small blue, pocket size album and typed out captions for each picture, translating my mother’s descriptions into Italian. I downloaded Goggle maps showing the route from Vasto running along the Trigno valley to Fresa. The route didn’t look too complicated but without the benefit of a global positioning device, (the technology wasn’t available in rental cars yet), I couldn’t help but feel we might still struggle a bit in finding our way along the back roads.

As we neared the end of October and time approached for our departure, I became more and more nervous. A persistent, nagging feeling of potential disappointment plagued me. Where would we go first? Who could we ask? Would my Italian be good enough to communicate? What if there was no one from the Ottaviano family left there? Worse, what if there were some relatives, but they weren’t friendly?

It’s natural to have “jitters.” It’s all too human to fear failure when embarking on a great undertaking. But for this adventure we would just have to go forward and see what happened. At least that’s what I kept telling myself.

The last week in October arrived. I bought a new digital camera; it cost over \$360 – a lot of money for an eight pixel piece of emerging photographic technology. But it was state of the art; a good camera would be well worth the investment. After all, my parents’ photos from 1948 were now an heirloom and I couldn’t consider contributing anything less to the family history, or so the expense was rationalized.

Friday, November 19, 2004 was the day of departure. Jackie had been granted time off from teaching at Aquinas School and I booked vacation days from my job at the Pentagon. Only the final details were left: get over the last few hurdles at work, take care of the

house, stop the mail, cancel the papers, lock the door, and, and, and – we'd be on our way.

Wednesday morning came early, earlier than my normal five o'clock alarm. For some reason I couldn't sleep and I had a disturbing feeling about my father. When you are excited about leaving on a vacation trip and you know you will be out of touch for a week, it must be normal for any adult child to feel just a little bit guilty about leaving his 96 year old parent alone. I worried about my Dad quite a bit. Just a month earlier, in October, Jackie and I had gone to Florida to see him at the care center where he lived. He seemed frail. Worse yet he was emotionally fragile, crying when we left and confiding to Jackie that he wished he had taken more joy out of life, hadn't been so hard on us when we were younger, hadn't been so much like his own father – to hear him speak like that was stunning and touching. He had never before expressed his feelings with such emotion.

We had told him about the trip we were planning and showed him the pictures from 1948. He was happy for us and he retold his favorite story from his visit to Fresa. The village men were so concerned about his shiny black 1940 Cadillac with its red leather upholstery they insisted he park it inside the flour mill overnight. The memories of that day, as always, delighted him. He laughed about how a fine layer of flour dust had settled on the car and the men insisted on cleaning it. I could only imagine, looking at his picture in the small photo with my mother's uncles and male cousins outside the mill, he in his Army officer's uniform. How proud they must have been of this robust young man – an *Americano* now – but still, he was one of them, just like them, or at least just like who they could have been.

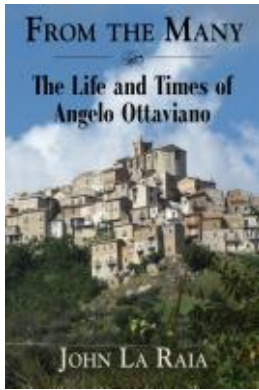
That early Wednesday morning as I lay in bed, my thoughts drifted and I spent the last hour waiting for the alarm to go off, tossing and turning, praying for my father. I said the familiar prayers, the "Our Fathers" and the "Hail Marys," the same prayers so often recited as a child when I wanted escape from fear in the night. That early morning I sought comfort in repeating them.

By the time I arrived at the office, just before seven a.m., my phone was ringing. It was Jackie. She was upset saying the Florida care center had called asking for me. They wouldn't give her any information; no answers to her pleading question, "Is he O.K.?" They just insisted she have me call them as soon as possible.

I called. The woman told me he had passed away during the night. It sounded so cold, so dispassionate. I wanted to scream at her legally prescribed detachment. Was he by himself? Did he die in his sleep? She had few answers other than they found him passed away during the morning bed check.

What difference did it make, whatever she said? Can you criticize the bereaved for emotion? For feeling angry? Can you deny a care worker the protection of callousness? I hung up the phone with a jumble of conflicting emotions: true sadness that he was gone, apprehension about an executor's obligations, the practicality of calling my two brothers to inform them of the passing.

There would be no trip to Italy. Instead we flew to Florida. I put away the photo album and the camera and spent the time with undertakers, lawyers and family. Arrangements were made, duties completed; particulars of his funeral and his estate occupied me for the next year. Amidst it all I couldn't help but think how much he, if he had lived a while longer, and for that matter, if my Mom who had passed away almost five years earlier were still around, if all had gone as planned, how much they would have enjoyed hearing about the little village in Abruzzo they had once visited.



From the Many recounts a real life journey from the Abruzzo region of Italy through the boom times of America's early 20th century where an ambitious 17-old-year begins life in America dynamiting tunnels, finding people to emulate and marrying a beautiful young Americanized Italian woman. It is the story of a self-made man whose talents, accomplishments and associations ensured great success, but often caused painful hurt as his family assimilated into American life.

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