

Life in Southern Italy at the Turn of the Century

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I had nothing in Montefalcione—if you didn't work you didn't eat.

—NUNZIO DIMARINO

“Brigandone! Ma che vai trovando [You big brigand! What are looking for]?” There in the hallway stood my diminutive immigrant grandmother, whose daily routine on the first floor had been disrupted by my rumble down the stairs. Hands on hips and with a familiar grin across her dark olive face, her charcoal eyes danced with delight as they did whenever she caught her mischievous grandson misbehaving. She mildly protested my youthful transgression, playfully calling me a brigandone. Growing up in the late 1950s as a third-generation Italian American, I had no understanding what my nickname signified in Italian history or the volumes it spoke about the resistance to the northern military campaign to crush the South.

The commotion I had caused triggered my grandmother's memories of the briganti—bands of resistance fighters comprised of draft dodgers, deserters, ex-soldiers of the Bourbons, escapees, poor farmers, day laborers, carpenters, blacksmiths, coal miners, tailors, tinsmiths, porters, bricklayers, shepherds, coffee makers, a lawyer, a judge. All had fought against the invading Piedmontese army, which attacked towns like my grandmother's with merciless violence.¹

Women fighters, known as *brigantesse*, also joined the insurrection. Descending from desolate mountain hideaways to wage surprise attacks, female soldiers rode on horseback and fired guns, often demonstrating more audacity in battle than their male counterparts.² They cut their hair and many

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dressed as men in battle to show allegiance to their band and to the insurgency. After skirmishes with the enemy, they changed into peasant outfits with an air of nonchalance, becoming valuable informants and message-carriers. As country nurses, they administered home remedies to the wounded. Risking certain death, they gathered critical information about enemy troop movements as spies and played important roles in planning acts of defiance with their male counterparts.³ When arrested as outlaws, women were often granted leniency based on the patriarchal view that women are weak.

From the time of the Risorgimento (Unification) in 1861, government victors wrote Italy's history, portraying the South as an uncivilized and culturally backward territory. Italian Americans, many of whom are descendants of the southern peasantry, inherited an incomplete picture of Italian history from grandparents who told stories of poverty and "*la miseria*." From its inception in 1815, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had actually been a thriving cultural and economic entity. Prior to the northern invasion in the 1860s, the kingdom's booming steel and iron factories produced the materials to construct the first suspension bridge, railway tunnel, and gaslight in Italy and also supplied the metals to build the second largest merchant fleet in Europe. Textile mills and silk factories proliferated throughout the South, employing over one hundred thousand women. Unemployment was unknown and the thought of emigration was foreign.

The banking system loaned money to support businesses at low interest and issued the first bank checks in history. The South gave far more toward the creation of a national treasury than the north, whose banks were in financial trouble with their banking overlords, the Masons of England. Learned teachers taught in a free public school system at every level and universities in Avellino and Salerno offered advanced degrees in medicine, theology, and law. The kingdom's population had the lowest infant mortality rate in Italy and nursing homes and hospitals proliferated, staffed by nine thousand doctors. Italy's first railroad line between Naples and Portici was created in 1839. The first electric telegraph was established in 1852. The kingdom created the first Seismic Observatory in the world as well as botanical gardens and a museum of archeology. The arts flourished in an era when sculptors, painters, music teachers, and craftsmen were often in demand. San Carlo Theatre, the first of its kind, was built in Naples in just two hundred seventy days.⁴

The causes of *brigantaggio*, the civilian uprising against the Piedmontese army's slaughter of unarmed civilians and looting of villages, was officially

covered up as recently as 2010, when the Italian government spent €4 billion (roughly \$4.5 billion) to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Unification. Streets and piazzas are named for generals who ordered the shooting of unarmed women and children in Avigliano, Gioia del Colle, Pontelandolfo, Casaldini, Venosa, patria d'Orazio, Barile, Monteverde, S. Marco, Rignano, Spinelli, Carbonara, and Auletta, which were sacked and burned.⁵ Montefalcione, whose many emigrants settled in the North End, suffered the same fate.

