

Foreword

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L'America

The White Star Line steamship *Canopic* was tied securely to the dock at the quay in Naples on a beautiful day in May 1899. The sun twinkled on the waves, small fishing boats darted around the harbor, and the old city looked serene under the early morning mist. The *Canopic* was a fairly new ship with a deep black hull, one funnel, two masts, and twin screw propellers. Her twin coal-fired engines could propel her at over fifteen knots and she could make the transatlantic crossing in little over a week during the fair-weather months.

The parade of immigrants began at the railroad station, the Stazione di Napoli Centrale, and slowly wound its way toward the Piazza Giuseppe Garibaldi. It was the same scene almost every day of the week. Rustic country people arrived, dressed in hand-spun woolens and carrying a motley assortment of valises and trunks. Men hoisted large trunks on their backs, women held children tightly to their thick skirts, and all the while the Neapolitan street toughs, the *guaglioni*, danced around ridiculing their country clothes, calling them the derogatory term *terroni*, and trying to entice the young girls to join them. It was only a short distance from the terminal down the Via Garibaldi to the docks, where several steamships were tied up awaiting their wretched cargo.

The scene on the dock was one of barely controlled chaos. Midship, the first- and second-class passengers were ushered aboard on a dedicated

gangplank by the courtly and courteous bursar. The ship had room for five hundred first- and second-class passengers and eight hundred in steerage. The steerage passengers, almost all southern Italians, were herded aboard like cattle near the stern. They came from the desperately poor hill towns surrounding Naples and Avelino, from Calabria, and from near the city of Matera in Basilicata. There was also a large group of noisy Sicilians dressed in their colorful costumes and jostling each other good-naturedly.

Southern Italy and Sicily were emptying out. It had been forty years since Italy was unified, and the Risorgimento (Unification) had brought prosperity to the North, but the South, the Mezzogiorno, was stuck in a medieval kind of serfdom like an insect preserved in amber. The Normans introduced feudalism to Italy in the eleventh century and it remained in place for over eight hundred years. Even when the Bourbons supposedly abolished feudalism in 1806, the ownership of land passed, not to the tenants, but to the local aristocracy and foreign investors. It seemed as though there were scores of *nobili*—*baroni*, *marchesi*, *conti*, and even *principi*—who owned the fertile land and extracted excessive rents from the serfs. The typical southern Italian farmer, or *contadino*, may have owned a rough stone house without water or sanitation but worked on large, industrial-style farms where at least half of all harvests went to the absentee owner. The *paesano* would arise before dawn, walk an hour or more to the farm, work until sunset, and finally walk home exhausted. He did this seven days a week, all year round. No wonder they called life in the southern Italian villages *la miseria*. Malaria and yellow fever were endemic in the swampy marshlands and early death was an ever-present reality. Superstition abounded and every village had a patron saint to protect the people. Miracles were passionately requested by prayers and sacrifices. Many young men and women wore magical amulets made from red coral around their necks to ward off the ever-lurking *malocchio*, or evil eye.

As late as 1935 the Torinese doctor, artist, and intellectual Carlo Levi was arrested on the order of Benito Mussolini because of his anti-Fascist writings. Instead of sentencing Levi to jail, the Fascists imposed an even worse punishment on the sophisticated northerner. They banished him to live for a year in Lucania, now called Basilicata, in the far South, where he wrote a journal of his life in the villages of Grassano and Gagliano, which he published in 1945. He called the book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, which was a common local expression meaning “Christ stopped at Eboli.” The town of Eboli was the terminus of the railway line from the North. Beyond that point travel was difficult, and the region was isolated from the rest of Italy and from civilization. The people of those hill towns felt abandoned, certainly by the politicians in

Rome and even by their revered Catholic Church. Northern Italians considered southerners a different race of people, more like animals than humans, and called them *terroni*, “people of the land.”

Levi was not confined to his house or restricted in his movements around the towns. Local officials were pleased to have such a famous intellectual from Turin in their midst and tried to ingratiate themselves with him. Levi, however, refused all invitations from the local leaders and instead aligned himself with the *paesani*, whom he grew to like and even admire for their inner strength, determination, and resilience.

