

MY GENEALOGY STORY

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I started to write this little story while returning from a vacation and family research visit to Italy. It was a wonderful trip! I had no idea when I arrived in Italy what an impact it would have on me and my quest to learn about my ancestors.

Part 1

I can't remember when I became interested in finding out more about my family's ancestry. I do remember asking questions about my mother's family at a relatively young age. My grandfather and grandmother emigrated from Italy in the early 1900's, but I couldn't gather much information from anyone. My older cousins told stories they had heard and I learned a few things from one of my aunts. At some point in my teens, I asked my grandmother where her family had lived in Italy. She simply said Calabria, Cosenza, Pedace. I wrote those words on the back of a card and carried it in my wallet for years. As the words began to fade, I put scotch tape over the card to protect it and stuck it back in the wallet. I later learned that Pedace is a town in the State of Cozenza and Region (Regilio) of Calabria. In high school and knowing nothing of my Italian roots, only that I was half Italian, I many times referred to myself as Luigi or Antonio – typical Italian names. As a graduating senior, I was asked to introduce the in-coming class president during a student body gathering in the auditorium. I dressed as a frumpy old Italian guy named Luigi while introducing my Japanese friend. I mention this only because the first two of my grandmother's Italian relatives I met on this trip were brothers Luigi and Antonio, cousins of mine. OK, so I thought it was quite a coincidence.

I knew even less about my grandfather or his family. Stories had him coming to the United States on a Merchant Marine Ship. While anchored in New York harbor, he is said to have jumped ship and entered the states illegally, eventually making his way to Colorado. Over the years I never heard much more. I do know that my grandparents were introduced by letter before my grandmother immigrated to the United States. Once they had corresponded for awhile, my grandfather paid my grandmother's passage and, when she arrived in Colorado, they "courted" while she lived with another Italian family. Pretty common practice is those days but very romantic! OK, the romantic part was my significant other, Cathy's, idea.

As I grew older, I started asking more questions but by then my grandparents had died as had most of my aunts and uncles. My mother, the youngest child, didn't know anything about either side of the family or Italy because for some reason, the "Old Country" was not discussed at home. I began to do some on-line genealogy in early 2000, but, given that I had no knowledge of or access to Italian records, the Italian ancestry research was difficult at best. I found reference on Ancestry.com to someone with the same last name and a similar first name as my grandmother who had arrived at Ellis Island in the right timeframe. My curiosity was peaked so one winter day my lovely lady, Cathy, and I took a day off work and went to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. where we found microfiche with the manifest from the ship "America". When we looked closely at the original document it was obvious that the first name had been entered into the Ancestry.com database with a misspelling. A step in the right direction. Then, sadly my mother's oldest sister, Aunt Mary died. My cousin offered me a stack of letters written to my grandparents in 1941 and 1942 that my aunt had saved. The letters came from my grandmother's relatives in Reggio di Calabria and my

grandfather's relatives in Algeria. They provided a wealth of information and the incentive to begin the adventure. I was further intrigued when, on a trip to New York City, we stopped at Ellis Island and learned more of the great tale of immigration to the United States. As we crossed on the ferry to the Statue of Liberty, I couldn't help but reflect on my young grandparents who ventured so far from home searching for a new and better life in America.

It begins in Calabria - Luigia Gugliemille (My Grandmother)

Cathy and I talked about taking an Italian vacation in Calabria and visiting the village of Pedace to search for relatives. Thinking that most Europeans retain homes in the family for generation after generation, we decided to simply visit Pedace and were confident we would find family. We were scheduled to leave on September 12, 2001. Obviously, the trip was delayed due to the events of September 11 but we eventually made the trip in June 2002. The trip was worth every bit of the wait. We made reservations at a coastal resort in Tropei about an hour and a half drive from the City of Cosenza. On the flight to Italy, I decided to take another look at the letters (written in Italian) to determine how many addresses I had. I was shocked that I had not previously noticed that the letters had names and the town of Pedace but no street address. That put a serious crimp in our plan to knock on a door and say hello.

