

## The "Spirit of Italy" in North Pocono

Stephanie Longo (June 06, 2008)



Following a lifetime of government service, Francesco Stoppini, of Elmhurst, Pa. now serves as regional Consular Correspondent to Italy

It's no secret that Northeastern Pennsylvania boasts one of the nation's largest Italian-American populations; according to the 2000 United States Census, Italian-Americans are the second-largest ethnic group in Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties. But, perhaps, the region's biggest secret is that we have a representative of the Italian government right in our own backyard.



Francesco Stoppini who, along with his wife Mary Anne, owns American Group Travel in Elmhurst, has been Northeastern Pennsylvania's Italian Consular Correspondent since 1993.

"Before then, if you were an Italian citizen living in this area, you had to go to Philadelphia or Pittsburgh if you needed consular services. Since we don't have a train that can take you to these cities, you would have to travel by car," Stoppini said. "The Italian government realized that, given the number of Italians living in this area, something needed to be done. At one point, my name was suggested and I became Italian Consular Correspondent to this area on June 10, 1993."

During the peak years of Italian immigration to the United States, Scranton was home to an Honorary Italian Consulate. Fortunato Tiscar, who is buried in St. Catherine's Cemetery in Moscow, held the position from 1896 until 1941 when America went to war with Italy. Stoppini is Tiscar's immediate successor.

As Consular Correspondent under the jurisdiction of the Italian Consulate of Philadelphia, Stoppini offers limited services out of his Elmhurst office; including help with visas, pensions, and dual citizenship. He also helps American and Italian citizens alike in navigating the two countries' often divergent laws.

"It gives me great pleasure to help people in whatever way I can," Stoppini said.

Stoppini's government work began when he was 16 years old in his native Assisi, Italy, where his family owns two hotels. When the city of Assisi was liberated following World War II, he was the mayor's official interpreter. "I had an English aunt and she taught all of us to speak English," he remembered. "I worked for the mayor for three years and then I went with him to Rome to work as a part of the Allied Screening Commission, which tried to compensate people who helped the Allies during the war."

When planning was underway in 1951 regarding Italy's presence at the 1964 World's Fair, Stoppini was sent to New York for a year to oversee the reconstruction of an exact replica of Assisi's Porziuncola, the small chapel where the Franciscan movement is said to have started.

During the 1950s, the United States was involved in the Korean War. Stoppini was drafted into the American Army since, at the time, the American government could draft non-citizens for service if they were living on American soil. He spent a little over two years in the American army, working with American linguistic services in Europe. Following his Honorable Discharge from the American Army, Stoppini was granted dual citizenship with the United States.

"My military service was the best time of my life," he said.

Stoppini's arrival in Northeastern Pennsylvania came from a chance encounter at Rome's Fiumicino Airport. There he met Mary Anne Jankauskas, whose parents both served as postmasters at the Elmhurst Post Office. The couple eventually married and remained in Italy until 1976 when they returned to the United States with their children.

Mary Anne has witnessed first-hand how her husband's work as Consular Correspondent has touched the lives of the people he serves.

"It is Francesco's mission to the community," she said. "He does not charge for his time, only the fees that are required by the Consulate in Philadelphia. We have people that bring us tomatoes, seeds, fig trees... Italians are known for their generosity and they insist on wanting to do something."

"The best thing about this job is being able to help other people in whatever they might need," Stoppini said. "In Northeastern Pennsylvania, there are many Italian-Americans who try to maintain their traditions and to maintain their link with Italy. I came to this area in 1976 but the Italian spirit—lo spirito italiano—never leaves you."



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