There is an apocryphal story of an important minister from Rome who visited a small southern Italian village just before the turn of the twentieth century. The government was considering building a public works project for the town and he had come to inspect the area and meet the local residents. The mayor gave him a tour of the town, which seemed strangely quiet to the minister. There were a few elderly people sitting in front of their houses and some children playing in the dusty streets but no young men. The minister assumed the men of the town were off in the fields working the land and asked the mayor when they would return. “Ah,” said the mayor, “if you want to meet the young men of the town, Excellency, you will have to travel to Boston or New York. They’ve all left.”



Among the passengers boarding the *Canopic* on that day in May were two teenagers from the hill town of Chiusano di San Domenico, outside Avelino. Carmela, a slight, fifteen-year-old girl with a turned-up nose, was traveling with family and friends to Boston. Nicola, the shy boy who stared at her in church, didn’t have a ticket but somehow had sneaked aboard as a stowaway. Carmela was promised to him; he believed they were *promessi sposi*, betrothed ones. Nicola was also running from the police, because of an unfortunate incident concerning a dead priest, so escaping to America was of vital importance to him.

The spring passage was rough and many of those in steerage were constantly seasick. There was the smell of vomit, the unrelenting thrum of the engines, and the odor of hundreds of unwashed bodies to contend with. The screams of frightened country people, most of whom had never seen the ocean, made the trip resemble a scene from Dante’s *Inferno*. Steerage passengers were allowed on deck only once a day, while the first- and second-class passengers were eating, so as not to be seen by the upper classes. They were limited to the aft deck at the stern of the vessel, where they were enveloped

by coal smoke from the enormous funnel, but even that was better than the horrors of steerage. Sometimes steerage passengers refused to go back to the bowels of the ship and sailors had to beat them with wooden clubs to force them back down.

The mortality rate for steerage passengers was upward of 10 percent, and those who died en route were unceremoniously buried at sea. My great uncle, Alessandro Onesti, who owned the Hotel Rome in North Square, died on a return trip from Italy. He was wrapped in a canvas shroud and buried at sea, without a priest to bless his body and missing his diamond pinky ring.

When the *Canopic* landed in New York Harbor, the upper-class passengers quickly disembarked while those in steerage were transferred to smaller ferries, which brought them to Ellis Island for processing. From the deck of the ferry they stared in amazement at the great city with buildings that seemed to touch the sky. L'America was truly a wondrous place.

As they passed by Ellis Island, Carmela and Nicola surely would have noticed the enormous bronze statue of a woman holding a torch in her right hand and asked other passengers about it. Some probably thought it was a lighthouse guiding ships into the harbor. Others may have said it was the statue of a powerful American saint named Santa America, who would protect them. Whoever it was, they would be happy to see this mighty saint and would have made the sign of the cross to ask for her blessing and protection.

On the ferry the immigrants could breathe fresh air for the first time and thought their nightmare journey was almost over, but the indignities of Ellis Island lay ahead. On some days over ten thousand immigrants landed on Ellis Island, and Nicola, the stowaway, somehow managed to slip into that great crush of humanity. The immigrants were lined up, poked and prodded, and their eyelids jerked up with sharp hooks looking for trachoma, which, if discovered, resulted in immediate deportation back to Italy. Italians called Ellis Island *l'isola delle lagrime*, the isle of tears, because so many hopeful immigrants were refused entry and sent back to their home countries.

From New York Carmela and Nicola made their way to Boston, where they had friends and relatives. The train was expensive and they most likely took the coastal side-wheel steamship that left New York daily for Rowes Wharf in Boston. From there they could carry their trunks to the North End and finally begin their new life in l'America. The date of their arrival was May 25, 1899.