In Sicily, the town of Bronte was burned to the ground; Randazzo, Castiglione, Regalbuto and Centorbi were looted and destroyed. In 1863, when the Piedmontese government recognized that the counterinsurgency could not be suppressed, it enacted draconian laws for mass deportations and imprisonment of anyone suspected of brigantaggio, being a relative of one, or engaging in any perceived act of providing help to them. Entire families were sent to internment camps all over northern Italy, some to the islands of the Tuscan archipelago. Some were sentenced to horrible jails, others to forced labor camps in tobacco fields or salt and mineral mines and on private farms.⁶

In Sulmona, Abruzzo, the hometown of many North Enders, citizens were rounded up, given trials, and sent away to forced labor camps.⁷ Because of the relentless efforts to uncover forgotten official documents in public and private archives, Loreto Giovannone and Miriam Compagnino (*Italiani Deportati 1863*), Antonio Ciano (*I Savoia e il massacro del Sud*), and Nicola Zitara (*L'invenzione del Mezzogiorno*), among others, have written the true story of the Risorgimento.⁸

Unification caused the South to pay a high price: the closing of its schools; the looting of its banks and treasuries; the disproportionate raising of taxes on the overburdened poor; the enactment of conscription; the dismantling of its iron, steel, and textile industries; the loss of farmers' government-sanctioned land; and the indiscriminate murder and plundering of its people by the Piedmontese army. Many of the deported (*deportati*) never returned to their small villages, further decimating the social fabric and economic vitality of the South. Under the guise of patriotism and national unity as a means to justify the colonization of southern Italy for its economic benefit, the Piedmontese government created the dire conditions that caused millions like my grandmother to leave. For those who immigrated to Boston's North End, the promise of America offered a future that their own country could not.



FIGURE 1. Nicola Argiro, 1981.

Nick Argiro Nicola Argiro talked about the nature of love: “When I say I love a you, eh no talk with the mouth *che* [that] I kiss a you, *ma* [but] with the heart, *con sango* [with blood].”

From the Earthquake in Messina to the Italo-Turkish War

I was in the *maremoto* [earthquake and subsequent tsunami] in Messina in 1908. My father was a lieutenant in the Italian Coast Guard. A captain said to me one day, “Argiro, now your father has been in this job, why don’t you sign up? At least you’ll make five years.” I said, “I already have three years, Captain.” So I let him sign me up for two more years. I was [a] policeman at the time, and we had to save the people in Reggio and Messina, and after the *maremoto* was over we built barracks and houses for the people. Then I got drafted for the 1911 Italo-Turkish War and we fought in Turkey for ten months. I signed up for five years and you couldn’t go home when you were in the service at that time in Italy, it was under Vittorio Emanuele III. He ran everything by himself, he was the head one, he was the king. I signed

up because my father was an officer in the police. He was a big boss for the Barone Casalino, who was Senatore Delle Camere [Senator in the House of Deputies] in Rome.

It [the war] was lousy, black, stink[ing], ooh it was terrible. We had lice so big we could throw [them] at you, they'd bite you; we couldn't change our clothes—it was bad. We took the boat from Naples; it took fourteen, fifteen hours—it went like a fish—landed in Tripoli, we were in Ben-Ghazi, Tobruk, the police always had to go to the front. The Turks used to hide in the trees, and if you didn't watch they'd kill you when you passed through. Their bullets were thick (the Italians had smaller ones) and they'd do more damage—if you caught one of them, goodbye, you die. They put poison on them too; we called it *famusella*. I was wounded, I got shot twice. Sometimes we didn't eat for two days—we couldn't get supplies. We ate rotten potatoes.

We had this wise guy lieutenant from Palermo who told us, "Go ahead, go ahead!" I said, "Listen, if we go to their camp then we can fight, but not here—they're all on the tops of the trees. See those trees? They'll shoot us like fish." He said, "Oh, over there, over there ..." I said, "Lieutenant, if you want to punish me, punish me, but it can't be—you can't take my squad over here and go over there, you have to command—go ahead, go where you like, I'm going here—report me!" He reported me. When he reported me, I couldn't do anything. They changed commanders and they sent him back to Italy.