When we arrived at the resort a young college student (Davida) carried our luggage to the room. He spoke great English and asked how long we would be on vacation. When I explained it was a vacation and family research trip and told him that I had Italian language letters and no way to read them, he volunteered to meet with us later that afternoon to read the letters and give us some names, relationships, and context. He read several letters to us most of which talked about the hardships being faced due to the war and heart-wrenching requests to my grandparents for clothing and other personal items. We came away with several names, a fairly good idea of who the people were, and their relationship to my grandmother. Two days later it was off to Cosenza and then hopefully to the smaller town of Pedace. The assumption was that once in Cosenza we would see road signs pointing us to Pedace. No such luck. As we drove through Cosenza, we decided to follow signs to the university hoping to find another English-speaking student who could provide directions. For some unexplained reason we pulled into the train station where we saw a car rental office. Entering the office, we hoped to get the driving instructions we needed. Inside we saw a man talking with the rental agent. Something in his conversation caused me to believe he might speak English so when he was finished with his transaction, I asked in my very best Italian "le parla Inglese" (do you speak English), to which he replied yes! His name was Sergio and as we were to find out, he became the key to our later success. Sergio was born in Italy and at age six was adopted and moved to Detroit with his adoptive family. Now in his early 40's, he was going through a number of personal problems and had decided a couple of years back that he would return to his homeland. He had been visiting Italy for a couple of months each year and was a week away from returning to Detroit to settle things before returning to Italy full-time. I asked about Pedace and he was shocked saying that his Italian uncle had been the mayor of Serra Pedace, a sister city to Pedace, for the past twenty-four years. He called the uncle to inquire about my grandmother's family, Gugliemilli. While the uncle was not able to help, we hit it off with Sergio. As it turned out, he was staying with an aunt in the mountains above Cosenza and was about to take a bus to her house. I offered to drive him to his aunt's house if he would point us in the direction of Pedace on the way. We had a great conversation as we headed up the mountain and out-of-the-blue he told me to make a turn. He was taking us into the village of Pedace saying he would ask some of the locals if they knew of the Gugliemilli family. We parked along the side of a narrow road where we met three elderly men waiting in front of the post office.

After telling them what we were trying to do, one of the men told us to go with him. We came to a house where the man told Sergio that members of the Gugliemilli family currently lived. We had no idea if they might be related to my grandmother. A teenager answered the door and after hearing our story opined that we might be related and suggested that we call his mother later that day. Excited that we had possibly found family but disappointed that we were the only ones excited, we started back down the road. The older man then turned us around and started back up the road saying that there was another Gugliemilli family who lived not far away. Next to the heavy wooden door of a two-story house was a sign that read Gugliemilli. Sergio knocked and a man and woman appeared on the balcony above us. Sergio related to them who we were and who we were trying to find. The couple disappeared. A moment later the door swung open and the short man began to hug and kiss me. As it turned out this was Luigi, my mother's first cousin. Everyone was elated! Lots of hugs and kisses all-around and, thanks to Sergio, the beginning of a great adventure. After 15-20 minutes of discussion, Luigi told of numerous other relatives in the area and suggested that we return in two days giving him a chance to gather some of the family. Now we were excited! As we walked through the small town to the car, we passed the train station, now old and no longer operating. Cathy stood along the tracks and looked back on the town. When I asked her what she was looking at, she replied that she was thinking of my grandmother and that she probably stood at this very spot, looking back on the town she would never return to.

We returned to the car and started up the mountain to drop Sergio at his aunt's house. Along the way he suggested that we again detour and try to find another cousin who Luigi had mentioned. As we pulled into a small roadside store, we saw an older man sweeping water from his driveway. Once again Sergio to the rescue explaining to this man who we were. He was older than Luigi and while he appeared to believe our story, he wasn't quite so quick to accept the entire thing. At that point I remembered that one of the letters I carried had a small photo of a young woman and decided to show it to him in hopes he would recognize her. I had forgotten that there were two photos, the second one being a photo of a young man. I found that photo first. When I showed it to this man, he began to cry and needless to say the hugs and kisses started again. This was another of my mother's first cousins. After sharing a drink and agreeing to meet with Luigi later in the week, we again headed for Sergio's house.

When we reached his aunt's house, Sergio asked for our hotel phone number and Luigi's phone number saying he would call everyone and arrange for the next meeting. Happy and excited, we headed back to the resort. Later in the day Sergio called and told us when and where to meet with the Gugliemilli's. He said he would meet us there. I told him that we had taken enough of his time and while we appreciated the offer, we didn't want to inconvenience him any further. He replied "are you kidding me? I've already started charging my video camera. I wouldn't miss this for anything." He told us he would take the bus and meet us there. No way were we going to let him take the bus. Early the next morning, we stopped at a pastry shop, bought a large Italian cake and then drove back up the mountain and picked up Sergio!

