

IL PAESE VECCHIO

ITALIAN-AMERICANS IN QUEENS

This virtual exhibition features the unique stories, traditions, immigration history, and culture of mostly but not limited to the large Sicilian and Napolitan population who live in areas such as Bayside and Whitestone. The exhibition focuses on experiences that span generations, from the Italian immigrants to their children.

HISTORY OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA

Although a wave of immigration from Italy started in the 1860s, it wasn't until the years between 1900 and 1920 that the United States, mostly New York, received almost two million Italians immigrants, most of which came from southern Italy. In New York during 1910, Italian immigrants were mostly employed as laborers who worked on the subways, skyscrapers, and various structures. Famous immigrants during the 20th century included Precisionist artist Joseph Stella who lived on Crescent Street Astoria, comic book artist for Disney, Don Rosa, and painter Frank Stella. Many Italian immigrants settled in the Lower East Side manhattan tenements, and various towns in North-East and South Queens.



Brooklyn Bridge, Joseph Stella 1919



New York, New York. Italian grocer in the First Avenue market at Tenth Street, 1943, Photographed by Collins, Marjory, Library of Congress



Cheese store, 276 Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village, 1937 Photographed by Berenice Abbott



Italian family looking for lost baggage, Ellis Island, 1905, Photographed by Lewis Wickes Hine, The New York Public Library Digital Collections

OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION

During the early to late 20th century southern and eastern Europeans were faced with discrimination. Italians in the early twentieth century didn't fit within the constructs of white and black, but were placed in a concept of "in betweenness". Even the Irish, when they first arrived much earlier in the 1850s, were disenfranchised but later assimilated and projected the same discrimination they faced on the new Italian émigré. Aurelio Palmieri, a prominent Italian-American Catholic writer, voiced his discontent in 1923 that the Irish considered Italians to be of another "racial origin."

Italian immigrants began to fight for equal treatment through "social reform" weekly meetings. Dr. Antonio Stella (the brother of Joseph Stella) was a huge figure in uplifting the Italian's moral and perception through his treatise *Some Aspects of Italian Immigration to the United States*, published in 1924. The book discusses the significance of political, economical, and social conditions for Italian immigrants during the 1920s, consequently at the same time of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and Immigration Act of 1924, banning all southern eastern Europeans, which included Italians.¹ Although Antonio Stella was a doctor, he was thoroughly involved in the Italian community living in New York and was strongly passionate about the injustices infringed on his community. His book extolled the brilliance of Italian culture, it's contributions to society, and of course, the great periods of Italian art, such as the Renaissance and Baroque.

¹ The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and Immigration Act of 1924 created a large concern for southern and eastern Europeans currently living in the United States. Joseph Stella secured his place when he had been admitted to United States Citizenship on August 30, 1923, a year before the Immigration Act was officially enacted.