The new commander was good. He said, "We gotta look out for each other, you watch for me, I watch for you, gotta watch one another." He split us up, no more two, three altogether, now one over here, one over there. The other commander wanted us like sheep all in one place—why you son of a bitch! I said in my mind; if I could I would have shot him in the head, I would have. The commander said to me, "Argiro, you know the commander who wanted to discipline you? He's dead. When he came back as [a] volunteer in the army his own squad knew all about him and they shot him." I said, "If I saw him here, I would kill him myself." He said, "Shhh! I won't put you in jail." I was a sergeant at nineteen. At my hearing the captain said, "Well, Argiro, he tried to do better. The lieutenant didn't know about the Turks in the trees, but Mr. Argiro told him that there were men up there and they would shoot us like fish because he was in the front. And he went to the back, alright, alright." And they gave me another stripe. I got more money and I, when I went home I brought three, four thousand lira. My father said to me, "Why did you sign up?" I was stupid to sign; I was young, I didn't care what they were doing at that time.

“We Were Like the FBI”

In 1911, I was an undercover policeman; we had to find the crooks, people who killed, it was a terrible job. It was like FBI here. We got seven lira a day, five lira was one dollar so I made a dollar twenty cents a day. A lot of other people were only making ten cents an hour. We called them the *Arditi* [“Daring Ones”] and we monitored and kept an eye on things. I signed up for five years. If they called you at night, you went; in the day, you went. You could never stay at one station, ten days in one town, five days in another, and if people saw you—we had to wear black masks, we carried hidden guns. You had to always keep moving so people wouldn’t recognize you; the *gangisti* [gangsters] were very smart and they remembered the people who arrested them. We didn’t arrest, we just watched, and we had a machine with [a] button you pushed to call. We’d say, “Yes, so and so and such a place, go and get them.” The troops would go—twenty-five, thirty—and arrest them.

The most we ever stayed in one place was a week, then we’d go to another town to check it out, if it was quiet, if there were crooks. We’d ask from family to family. We didn’t sleep in barracks because the bad guys would know the police were around, so we stayed with friends—the police would find a place for us. I knew where the gangs were, I had a good eye. I told my partner Vittorio, “Let’s go inside there.” He said, “No we can’t go into that cantina, that bar, it’s a regulation.” But we went. He liked macaroni too much (laughing), so we went in and I ordered steak. And I watched as the gang over there played cards for money. We paid our bill and we left. Right away I called up and I said, “We have so and so over here.” The troops arrived with machine guns, ten, fifteen carabinieri, and the lieutenant said, “Put them all in jail.” They had a car, like a truck, and they put them all in there.

When World War I came, I knew they were going to send me to the front in Italy. A lawyer friend of my father told us, “There’s a war coming; if you want to leave you better go now!” I came here in 1914 from Gioisa Ionica in Calabria. I lived in Brockton for six years, then I came to the North End in 1920. I came here because my father-in-law was here and I had a permit for one year from the government because I worked at the *deposito* [army base].

Michelina Manfra spoke about the nature of death,
 “Siamo sempre vicino la porta [We’re always near the door].”
 Her remedy was “Si muore solo una volta [You only die once].”

Christmas in Parolise at the Turn of the Century

Everything was outside, it didn’t matter the weather. We gave gifts, but not like over here. Everything was nine, nine kinds of fruit, or nine types of *pasticcerie* [pastries], or nine kinds of nuts, or nine oranges. I don’t know why it was always nine. I’m seventy-eight years old and I remember when I was three, four years old, they always did like that. My mother liked *mostaccioli* [a sweet pastry]. When I was little kid, when we had a party—*chi ti le deva i soldi* [who was going to give you the money]? Who had a penny in Italy when we were kids? Never! So I went to sell the grass to people who had horses, they’d give me a penny. So when Christmas came, they sold pastries and my mother loved *mostaccioli*, so we went to the store and we bought one each and we brought it to my mother on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day everybody wanted to be the first one in church. When we went, my mother cooked, she didn’t care for how many people. First, she cooked *manicotti*, cooked rabbit in the oven, made bread, then made the *panettone*—she made beautiful bread. All the family came—the grandfather, grandmother, my mother, my sisters, the son-in-law, nephews—they all came for my mother. My mother never came to my house. Christmas Day my father, my mother my grandfather, his mother, his brother, everyone—they went to church. When they got home, we had supper. Nobody moved from that table. Everybody kissed my father’s hand.