At Luigi's with Sergio translating and videotaping everything, we exchanged greetings, had a great cup of Italian coffee, and then walked up the street to an apartment building. Luigi introduced us to xxxxxx Maria? another second cousin. Her [grandfather – grandmother] was a [brother – sister] of my grandmother's. She then introduced us to her mother and her Aunt Fiorina. The name Fiorina rang a bell with me and I again pulled out the letters we had brought along. There among them was a letter from Fiorina DeLuca to my grandmother. When she wrote the letter, Fiorina was an 18 year old young lady telling her Aunt about her dream to immigrate to the United States, marry, and build a life there just like Aunt Luigina. Inside the

envelope was a photo of this young lady now standing in front of me in her eighties. She couldn't believe that I had the letter.

Several other family members joined us for coffee and snacks. With Sergio jumping in and out of multiple conversations simultaneously translating and videotaping, we spent a couple hours furiously asking questions about one another, laughing, and gesturing. OK, it was Italy, gesturing was a given. It was amazing!

In the two days since we had first met, Luigi had laid out the family tree on a large piece of butcher paper. I shared with him family information regarding the descendants of Luigina in the United States. I learned that other family members had immigrated to Canada. I was given the name and phone number of a cousin in Canada, who coincidentally had the same first name as I and was born the same day, month, and year as me.

Needless to say, the trip was wonderful. We spent time on the beach, did some sightseeing, and ate some wonderful food. But, more importantly we found "La Familia". How could we sufficiently express our gratitude to a stranger we found at the train station who played such a major role in my quest to find my Italian roots? Without his help this trip would have not been nearly as productive or meaningful and I will forever be thankful to our new friend Sergio.

Sergio made copies of the various recordings he had made and mailed them to me when I returned home. I sent a copy to my mother and asked if she would like to visit Italy. Her immediate response was that she was too old to make that kind of trip. In our weekly telephone calls, she began to make reference to Italy and talked about the great trip Cathy and I had taken. She seemed especially moved by the statement made by Luigi at the end of the videotape that begged us to return some day and bring "la mamma". For her 80th birthday, I surprised her with tickets to Italy. In 200X, I returned to Calabria with my mother in tow. She was introduced to all of the family that Cathy and I had previously met and many, many more. Sadly, Luigi's brother and his wife had died in a car accident shortly after Cathy and I returned to the states. By the end of the week her Italian was coming back and she was able to converse in an English/Italian exchange as long as the conversation was slow and not too complicated and, of course, she was able to use her hands for gesturing! With Luigi and his family, we visited the church where Luigina worshipped, the house where she was born and raised, and of course the cemetery. Speaking of the church, as we left Luigina's childhood home and walked up a very narrow street toward the church, the bell tolled unexpectedly. It was not on the hour or half hour. I told mom that grandma was welcoming her to Pedace. She smiled. There is no way to describe her obvious happiness and I was so moved to be a witness to this.

A year later, after finding and connecting with Roberto (my Canadian cousin with the same name and birthday) mom and I were invited to visit them and attend the wedding of Roberto's niece. We didn't hesitate. Again, we met many more of our extended family members and attended a wonderful wedding where we laughed, had a few drinks, and danced the night away. Mom was rocking!! We stayed with Emma (a cousin of mom's age) and her husband Mario who has since died. The two ladies struck up a great friendship and still call one another periodically just to talk.

It was a great journey made even more special by sharing with my mother. I recommend a similar adventure to everyone. Just step out and take a chance.

Part 2

It Continues on the Island of Ischia - Modesto Salmonese (My Grandfather)

Since those visits, I had the good fortune to come into contact with a cousin from my grandfather's family. This full-blood Italian is a French citizen who found me through his research on the internet. . In 2009, a female cousin still retaining my mother's maiden name, i.e., my grandfather's name – Salmonese – received a letter from a Louis Belini, a full-blooded Italian French citizen. An Italian Frenchman – wow! Louis had done extensive genealogy research and had found information about my grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, birth and death dates, burial records, etc. My cousin gave me the letter which contained both a mailing address and an email address. I immediately sent Louis a response by email and we continued to exchange emails and mail for over a year.