Mulberry Street, Little Italy, 1898. Italians in Lower East Side tenements

ITALIANS IN QUEENS

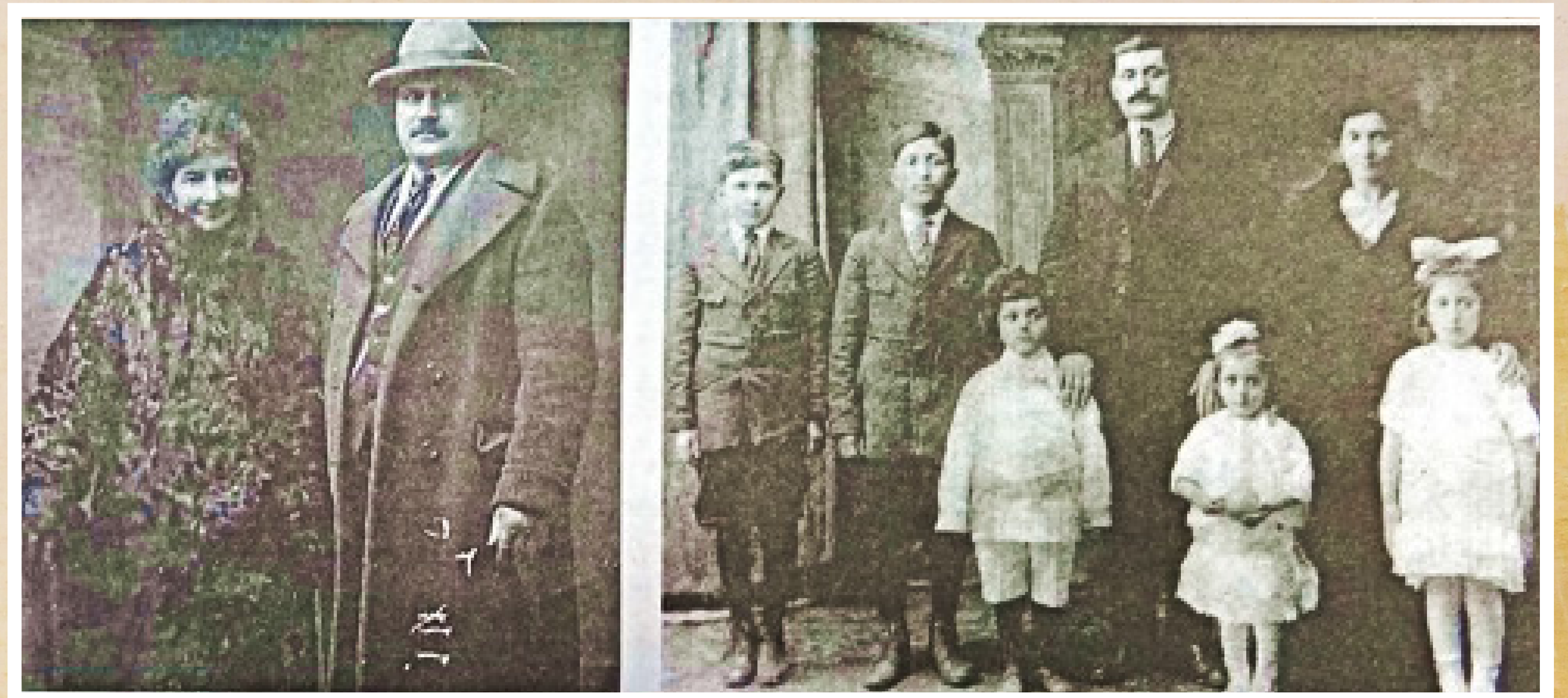
Towards the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th, Italians had immigrated to New York City from mainly locations in the south of Italy. In particular, about 3 and half million people have emigrated to the United States from the small Sicilian village of Castrolibero, with the majority of immigrants centering themselves in Queens. Upon arrival, these Italian immigrants have been known to organize and maintain communities for their particular regions or villages so that they are able to continue local traditions, celebrate feast days, and even help each other find work. This practice not only has, and continues to shape culture within their communities, but also often characterizes neighborhoods within the boroughs in which they settled. More recently however, due to the immigrants having aged, as well as immigration from Italy slowing down, the communities once flooded with immigrant and first generation Italians have assimilated to fit-in with American culture and practices, ultimately constructing cultural customs now known as, and belonging to the Italian-Americans. Areas in Queens such as Ozone Park, Howard Beach, Bayside, Whitestone, Fresh Meadows, and Ridgewood still have a large community of Italians. Today, 58% percent of New York is Italian.



Lou Lodati owner of Lou Lodati Play-ground in Sunnyside



Columbus Day Parade in Astoria — Federation of Italian Americans Organization FIAO



Italian immigrants in Queens. (Left) Antoinette [Baino] and Dominick Lodati in the 1920's. (Right) The Lodatis and their children Louis, Anthony, Alfred, Maria and Philomena.

ITALIAN CUISINE IN QUEENS

Many restaurants and supermarkets in Queens pride themselves on selling and making authentic Italian food often made fresh or imported. The most popular types of southern dishes and desserts, particularly Sicilian and Napolitan are: caponata, pasta con le sarde, cassata, stigghiola, arancini, cannoli, and chickpea dishes such as Pannelle.