Every town celebrated La Befana [the visit of the Christmas Witch] different. We had a beautiful ceremony. We had twelve small children and one who was the angel. There was a woman who went house to house to collect gold; they didn’t give it, they lent it to dress up the *bambino*. We had the big *bambino*, the Christ child, everybody dressed him. On the morning of La Befana, they had the procession with music, the members of the *società* [society], and everyone would be crying. Then they would go get the *bambino* from the church and one of the twelve children would come out with the *bambino*. They took the *bambino*’s clothes and these children, five, six years old, dressed him up in new clothes, and brought him back to the church. After the priest would get the little boy, bless the *bambino* with holy water,



FIGURE 2. Salvatore Bernardo, 1980.

give out bread, and they donated all the clothes, the stockings, the shoes, the underwear, the little hat, like a Santa Claus hat, to charity. When they finished the ceremony in church, on the side of the church on a big table, the nuns fed the thirteen children.

Salvatore Bernardo spoke wistfully about his life as an elder:
“Now I just hang around like a strange dog without its owner.
No friends. Today you know who your friends are? The pockets!
If you have money, then you have friends.”

Salvatore Bernardo

Life in Siracusa

When I was young in Siracusa—I was born in Canicattini Bagni in Sicily—I didn’t run a hell of a lot, hanging around, working here, working there, doing different jobs. I’d work whenever we had a chance, building stone walls. I went to work when I was nine years old, I left school. I started work and I worked till I was seventeen years old. Once in a while we’d have to change with different masons because I was working with the masons, and each one has their own style, another one way, another had another way. Monday would come to Saturday night, and we’d do all kinds of work, but no money. I carried stone on my shoulders all the time, back and forth; we used to build dry wall, we used to put it on our shoulders and carry it and bring it [to] the mezzanine. No cement; that’s just what we called dry wall in Siracusa.

Then we worked outside the city [roadwork] making holes, digging the ground, plugging holes, that’s [what] we used to do. Money was pretty scarce. One day I was working and my father said, “Did you want to go down to America and see your brother?” I said, “Yeah, sure, I want to, I want to see my older brother.” He asked me because my father was in the United States twice and he figured I’d have a better life. So two days later we went up to the city council in Canicattini Bagni, we started to make up the papers. The first thing you know, the eighteenth of March the passports came in and they gave me my passport. I left and I never saw my mother again. All my friends got killed in World War I. I got off the boat, the *Cretic*, in Charlestown in April 1913. It was one o’clock in the afternoon, that’s when we got off the boat.



FIGURE 3. Frances Lauro, 1909.

Sciacca in 1909

I was born on North Street in the North End in 1903. My mother died when I was six and my father couldn't afford it here, and he took us back to his town, Sciacca, in Sicily; he had his mother there, so my grandmother could take care of me and my brother. My father left us and went back to the United States and got remarried. I was growing and I hadn't even gone to school yet, and my grandmother got sick and she was in bed—"Get me this, get me that"—and I did the best I could. I had to take care of her. Then my grandmother died. I can remember me and my brother alone. We sat in front of the doorway and she was in the house dead in the bed. So late at night a neighbor came over and took us in their house for the night. We slept on the stone floor. The rooms used to be all made of stone. The next day they took my grandmother, they put her on their shoulders like they did in Italy in those days—the casket, they took it and buried her. So we remained with the neighbor, the poor lady took us in. My brother was four years older than me, and they put him out to watch the sheep. The neighbor used to shave my hair close so I wouldn't get any bugs. Maybe that's why my hair grew so thick later! Then one of the women who was coming to America took us back to my father. He was already married with two children.