At that time, North Square was the center of the Italian North End. The house of the patriot Paul Revere was located there but, much to the chagrin of the Yankee Puritans, it was used as an Italian grocery store and

cigar-manufacturing company. The young couple discovered that the North End was very similar to their Italian village, Chiusano di San Domenico. Italian was the language of everyday conversation, although they had a difficult time understanding some of the other regional dialects. There were grocery stores, butchers, cheese and wine shops, and all manner of other small shops that catered to the needs of the nascent Italian community. It was almost like being back in Italy but much more crowded and chaotic. There were also hardships to be endured. The newly arrived Italian immigrants were exploited by the owners of the factories where they worked; by the police and other city officials, who demanded payments for the most trivial considerations; and even by the *padrone* (bosses), their own countrymen, who loaned them money and then sold them into virtual slavery to pay it back.

The Boston Brahmins (Yankee Americans) were repulsed by the immigrants from southern Europe and Russia, particularly Italians and Jews. They considered Italians to be criminals and anarchists and Jews to be union organizers and Bolsheviks. The Eugenics Society of America was founded and supported by two Boston Brahmins, Henry Cabot Lodge, the junior senator from Massachusetts, and Joseph Lee, a wealthy Beacon Hill Brahmin. They excoriated and dehumanized these immigrants in their writings and grotesque cartoon caricatures published in newspapers owned by the anti-immigrant publisher William Randolph Hearst. In 1924, they finally succeeded in passing the Immigration Restriction Act, which severely limited immigrants from southern and eastern Europe (basically Italians and Jews) and favored those from what they considered the more refined and acceptable northern European and Nordic countries. This blatantly racist act remained in effect until 1965.



Nicola and Carmela found a shared room in a tenement building on the North Square, which was owned by *paesani* (fellow Italians) from their town. Rooms were rented by the week, the day, or the hour. There was no privacy and only one toilet per floor, which had to be shared by several tenants. The couple were married in Sacred Heart Church and Nicola worked as a day laborer—“pick and shovel”—as they used to say, and as a longshoreman unloading coal from the barges that brought it to the Lincoln Wharf power station. By 1920 they had their own tiny, cold-water flat at 20 Moon Street and were raising a family, which eventually numbered ten children. They then moved to South Medford like so many other North End Italians and were able to send four of their six sons to college and one even to medical school. Once they graduated from high school, the girls were expected to

help raise the younger children or get married as was the custom in Italian peasant families.

Carmela and Nicola's story has been told millions of times about immigrants of all nationalities and is still being told today. The early immigrants asked for little, expected nothing, and received even less. All they wanted was a chance to work, earn a living, feed their families, and educate their children. The only safety net they had was the strength of their backs and the love of their families. There was no welfare, no Medicaid or Medicare, no unemployment benefits, no food stamps or rent subsidies, nothing. Yet in spite of all the obstacles and prejudices, they refused to surrender. They relied on peasant skills and instincts developed and honed over millennia of enduring suffering and oppression. They were tough, resilient, clever, and yes, stubborn, and they survived and thrived. Their children and grandchildren benefited greatly from their sufferings and helped make America the great country it is today.



I was born in the North End of Boston one month before World War II ended and have lived there ever since. The North End of my youth and young adulthood was an Italian village. In many ways it was the quintessential Italian American immigrant neighborhood. Separated from the rest of Boston, first by blocks of semiabandoned warehouses and manufacturing buildings and then by the Central Artery roadway, which replaced them, the North End remained physically isolated from the rest of the city. It was also separated culturally and socioeconomically by being Italian and having a strong ethnic identity. Outsiders came to eat at the many Italian restaurants and in the summer tourists would walk on the Freedom Trail, but the North End remained an insular, Italian neighborhood well into the last years of the twentieth century.