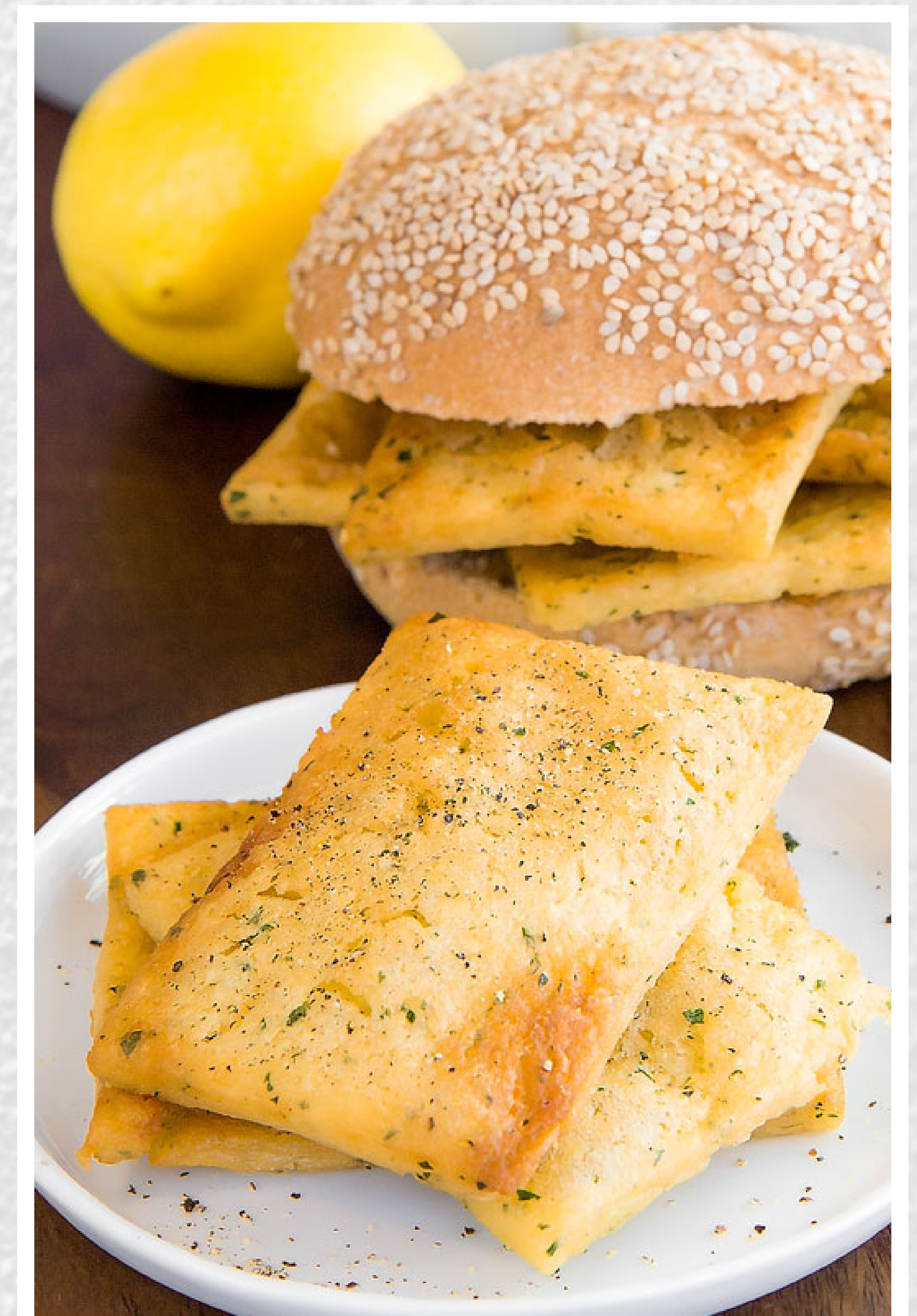
Pasta con le Sarde



Cassata from Palermo



Sicilian Arancini



Pannelle

VOICES AND MEMORIES OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

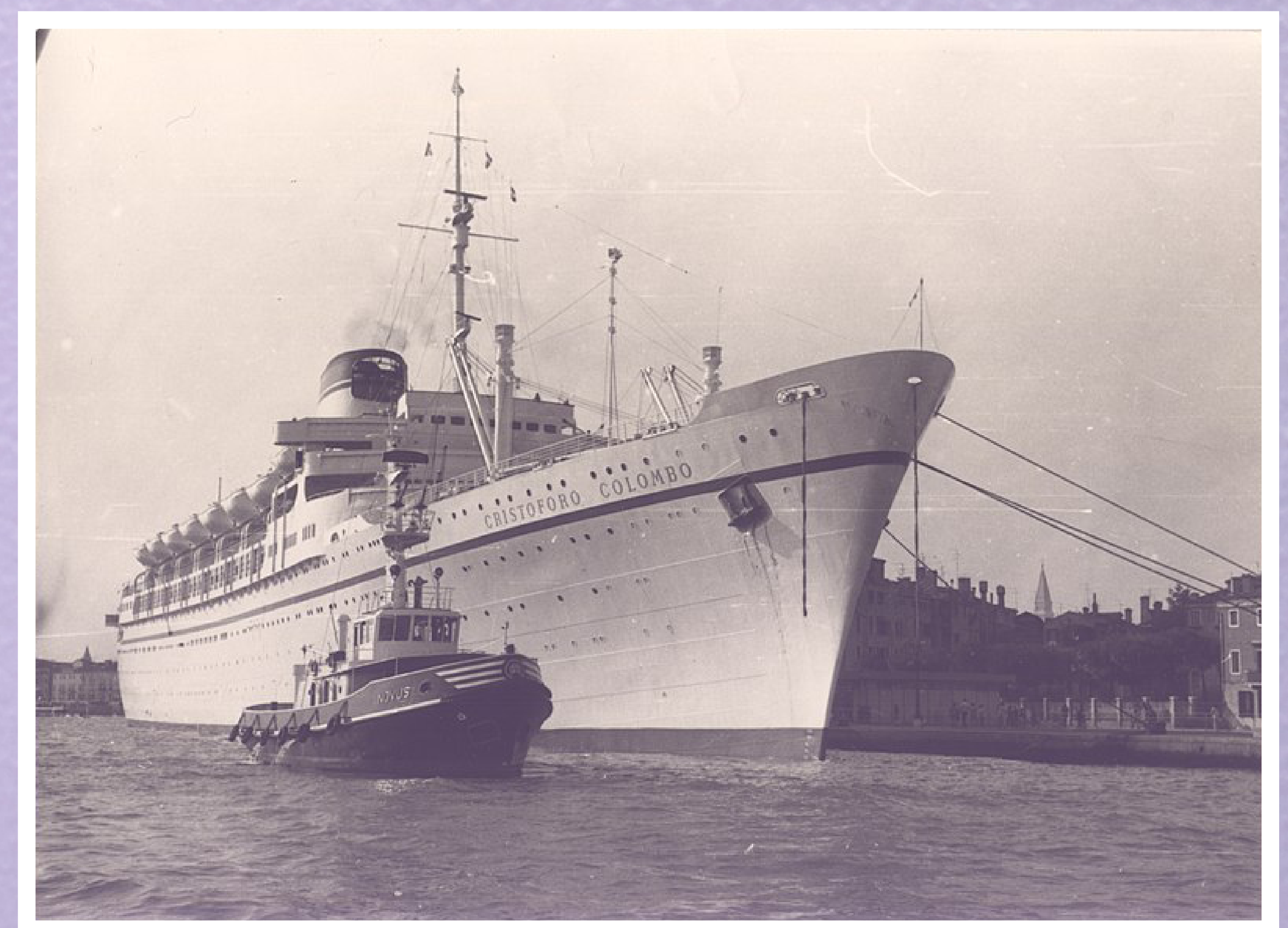
INTERVIEWER: GIUSEPPE ADDAMO [PART 1]