Giuseppe (Joe) DiCenso chafed at the bureaucracy in Italy, like waiting in lines to exchange money at the local bank. After one long wait, a man with more social status jumped ahead—"Ah onorevole [Oh your honor]," and he came first. Joe took his hundred dollars and left in disgust.

Giuseppe DiCenso

Sharecropping in Sulmona

When I was over there [mid-1910s], you go to work, they give you forty cents. Forty cents a day—you gotta get in at five, six o'clock in the morning, working the land, from five, six in the morning till the sun goes down, when it's dark. They give you forty cents for the day. Can you live with forty cents? You

never got steady work. Somebody who owned a farm would say, “I’d like you to come in and help me tomorrow, alright I’ll give you one pay.” And the next day, when there was nothing to do, he’d say, “Well, I don’t need you.” What are you gonna do on a farm?

Marguerite Locchiato

“Girls Couldn’t Learn to Read and Write on the Farm”

My mother and father never had the desire to go back, and I asked my mother why. She said because she had it bad in Italy. She said, “Times were so bad in Italy, and when I came here I was fortunate enough to get a good man, I had a good life here, and regardless of some of the people I know who weren’t as fortunate as I was, they were even better off here than they were in Italy.” [That was] in my mother’s days. My father never spoke too much about Italy; I don’t think he knew too much about Italy, he came so young. My mother had a really hard time in Italy: she had to work hard on the farm with the donkeys and all that. But it was strange how the father—she resented it a little bit—made her brothers learn how to read and write and not the girls. The father felt as though the girls would get married, [so] they wouldn’t know, they wouldn’t need that. Of course, that was them times and they were ignorant probably in them days.

Frank Favazza Seventy-eight-year-old Frank Favazza was the oldest of eleven children and the only one to stay in the North End.

Life in Terrasini

I was born on North Street in a family of eleven children. My father was a fisherman from [the] province of Palermo, from a small town called Terrasini. His father was a fisherman. It was so poor in that town that my father, when they didn’t have bread, he used to go to the chicken coops of the ones that had a loaf a bread—they were all poor then—and steal the bread from the chickens, clean it up—the scraps they liked to feed the chickens, that’s how poor—and take it home.

“You Had to Own”

My father came here in 1905 because he couldn't make a living in Italy. Necessity brought him here. In Italy nobody could make it. In those days if you stayed in Italy, you wasn't going nowhere. If you wanted to get anywhere, wanted to do anything, you'd have to get out of Italy; you'd have to go to either England, Germany, or Australia or some other country where you'd have the chance to advance. If you stayed in Italy, you couldn't advance because there was no chance there and that's why they immigrated to America as laborers. My father kept his farm in southern Italy. He came here two or three times.

He came here because you couldn't make a living in Italy. In Italy, if you didn't have [own] your own farm to work—you'd be [a] farmer, like, and you'd work your own property, your own farm, you'd get your crops, you use it for yourself and your family. And if you had any extra, anymore or a lot more, you could sell it, see? And like that, you could live. But if you didn't have a farm of your own you couldn't live in Italy at that time, in 1905, when he came here. He had a pair of oxen on the farm, and when you had a pair of oxen you was pretty good to have them because a lot people didn't have the money to buy the oxen. Then you had to feed them and everything and keep them. He inherited them from his family—he had the place.

Antonio Crugnale

“I Couldn't Have a Wife in Sulmona”

I started to work as a carpenter with my older brother when I was six years old in Italy. That's the way it was in Italy. We had our shop and we still own it. All the young boys in those days had to work. Almost as soon as you were born in those days, when you were five, six, seven years old, they would send you out to the fields as shepherds to tend the little sheep. I didn't have to do that, but I had to do something just like the rest of the boys. Luckily, I didn't have to become a shepherd, and I could work under my brother in his lumber mill and learned my trade, my *mestiere* [craft] as a carpenter, which is what I did.

I went to school up to the fifth grade that was run by a priest who lived near my house, where there was a church in our *contrada* [region] outside of Sulmona. This priest ran a school for the boys in our neighborhood. At the end of the fifth grade they took me to the city of Sulmona to take and pass an exam, because in those days, in 1926, you mostly only went up to the *terzo elementario* [third grade]. But I went there because this priest wanted me to become a priest because I was a good student. But he told my mother I couldn't have a wife. When I asked him why I couldn't have a wife, he gave me such a beating on the head, he left me bleeding quite a bit. Just for saying that! They had to take me to the hospital because the bleeding was so bad, and after that I got better and everything healed.