Until Louis appeared on the scene, my knowledge of my grandfather was limited to his citizenship application and anecdotal references to his travel to the United States on a merchant marine ship. The naturalization papers referred to Ischia and Naples but didn't characterize Ischia as an area of Naples, a town, or anything else. As I found out from Louis, our grandfathers were brothers, born and raised on the island of Ischia off the coast of Naples near Capri. The brothers were two of a rather large family. All but one of the siblings had emigrated from Italy during a particularly difficult time on Ischia; Louis' grandfather to Algeria along with our great grandmother and my grandfather to the United States. Louis provided a wealth of family information dating back to the 16th century on Ischia. I was able to provide him family information for the Salmonese line in the United States.

After a year of corresponding by email, we decided to meet in person. What better place to meet than the town of Forio on the island of Ischia, the birthplace of our grandfathers! We selected a hotel in Forio, picked a date (June 2010), and made our plans to meet at the hotel. Later we decided to meet at the airport in Naples and travel together by ferry to Ischia since it appeared our flights were landing at about the same time. Louis was bringing his wife Monique, his best friend Jose (from his childhood in Algeria) and Jose's wife Nicole. Cathy was easily convinced to come along to continue the adventure! While waiting in Rome for our flight to Naples, Cathy noticed a group of four people walking toward our gate with one gentleman who resembled the picture of Louis that he had provided to me. I quickly approached them to get a closer look when Louis turned around, spotted me, and excitedly called my name. Amazingly, they flew from Lyon, France and we from Washington, DC and we were coincidentally on the same flight to Naples. Louis was somewhat conversant in English – Monique, Jose and Nicole understood a little English and we spoke no French. We became very dependent on Louis and his English to communicate throughout the week.

Arriving in Naples we decided to use public transportation (read that as a crowded bus) to get to the ferry. Leaving the bus, we drug our luggage through several blocks of side streets and alleys until we reached the port. (Lesson learned – next time take a taxi although our experience made for a much better story!) The ferry trip was uneventful but exciting, especially as the island came into view. Stepping from the ferry to the pier at Forio was a great feeling. I handed the camera to Cathy and she started taking pictures of me and another of Louis and me with Forio in the background.

We spent a wonderful week on Ischia. On the vacation side, we traveled around the island, played in the ocean, ate some great food and drank some really good wine. From a personal standpoint, we told stories, exchanged jokes, talked politics, went dancing, sang songs together at dinner and generally had an amazing time. On the genealogy front, we shared photos and family stories. Louis had a large number of documents

he had collected through a local association that provided insight into the family and life and death on Ischia. We visited the City Hall in an attempt to locate family related to us through the one sibling (the oldest brother) who did not leave Ischia. We collected a list of names but were unsuccessful in finding any living relatives. We visited the cemetery, took notes and lots of photos for future reference. We visited the church where the family worshipped and met a young priest who may be a great grandson of that on-island line. We plan to follow up on this lead. Cathy was especially excited to learn that the large vineyard and winery on Ischia was once owned by the family! The wine was very good and we brought a bottle home which we shared with my mom when we saw her. Louis had our great grandmother's passport which documented her immigration to Algeria along with his grandfather. He gave this document to me as a memento – quite an exciting moment.

The Discovery Continues

Now August of 2022 and we are planning to return to Ischia. During the COVID lockdowns, I continued to do research online and was fortunate to find other family members who still reside on the island. In September, we will return to Ischia to meet these cousins and continue the research. It is an exciting time.

My Closing Thoughts

The journey to identify my Italian roots has been eye-opening and very rewarding. Finding my grandmother's family was made even more special by sharing it with my mother. Finding my grandfather's family has brought me a new and wonderful relationship with my previously unknown cousin Louis. If this type of research and discovery has been on your bucket list, don't hesitate. Step out and take the chance. You may be as lucky as I was to meet a stranger at a rental car office or receive a random letter one day, opening the door to the experience of a lifetime.

Had it not been for the research documented by Pascal Scotto Di Vettimo in his La Grande Famille De Procida & Ischia Database, my cousin Louis would not have found our Ischia family. Thank you Pascal for all of your dedicated work.