Giuseppe Addamo, now 60 years old, immigrated to America from Palermo, Sicily in 1966. On December 10th, 1966, he was only 6 years old when he came to America with his family on the Christopher Columbus Boat. Like many immigrants, his family came for economic opportunities which weren't available in Sicily at the time. Illegal activity by the mafia was preventing progress and the region subsequently became corrupt and poor. His dream was always to come to America and was excited to experience a new land in a new continent. For a young child, it was an adventure. His father arrived first in order to secure work and sponsorship to acquire a visa until he was able to bring the rest of the family.

Giuseppe still remembers the night before leaving Italy vividly. He stated: "The day that I found out, we were all excited. The night before, I can remember we were in the piazza. When my father told us, he put me on his shoulders and we walked down the piazza happy and full of joy." The journey was long, about 30 days. The seas were rough, and Giuseppe remembers holding on to the rail because the boat started to rock and some of the furniture began to slide. People were getting sea sick, as well as my father. When they pulled into the Brooklyn pier he remembers it was at night.



I could remember being overwhelmed by thousands of white lights from the buildings. I'll never forget that. We drove to our house in Whitestone, a community already filled with Italian immigrants, and along the way there were so many buildings and houses. Coming from a small town in the mountains, I was overwhelmed.



SS Cristoforo Colombo Boat c.1960s

VOICES AND MEMORIES OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

INTERVIEWER: GIUSEPPE ADDAMO [PART 2]

Giuseppe became a naturalized citizen in 1977. However, he's maintained roots in Sicily. Giuseppe expressed other sentiments about his first experiences moving to the U.S. — "What I expected was a more family oriented home-town feel, however, living in New York City, I soon noticed it was a separate life. There was a sense of isolation in the city. When I would go back to Sicily, I was reminded that everyone in the neighborhood was related and knew each other. And you lose that sense of community when you live in New York though Queens communities do foster a communal feel. I'm still grateful for living here, however, home will always be Sicily."

When asked what immigration meant to Giuseppe, he stated: "immigration means searching for new opportunities, learning how to live with a variety of different people, experiencing different cultures, lifestyles and cuisines, as well as all the modern conveniences that are afforded in certain places in the United States that we don't have in small towns in Sicily. To be an immigrant is also the idea of feeling like an outsider but inevitably assimilating. However, you never lose that feeling of being an outsider, always feeling like you belong somewhere else. You feel like something is always pulling you back to where you came from, always having that hope of going back, but you can never recapture what you lost. It becomes a nostalgic dream."



The benefit of being an immigrant is being part of two worlds: the old country and the new.