Michelina Manfra Michelina Manfra was a solidly built woman with large hands who lived alone in a cold-water flat. Her father liked having Michelina around because she could do as much farmwork as any man. *Translated from Italian.*

Daily Farm Life in Parolise in 1913

Working on the farm in Parolise was beautiful. In the beginning you no like, *ma* [but] after, that's a your job, you work on the farm. In the morning you get, when it started to be [a] little light out, you get up and go to work and you be joyful every day, beautiful. My mother, seven-thirty, take a the breakfast, when my mother come on the farm we had a lot of chickens, my mother just a call, "Quee, quee, quee," and all a the chickens run a to my mother; she'd say, "Ma coming with the food." After she come, she cook at twelve o'clock make a the dinner. So this was our life. At noon she'd come and bring us food to eat. There were nine of us in our family and we never starved, we never was a millionaire. We never goin' a beg. My mother always gave us something because we always had it, we all had food. We didn't have a business, but we had wine—do you know how much wine my father sold? Aye, hundreds of quintale [1 quintale = 220 pounds]. Sunday morning on the farm I go to church, after church my mother made rabbit with *tagliatelle a mano* [homemade noodles], and after we ate, I take off a my shoes, my stockings, I go on the farm—to the vineyard and grapes—and I worked through October, November, December, with no shoes, no stockings, no nothing. Only once a week, on Sundays. Here in America, with two dollars I'm a go buy a pair

shoes; over there how you gonna buy a pair of shoes? We enjoyed it; I had a wonderful father, I remember my father—how much I miss him! He wasn't too tall a fellow, he had a mustache, and he had blond hair, light skin, and blue eyes. He loved his family—he loved us! If you could have been in my family, you could hear him sing out, "I'm a rich man! Look at what I have! I got a beautiful daughter. I got a beautiful family!" He was a happy man and everybody loved him.

My father used to take me by horse and wagon to go shopping at the market in Atripalda or Avellino. They would call out to him by his nickname, "Hey, Misdeo!" I had one brother they called *Pecorella* [a little sheep], another *Cacciatore* [the hunter]. He used to sell his wine there. If we were there right now it would be *primavera* [the spring], it would be time to plant the seeds, *seminamo le rabe* [broccoli rabe], *li pasconi*, it's a green that grows during the winter and then by the spring it's already big, you have to *zappà* [till the soil], and put them under. Then the *grano* [wheat], was already planted. By October, would be when we picked the olives, the grapes in the vineyard. If it rained or if it was damp, you couldn't pick the olives because the tree would dry out. I always went with my father and my brother to pick the grapes. We were very busy. All the chestnuts! Oooh boy! Oooh! If I have a dream about chestnuts, I won't sleep! Oh boy! Too much work!

Now during *la vendemmia* [the harvest], you picked the grapes and my father didn't believe in the donkey, so we filled up the baskets to the brim and then we had to carry them on our heads to the town. When we were there after we dropped off the grapes, we carried all the leftover stalks and stems out in the country, one carried the baskets with the other, one with the other, we went back and forth. When night came, you think you went to bed? Oh, no! Then it was time to crush the grapes in big tubs. Now you do it with a machine in America, but all the men crushed the grapes in big tubs with their feet. Then we would climb up the ladder with our pails on our heads, we'd empty them into huge, tall barrels, they held a good hundred quintale of *ò musto*, we called the grapes before they fermented. Then the grapes would start to ferment, [and] the men would stir the grapes with long forks. We would stomp the grapes with our feet, that was our custom. When we were finally finished stomping the grapes around eleven or midnight, my mother would come around with kettles of warm water for the men to wash up and change their clothes. Then we'd sit and eat *baccalà* [dried cod], hot peppers with homemade wine vinegar, and drink our wine. At four the next morning we'd get up and start all over again. *Translated from the dialect of Parolise.*



FIGURE 4. Angelo Sardo.

