

The Fortunate Pilgrim

Paul Moses (October 14, 2015)



A German Jewish Italian American travels to his ancestral villages and feels the pull

This June, I deepened the ties to my Italian heritage by traveling for the first time to the villages in Calabria and Basilicata where my mother's parents were born.



I never met either of my grandparents, who married in 1909 at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mott Street and lived on the next block down. Both died before I was born, but in some ways, I met them by seeing the small towns where they grew up. My grandmother, Rachela Martoccia (shortened to Martocci), was especially vague for me as she had died the year after giving birth to my mother in Manhattan.

But to see her lovely hilltop village of Laurenzana in the Basilicata region, to meet the people, to kneel at the local shrine and to taste the food specific to the area all helped me to better understand her and my Italian ancestry. A castle that served Emperor Frederick II in the thirteenth century presides from Laurenzana's rocky pinnacle. Nearby is an 800-year-old church where the remains of the holy Franciscan friar Blessed Egidio are venerated.

The narrow, winding streets on the hill below, the stone buildings and rounded towers date to medieval times. The Martoccia family, I discovered, lived in a valley far below these heights and worshiped in a little chapel on the town's outskirts. I now understood one of the stories about my grandmother: how much she enjoyed going up to the ancient castle when she was a girl.

Cerasi, my grandfather Christopher Moscato's hometown, is up in the clouds in Calabria's Aspromonte mountains. Driving there was a little frightening because I was so tempted to peek at the breathtaking views while negotiating hairpin turns. Seeing Cerasi made me appreciate a story I heard about how my grandfather would leave home as a youth to work in the fields with a bit of bread, cheese and a chestnut in his pocket. It would have been a very long walk through those steep, pine-forested hills to arrive at any fields.

And I was amazed that someone who came from such isolated rural splendor could manage to raise six children in Mott Street's crowded slums. The people were very hospitable when I met them on June 13 after Mass for the Feast of St. Anthony, Cerasi's patron saint.

I was invited in for espresso and cookies, and shown the Moscatos' one-time home and the communal wood-fired hearth where bread is baked—a particular favorite for me because, perhaps not coincidentally, I am an avid bread baker.

While just a handful live there nowadays, quite a few people with roots in Cerasi return to the old family homes on weekends or for vacation and a celebration of St. Anthony in August, demonstrating the ancestral magnetism of the villages that dot Italy's mountain regions. Now I've felt that pull, too.

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