Giuseppe's father Salvatore



Giuseppe's mother Maria

VOICES AND MEMORIES OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

INTERVIEWER: GIOVANNA ADDAMO [PART 1]

Giovanna Fazzino Addamo (wife of Giuseppe), now 55 years old, immigrated to America from Palermo, Sicily in August 1973, and eventually naturalized in 1988. When explaining her experience she stated: "I came here on a plane when I was 9 years old. I remember my two brothers and I were very excited about going on an airplane for the first time. Knowing that we were going to fly across the Atlantic ocean, although it was an exciting thought, it was also very scary. I remember it vividly. I had a lot of friends and cousins in Italy and I was sad about leaving them and my small town of Partinico. I was excited about traveling to a new country, yet sad to leave my home, cousins and friends."

Her father had already traveled to New York 5 years for work opportunities before the rest of the family came here. He later brought them to New York to live in Corona.



Fazzino Family 1960s

“Since I was very young, the only expectation was the idea that it wasn't a challenge. I was too young to imagine any challenges that could have arrived. I was excited to experience new land and make new friends with different cultural backgrounds. As a child I didn't have many expectations. There definitely was the challenge and fear of learning a new language, which I struggled with the first few years. I felt like an outsider wishing to belong to this new environment.

VOICES AND MEMORIES OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

INTERVIEWER: GIOVANNA ADDAMO [PART 2]

Giovanna loved her country. She loved being around all her relatives and friends. She always loved Italian cuisine and culture, as well as the friendly faces when she gathered at the piazza.

She was somewhat disappointed once she started school. It was very difficult to adapt to a new culture and making friends was a challenge because of the language barrier. However, as a young child she was able to pick up the language quickly. Giovanna was put in a bilingual class and was also able to learn Spanish and still speak it fluently which has served her well for many years knowing 3 languages: Spanish, Italian, and the Sicilian dialect.

She keeps her traditions and costumes by keeping the culture alive, such as cooking Sicilian and Italian food and maintaining contact with religious traditions and always speaking the Italian language in the house. Staying in touch with relatives in Italy, visiting often and teaching her children about Italian traditions has always been important to her. Like other interviewees, she feels that she has the best of both worlds, being an American and an Italian. Her hope is that her 3 children thrive and have happy, prosperous and healthy lives here as well as maintain their Italian culture and never forget their roots.

I loved the small community in Sicily, and going to church every Sunday. You could hear the church bells — so beautiful. I remember frequently getting gelato at the town's ice cream parlor and walking around the park called the Giardino.

To Giovanna, immigration means new opportunities to meet and embrace new culture and learn different customs, new people, new food and embracing all people that contribute to the wonders of America.

VOICES AND MEMORIES OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

INTERVIEWER: ELEONORA GRECO

Eleonora Greco, now 56 years old, came to America when she was only 9 years old on November 10th, 1973, from a small town in Bari, Italy. She too left due to corruption and poverty with a weak political system. America presented opportunities and a better life for her family, a common reason for many immigrants seeking the "American dream."

When her parents first broke the news of this new adventure, she explained that she was actually terrified to leave to an unknown country, yet excited at the same time. She didn't know what to expect, except for stories she learned about New York from others who had visited or immigrated to. New York was a bustling city crowded with people, and tall buildings. Eleonora's family first settled in Corona, Queens. This town helped to ease her into her new surroundings since there was a sense of community, with many Latin Americans and Italians, eating Italian ices at the famous Corona Ice King and playing bocce ball. She expressed that she built a great life for herself in New York, however still keeps strong roots in Italy by visiting her family every year, cooking southern Italian cuisine, and keeping the traditions alive. Eleonora also has grown to love the United States. At the end of the interview, she expressed that she is also proud to be an immigrant, because she can be both Italian and American.



Eleonora Greco, her siblings and her grandparents when they came to America



Lemon Ice King Corona, Queens



Eleonora Greco's home town of Bari

MARIA BECCE

QUEENS RESIDENT AND SECOND GENERATION ITALIAN

Like many Italian/American families who made Queens their lifelong homes, my family's story begins with a young immigrant arriving on Ellis Island in New York. In our family, my grandparents immigrated from Sicily and Bari. My parents were both raised in Long Island City and were married at St. Rita's Church. I was raised in Astoria and now live with my husband, William, and son, Matthew, in the historic neighborhood of Broadway-Flushing. Lifelong Queens residents all!

What sets Queens apart is its great diversity. Families blending with other families and sharing stories and life experiences. What sets Italian/American families apart is the great food! Our homes and backyards were always the center of activity on our "block" within the community. The recipes in our home spanned two very different regions in Italy — lucky for us!

Queens provided opportunities to work, marry, buy a home, and raise a family. It was the embodiment of the American dream. It also allowed future generations to be well educated and advance their professional careers.