Life in the Province of Caltanissetta

The old days in Sicily were the days of *miseria nera* [the black misery], I remember there was nothing! If you wanted a salad you had to go looking for it out in the countryside. It's not like today, you can find greens or food to eat anywhere you want. That's the way it was in those days. There was no gas or electricity to prepare your food. Forget that! I had to go into the countryside to search for firewood to bring to my mother so she could use it to cook in her *fornellino* [little oven], made of brick. You had to start the fire underneath—pfff-pfff—and you had to keep fanning it, and you'd get tired and get more hungry with all that work you did even before you sat down to eat! There were no conveniences like today. Before, big families all lived together in one room or two rooms in Sicily. How could they all sleep in one place like that? If they didn't have a bed, they used the *cavaletto*, which in our homes we called a *trispida*. They used *i cavaletti di legno* [wooden boards], or sometimes they were made of iron, and they made mattresses out of leaves of corn stalks or with grass. They could never use wool to make mattress covers because it was too expensive for them. And they'd put the mattresses over the boards to sleep at night. In the morning they would break everything down and put everything in a corner of the house and put ... *la buffetta* [the dinner table] back where it was. But you didn't do like you do today.

Today, for example, you have a refrigerator and buy enough for a week and then put it in the refrigerator. You couldn't even buy for one day! For sure! There were no bakeries like today where you could buy a sandwich or get mortadella, things like that. What the heck! To even have coffee at my house! Because being poor for us was shameful. As a young boy, along with the other boys, I used to go out looking for wheat in the fields with a little sack. They used to cut down the wheat with sickles and not with machines like they do today. And there was always some ears of wheat left behind to be found. That's what the boys did in those days, go out in search of wheat left on the ground, and we would bring [it] home to our mothers. They would bring them to the miller, who would grind them into flour to make bread. Then they'd bring it to the *forno* [bakery] oven—they used to pay *un*

soldo, due soldi [one or two pennies] in those days, and they would make pasta, macaroni, bread—whatever the women made—for them.

Women were born to get married and they knew they had to guarantee a family, had to guarantee the husband to cook, wash, iron, raise the children, and there was no division of labor between men and women like today. Women's work was like this: What are you doing? Heh, nothing, I have children, that's all! A woman was nothing but *una fabbrica di figli* [a baby factory] in those days, ten, fifteen, twenty children. The firstborn, who would become the oldest, had to take care of his sister and brother. And that's how they survived. Because each child had an obligation to go and out and find something to do, to try something. We all had to do that. But we all ate. But we didn't eat like they eat meat, mortadella, this and that today, forget it! What we ate in those days was limited to bread and sardines, bread and onions, bread and olives. It was like a holiday when you had a piece of bread. And how good it tasted! Bread was all natural. You were never sick. We were all in good health in my family. Because in those days the fruit you ate was all natural, the mandarins, the oranges there, they never used that medicine, that poison on the fruits. That's where the sickness, the cancer comes from, that poison they put on them, from the chemicals you eat, it ruins your stomach, your ears, your nose. In those times, no.

Going to School

At six years old I went to school. But I went to school, not like now, a young boy, six, seven years old, what do you want? In those days it wasn't like it is now where school is enforced until you're eighteen. There, nothing! You were going to school and one day you didn't show up. The *professore* would tell you, "You didn't come to school yesterday?" "Eh, no." So you made up an excuse like "My mother was sick, I had to ..." and then the *professore* would tell you, "Eh, the less students, the better we are!" And then (sarcastic voice), "What are you coming here to do? Become a lawyer? An engineer? Stay home. Better if you don't come anymore." The *professore* did this on purpose, with the intention of giving more instruction to *i figli di papa* [the children of the well-to-do], whose parents controlled everything in town; the *farmacista* [the pharmacist]; *il prete* [the priest]; *il sindaco* [the mayor]; *e qualche capo esponente della citta* [the bosses who controlled the jobs in town]. They were in control of everything—they were the mafiosi, they were the mafia.

