



NYC. Italians and Italian Americans Remember 9/11 @ the Italian Consulate

Francesca Giuliani (September 15, 2011)



Stories of Pain and Hope at the Italian Consulate of New York

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On Sunday the Italian Consulate held a memorial ceremony for the victims of 9/11. The memorial service proved to be more than just an official occasion to pay homage to the Italian victims of the terroristic attacks, it was the moment in which the Italian and Italian-American communities came together, to give one another the strength to finally move on, and start looking at the future with new eyes.



In the words of Lucio Caputo, one of the survivors of the tragedy: "For ten years we did nothing but remember our victims on this day, but our memory could never be complete. Today, after the death of Osama Bin Laden and with the opening of the 9/11 Memorial Site where the World Trade Center once was, I believe the circle of 9/11-in-the-past has closed, and we can look forward to the future."

The Freedom Tower, at 80+ stories, and other buildings being erected at Ground Zero, are the signs that America has recovered, and that New York has too, Caputo believes.

"This city has always been the place where everyone wants to be, but it always had an aura of invincibility surrounding it. The attacks humanized New York, they showed the world that even New York can be hurt. They also taught the world that the people in New York are capable of pulling together and show the greatest solidarity in dramatic and difficult moments."

There were many Italian and Italian-American New Yorkers attending the ceremony, with their eyes lit up by that same solidarity, a veil of commotion, and a story to share.

It's the case of Cavalier Giulio Picolli, President of the Italian Association "Ieri, Oggi e Domani," who experienced the loss of a grandson during the attacks.

Picolli is responsible for the erection of a commemorative monument to the Italian and Italian-American victims of 9/11 in the Italian Consulate's building, and he personally spent years drawing up a list of all the Italian and Italian-American casualties: "It took me five years to select 200 names, and the list is still not complete."

Picolli carried out this task with extreme determination. "A few days after the attacks, I was watching 'Porta a Porta' [A famous Italian evening time talk show hosted by journalist Bruno Vespa on Rai Uno], and a correspondent from New York was asked if there were any Italian victims. He said he didn't think so, and that infuriated me. I knew there were many," he explained.

From that day, Picolli started gathering information, dodging bureaucratic obstacles and advocating for the initiative with the Italian institutions, who weren't always as supportive as he wished, he admits.

His next battle, he anticipates to i-Italy, will be the one of having the complete list of names engraved in the Consulate's building. "I will fight ten years for it, if that's what it takes," the Cavaliere says.

Picolli was also the one to personally invite the families of the victims to the ceremony held at the Consulate. Eight families went from Ground Zero to the Consulate. "They could have been more numerous, but it has been a very fatiguing day for all of them," he concludes.

Ambassador Giulio Terzi, who was also present at the ceremony, praised Picolli's efforts in his intense and vibrating opening speech.

Quoting the Latin orator Marcus Tullius Cicero, Terzi remarked on the importance of memory, "the treasury and the guardian of all things," and the necessity of keeping it alive. "Cicero's words are a strong reminder for us to never forget, to pray, to remember the fallen, to honor our heroes," Terzi said to a shaken audience.

The Ambassador also remembered how "Italy and the United States have always done so, in all the most tragic moments of our common history," and how two years ago the two countries played a



primary role in encouraging the United Nations' Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to "bring together governments and civil society to strengthen their commitment for all the victims of terrorism and their families." Among those families who gathered in 2009 at the UN Headquarters there were some Italian ones, to testify Italy's direct experience of the atrocities of terrorism.

Terzi referred to the "season of terror" that gripped Italy in the late 1970s and the 1980s, when "hundreds of Italians faced the brutality of a political terror ignited by extreme, inhuman and unspeakable ideologies." "This is why we must say, on this tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, that we very much feel your same pain and join your urgent quest for justice," he stated.

Terzi further condemned the committers of such horrendous crimes, while expressing his disappointment with those countries who still harbor terrorists, including the Italian ones, instead of joining Italy and the United States in their "search for justice."

Consul General of Italy Natalia Quintavalle, on her first official meeting with the Italian and Italian-American community of New York, says she's deeply touched by the stories she has been listening to from witnesses of the events of September 11, 2001, and from the numerous members of the community who tragically lost family members and friends.

"Each story is incredible. They are the stories of wonderful people who, in those dramatic moments, tried to reassure their families about their conditions, or tried their best to help those who were trapped with them," she tells i-Italy.

We asked Consul Quintavalle where she was on the day of the attacks, before she had any idea that ten years later she'd be in New York, meeting the Italian community for the first time on such a somber day. "I was in Geneva, as a Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations. I have the clearest memory of the event, and in Geneva everyone was deeply shocked."

The September 11, 2001 attacks motivated Consul Quintavalle to keep on working on multilateral issues and on the defense of human rights, believing that these efforts are the necessary "to ensure a safe future for the whole world."

The Consul's first impressions of the community is the one of "a very composite and variegated reality, as the stories of the victims of 9/11 attacks demonstrate."

"There is a demographic of people who have lived here forever, there are Italian-Americans, but most of all there are new generations of Italians emigrating to America, and to New York in particular," she says. "Young Italians keep on moving to New York, to study or to work, because they still firmly believe that this wonderful city will allow them to accomplish great things. We must keep it that way."

Joseph Sciamè, President of the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee, chose to wear a green tie to the ceremony as a sign of hope, he tells i-Italy. "It's a sad day, but a proud day because we have the future," he adds.

Sciamè, who is also Vice-President for Community Relations at St. John's University, told us about a very special exhibit at the Staten Island campus of St. John's, where a quilt for every person who perished at the World Trade Center is on display. He was glad he was able to spend the weekend with the families of the victims of Ground Zero, on the occasion of the inauguration of the exhibit. "All I could do was thanking them personally as an American Citizen for their strength. The sacrifices they experienced are irreparable and never compensable."

According to Sciamè, we now need to work on how we instruct the children, who will be the future generation. What lessons have they learned? Is peace attainable? "Peace is attainable when people



meet one another,” Sciamè says. “It could be through sports, or through music, maybe it’s through culture – that’s why we have Italian Heritage Culture Month, to try to have people work together. That’s what next, a lot of hope, and a lot of goodwill.”

Anna Fiore, Dean of La Scuola d’Italia “Guglielmo Marconi”, shares Consul Quintavalle’s and Joseph Sciamè’s passionate concern on the new generations. “It is of utmost importance to send the right message to our youth. I’m glad Ambassador Terzi quoted Cicero in his speech, as two-thousand years ago he emphasized so powerfully that cherishing the historical memory of events is something fundamental.”

At La Scuola d’Italia, Fiore explains, they believe in a multidisciplinary and integrated approach, valuing diversity as an enriching factor. Fiore’s student’s are first of all citizens of the world, and of Planet Earth, she tells i-Italy: “Our students must be anchored to the universal values of terrestrial citizenship, which means that they need to feel as protagonists in building a better world with optimism and positivity. We want our students to ask themselves questions, and to be interested in finding answers which can never be simple or univocal, but complex.”

Louis Tallarini, President of the Columbus Foundation, believes America has been learning a lesson everyday since 9/11. A lesson of peace, which is “the only option,” and of strength, which is also the only option “not to give in to evil.” When we ask Louis about fear, he gives us a piercing look with his dark Italian-American eyes, and answers firmly: “I’m not afraid, no. I’m cognizant of the dangers, but I’ll never be afraid.”

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