My paternal grandmother, Maria Cinquemani, arrived at Ellis Island from Castrolifippo, Sicily, at the age of thirteen in 1906. She and my grandfather, Calogero Restivo, were among the first residents of Queensbridge Projects and raised their two sons in Long Island City. My grandparents both lived to be in the nineties and were married for almost seventy years. My grandmother was also instrumental in sponsoring her nephew to immigrate from Sicily. He in turn sponsored his parents and siblings to join him in Astoria. You can say that Maria Cinquemani Restivo planted the seeds for generations of Italian/Americans in Queens.

My maternal grandmother, Guistina Cipollino D'Attoma, arrived in New York as a child. When my grandfather passed away, she raised three daughters and became a supervisor at Loft's Candy Factory in Long Island City.

My maternal great-grandmother continued to live in Astoria well into her nineties. To say that I had strong female role models my entire life is an understatement. Four generations of women photographed for special occasions was the norm in our family.

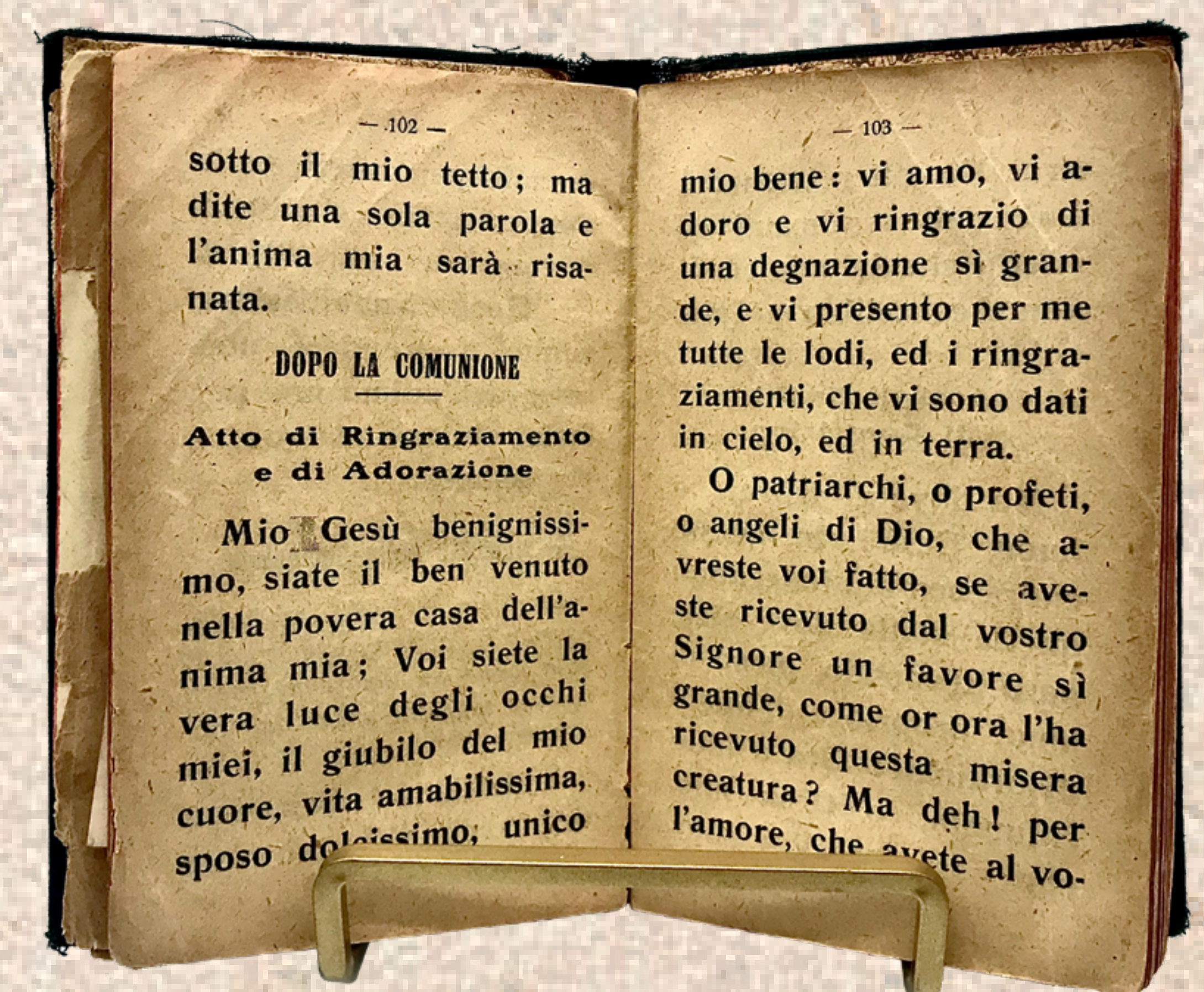
I hope my parents and grandparents are proud of their daughter/granddaughter who flourished from their love and courage, to become a Trustee of the Queens Historical Society.