That was the mafia because they had the people of the town *sotto i piedi* [under their feet], under their total control. The people used to go to work. They got up at four o'clock in the morning, and as long as there was light, they had to keep working for little wages, for a few pennies. It was *una vita disgraziata* [a terrible, unlucky life] they lived in those days in Sicily. Especially when someone went looking for work and the bosses tried to exploit them. The bosses would try to take advantage of the situation if you had a daughter or a wife they wanted or found attractive. So what would happen? A *capo esponente di lavoro* [foreman] used to go to the home of a poor family and check out the young daughter or the pretty wife, not in all cases, but in the majority cases they always tried to take advantage of those poor devils because they didn't have a lot of education and they didn't know even how to express themselves or fight back. At night three or four families used to gather and play cards or play bingo because there wasn't television or radio or any entertainments.

There were theaters but they had rudimentary films with subtitles. And the majority of people couldn't write or read so what were they going to do if they went to see a movie? I remember them saying, "What are going to see there, go and spend a half lira, eleven cents to see a movie?" So instead they'd all say, "What are we going to go there for? Hey, *facciamo quattro fave, quattro ceci* [let's cook some fava beans, some chickpea beans]." And they would boil ceci and fava beans and entertain themselves at night like that. And they would play card games for *centesimi, un soldo, due soldi* [a penny, two pennies], very little money. I remember that before 1922 in Sicily, it was a disaster. I was seven. Life was impossible. You were closed within four walls and a roof. Anyone who was intelligent could never take advantage of it because one could never leave your town very easily like you can today. It was like being a *prigioniero volontario* [voluntary prisoner]. And if one always stays in the same place, one never gains any experience. If you never learn a profession, what can you do? Nothing. Even if you had a good head on your shoulders, you could never develop into anything. That's because schools weren't obligatory then like they are now in Sicily. *Translated from Italian.*

I Camoristi

There were organized groups of people who were parasites, people who didn't want to work. They used to gather, go to someone's house, knock on the door, or sometimes they would go to the local bar where people were enjoying

themselves. They would buy a half glass of wine, not a liter or a gallon like today, forget about that. So then two or three of their people would come into the bar. They'd announce, "We're playing cards for money, un soldo for each, go ahead. Now give us a half liter of wine!" And the owner would say, "And who are you?" They told him, "We are camoristi!" And if the owner didn't give them the money and wine they wanted they would beat him up.

In people's homes they did the same thing. I remember as a little boy, I was born in 1915, I used to listen all the time, "Oh, they killed that one over there!" And being a young boy like the others, I'd listen when all the women gathered together to talk, "Oh, the camoristi went into my cousin's house last night looking for money, he didn't have any, so they beat him up." Then you would hear another story from another woman, "*Sai cummari* [you know my friend], ..."—you know how the women were in those days. There was no such thing as a meeting like here, nothing, there was nothing like that at all, I tell you it was real and true slavery. *Translated from Italian.*

Working in the Sulfur Mines

I remember those times very well, there was very little work. When I was seven, I was walking with my brother down the street on the way to work in the sulfur mine. We worked in the mines at that age, just like in the coal mines. Because we were small, we could work with the small shovels, and when we extracted the sulfur, we called it *i panotti*, like loaves of bread, but it was sulfur. So all the little boys did that kind of work [and] the older boys carried the sulfur on their backs to the brick furnaces. Sulfur is all mixed in with stone and other materials so it was brought to the furnaces and heated in a way that the sulfur separated from the impurities [stone] and fell off. What wasn't needed was thrown out. But you had to bake it to extract the sulfur, to make pieces as heavy as a hundred kilos. And then they were exported to other countries; it was a great trade industry.

So *i capi esponenti del lavoro* [the bosses] of the *miniere di zolfo* [sulfur mines], they took advantage of the families because the fathers would go out in search of work and they [bosses] would ask them, "Who are you? Where are you from? Do you have a family? Do have children?" And in those times in the families, you know they often had three, four, five, ten, fifteen children, twenty children. This one, twenty children! My grandmother, twenty-two. And another, "Hey, my wife, we have twenty-two!" At my house we were