Southern Italians weren't the first immigrant group to settle in the North End. Before the Civil War, the Irish came escaping the potato famine. The North End at that time was still made up of wooden buildings left over from the colonial era and the Irish crowded into these wretched hovels. Around 1880, eastern European Jews arrived fleeing the tsar's pogroms. Their quarter centered on Salem Street, where they had dry-goods shops, kosher butchers, synagogues, and schools. The Italians began arriving in the 1890s, and what began as a trickle soon became a tidal wave. Like all ethnic groups they re-created what was familiar, and by the early twentieth century the North End resembled an Italian village. Almost every street had a butcher, a bakery,

a greengrocer, and a *salumeria* (deli), where Italian groceries were available. There were Italian social clubs and saint's societies that organized street festivals every summer. Settlement houses and Italian churches helped acclimate newly arrived immigrants to the oftentimes confusing social and cultural norms of the new country. The tenement buildings of the North End helped tens of thousands of immigrants gain a foothold in America. Most used them as a steppingstone to a suburban house with a garden, but some, like my family, stayed on and watched the North End change.

The single most important thing the North End had to offer the immigrants was the opportunity to work. From the 1860s onward, America was expanding and industrializing, and low-paid workers were needed to do the heavy lifting. The North End and surrounding neighborhoods had thousands of jobs in the wholesale meat, produce, and fishing industries. There were warehouses, restaurants, taverns, and coffee shops, all within a short walk or trolley ride. We had everything we needed right outside our front doors. My mother and grandmother would shop for food daily at their favorite shops. There they could speak in Italian and catch up on local news and gossip. As children, my parents, aunts, and uncles worked in typical blue-collar North End jobs, as a seamstress, candy dipper, salesclerk, secretary, bar tender, undertaker, auto mechanic, and bookie. Every morning Nonna would make a big pot of coffee accompanied by toasted Italian bread or fried polenta left over from the night before. When they returned from work in the evening supper, would be ready: chicken soup with a bitter green salad, fried veal cutlets, home made pasta, or maybe chicken cacciatore. After supper the men would go to their clubs to play cards and socialize. The women would attend classes at one of the settlement houses or go to a novena or mission at one of the four Catholic churches. On payday the girls would turn over their money to Nonna, who would give them a weekly allowance and save the rest in a metal coffee can over the sink. The boys got to keep their own money but had to contribute to household expenses. It was a wonderful way of life that was enveloped in love, family, and tradition.



They say that history is the story of great men doing great things, but Anthony Riccio has taken a different approach in this book and has honored the quotidian. He has chosen to profile the ordinary lives of the thousands of Italians who settled in the North End. Anthony arrived in the North End in 1978, fresh out of graduate school in Florence, Italy. He came from an Italian American community in New Haven, Connecticut, so it was natural for him

to accept a job as coordinator of the North End Senior Citizen Center. There he became friendly with the residents from my parents' and grandparents' generation, who were some of the last people to have experienced inner-city tenement life. Many of those elderly people were in their nineties and had immigrated to Boston during the great Italian diaspora of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anthony quickly realized that their stories were about to be lost in the fog of time so he decided to record their memories. He visited them in their cold-water flats, looked at old photographs they had tucked away in boxes, and marveled at the memories they shared. Southern Italians who immigrated to America were poorly educated and their cultural traditions were passed from generation to generation by the spoken word, through stories and allegorical tales. This book is a record of those accounts, which are stories that come *di cuore*, from the heart.

The North End has changed, but like all great neighborhoods it is reinventing itself in a new and unexpected way. Italian families have mostly moved on to the streetcar suburbs and beyond. They are being replaced by young professionals who work in the financial district. Gentrification has made its inexorable changes and a once poor, working-class neighborhood has suddenly become posh. The neighborhood still retains a veneer of Italian culture but continues to evolve according to the needs and desires of the times. This book pays homage to those Italian families and to the millions of poor Italians who came to America seeking a better life. Because of their blood, sweat, and tears we have prospered, and we owe them our eternal gratitude.

—North End

Boston, Massachusetts, August 2020 Addendum

Anthony Riccio died a few weeks after submitting this book to his publishers. His passion was preserving the voices and stories of the early Southern Italian immigrants to America and his passing is a tremendous loss to the Italian/American community. While we mourn his passing, we celebrate his great achievement. This book will serve as a living memorial to Anthony's love for his Italian heritage.

Riposa in pace, caro amico, che la terra ti sia lieve.

Rest in peace, dear friend, may the earth rest gently upon you.

—Nicholas M Dello Russo