Sicilian carrozza



Joseph Restivo, eldest son of Maria and Calogers Restivo, proudly posing in L.I.C., 1949.



Bible in Italian, c.1940



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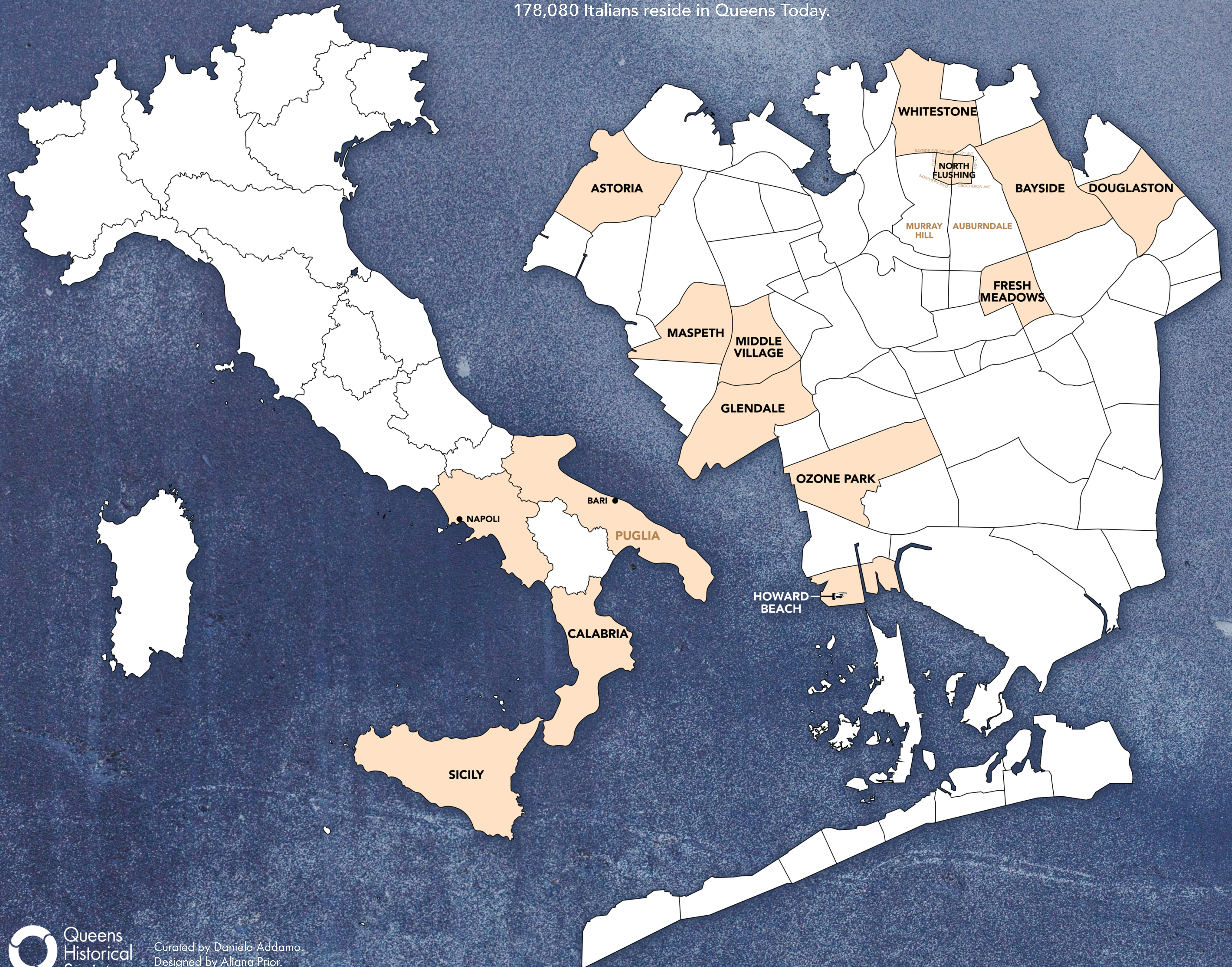
ITALY

Areas of Italy that migrated to the U.S. in the 19th to 20th century.

QUEENS

7.7% of Queens is Italian, which makes up the largest population in the borough.

