

Yearning for Commonality

Renata Conte (July 13, 2009)



Commonalities on the surface, jealousies underneath, not conducive to our mainstreaming or to our recognition of a cultural identity.

It is certainly true; Suburban Italian-American youth are for the most part void of any positive cultural identity. What is ambiguous and difficult to ascertain is the reason why. The US census bureau reports an increase in the number of Italian-Americans in the general population, up from 16 million in 2000 to 17 million presently, making up nearly 6% of the US population. I find it even more intriguing that this difference is due to an "increased identification of Italian roots" rather than any increase in immigration. Are these 1 million people so far removed from their *italianita'* that they



needed eight years to realize they had any Italian roots? Where did they think they came from? Was it just a lack of interest?

For myself, I cannot imagine roots firmly planted anywhere except Italy, nor do I have any desire to identify myself as anything but Italian Mezza Via. My ravenous appetite for everything Italian is ever present; has always been. This is why I am finding it so difficult to find an answer to the aforementioned “why” question. I detected a bit of apathy in my children regarding their Italianess, I deemed it unacceptable. That’s about when I took on another job, saved, and gave them a fantastic dose of Italianess first hand. We spent 5 glorious weeks driving all over Italy, Campania to Liguria. The time we spent with our family including cousins their own age, totally italianified them. I realize that not everyone has a place to hang their hat that is so warm and comforting, not everyone gets a chance to experience culture and Italianita’ so intensely and directly. So the answer must lie in our young (and not so young) apathetic Italian-Americans’ immediate surroundings. In their schools, their homes, their cities and their suburbs, something is lacking, and what an incredible culture they are all missing out on. I’ve always felt that no one appreciates Italian culture like a non Italian. (-American).

Recently I came to realize that gaining or improving on this Italianita’ is no easy task; not even in a place like New York City. My frustration came to acme while trying to engage my daughter in some type of intellectual stimulation for the upcoming summer. She had expressed some substantial interest in expanding her basic knowledge of the Italian language. So my search began. We needed something fun, affordable, popular for her age group, and not too much like “school work”. I guess these were far too many requirements.....I found a program that did meet all these requirements except for one. The immersion program for teens in NYC was affordable and fun and was offered by the “French Institute: Alliance Francaise”. I failed to find the equivalent Italian version. Please do not misunderstand, I found some Italian language programs, but none fit. Some offered cooking; most were for toddlers or working adults, wonderful programs but none to suit the needs of my 16 year old. She ended up spending 3 weeks with family in Bologna and loved it because she felt like she “lived there”, like she belonged.

I must be missing something. I think back on the six years of petitioning for Italian to be offered as foreign language study in our suburban school district. A district full of people with vowels at the end of their names. A district whose offices are located literally on the Stony Brook University campus. The only state school offering adolescent teaching certification in Italian, as a course of study. My petitions fell on deaf Italian-American and non Italian-American ears as well as stone wall administrators with the ever present instinctive response of budget restraints. Finally, and coincidentally I suppose a new middle school principal was appointed who turned out to be instrumental in our cause. He juggled and danced and was persistent enough to get the job done, he was a rarity, an involved Italian-American.

My point here is, if it is not yet completely obvious.....why is this so hard? We need to mainstream a little better; here in New York is the only place to start. This principal I mentioned was educated as a Spanish teacher much for the same reason college students today will not elect to study Italian and will opt for Spanish. There are not enough jobs in the teaching of Italian. We need 20 Spanish teachers for every 1 Italian teacher. There is a much esteemed parochial High School here on Long Island, run by an order centering on the principles of St. Francis, one can imagine the percentage of Italian American students at this school, it is very high. Yet Italian is not offered at this school on a regents sequence!! When I inquired as to the reasoning, I was told by one of the Italian-American Spanish Language teachers that she would love to teach Italian and that she was indeed certified. I attempted to discuss this matter with the hierarchy, explaining that there really would be no extra cost to their budget because this teacher already on staff was certified. I am still waiting for my meeting with the principal. All those students have long graduated (with 4 years of Spanish, French or German under their belt.) What is more incredible is to realize the amount of Italian-American parents of influence in their communities that send their children to this school. It is literally an embarrassment that they do not offer Italian as a regents course of study.



I'd like to end on a positive note, but I don't think I can. I guess we will have to start on an individual basis, as I have been trying to do. My daughter will be majoring in Italian Language and Literature in college next year. She has such a fierce love of Italianess, it makes me look like an unemotional Celtic. I hope she will have a new "Italian insider" world opened up to her. I hope she will find a great internship, and then a great grad school, and then a great job. Most of all I hope she finds a commonality and camaraderie in those around her.

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