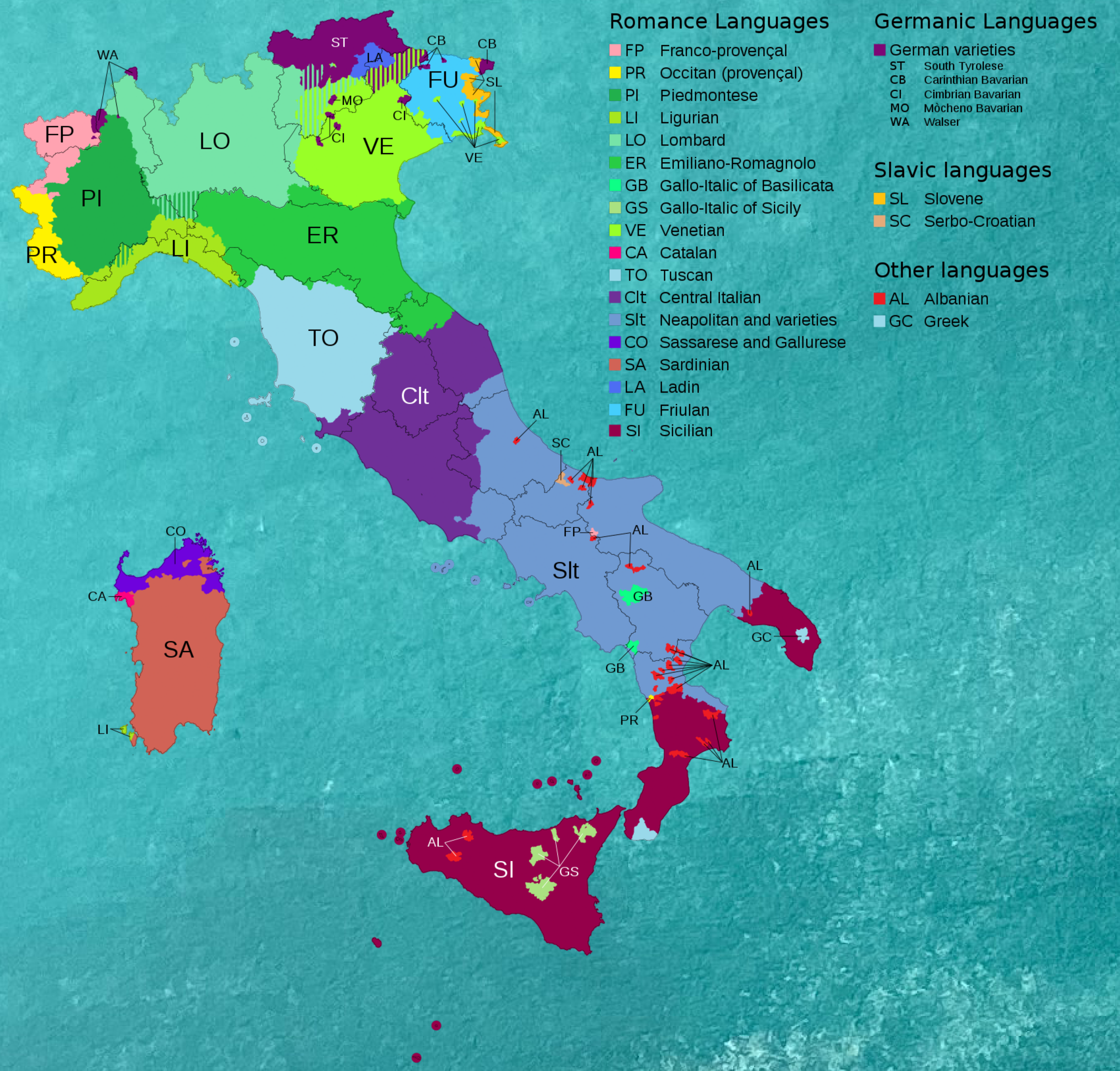
178,080 Italians reside in Queens Today.



CAPISCO OR CAPISCIU?

DIALECTS OF SOUTHERN ITALY

Dialects of southern Italy that are still spoken by Italians in Queens include: Neapolitan, Sicilian, Calabrese and Barese. Though each dialect has specific words and phrases from different roots, they are more similar than those of the north. Sadly, these dialects are starting to die out and it is believed that within the next generation they may be completely obsolete. There are organizations and scholars, however, that are dedicated to preserving these distinct and unique languages such as the Endangered Language Alliance, located in NYC. These dialects are fading out as more and more speakers are forced to learn and use a standard Italian. Consequently, the dialects are in a way frozen in time in the southern-Italian communities in Queens. Many first generation Italian millennials speak one of these dialects that they grew up with, passed down from their immigrant parents and grandparents. Almost all of these communities only speak in dialect. However, it creates difficulties for descendants to communicate when they visit Italy. In the ancient world, the region of southern Italy was a meeting place, trading hub, as well as a site of conquest, notably Sicily. As a result, the dialects are infused with influences from Greek, Arabic, Norman French, Arabic, and Spanish. These languages have shaped the sounds, structures, and lexicon of southern Italian dialects.



Curated by Daniela Addamo.
Designed by Aliana Prior.

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