

Becoming Italian-American

Stephanie Longo (June 16, 2008)



Sometimes ethnicity is a choice rather than a fact.

My mother wanted to name me Stefania; however, Stefania Rewt just didn't sound right. So I was born Stephanie Ann Rewt in the winter of 1981 in Scranton, Pennsylvania to an Italian-American mother and a Lithuanian-American father.

Shortly after my birth, my mother put an Italian horn and hand in my crib, to protect me from evil spirits. Nothing or no one was going to hurt her bambina, not if she could help it. These Italian relics were her way of uniting me to her family's bloodline, even before I was old enough to understand.



My parents divorced when I was three and my father and his family disappeared from my life. My mother's parents had died well before my birth so it was just the two of us. To her credit, she did what she could to teach me both Italian and Lithuanian traditions, but how could she instill something in me that was foreign to her? To this day, I would rather eat my mother's polenta than her pierogies; they both taste good but there is more of my mother's soul in the polenta—that's because she is proud of her heritage and she passed that down to me.

My mother would always tell me about her father, Joseph, who came to this country when he was 11 years old and who died without ever seeing his beloved Guardia dei Lombardi again and her mother, Anna, my namesake, whose parents came over from Calabria. She would tell me about her grandmother, Nicoletta, who never spoke a word of English and who was convinced that my mother, whose parents didn't teach her Italian, understood every word she said. She would remember what it was like when her uncle Angelo finally arrived in America with his wife and children and how, as a young girl, she was fascinated by their accents and their different customs. This is my heritage, this is my gente.

Growing up, I never considered myself as having a dual ethnicity. I was Italian, punto e basta. The fact that I am half Lithuanian was just a detail. In a heavily ethnic area such as Northeastern Pennsylvania, upon meeting someone for the first time, it was normal to first be asked your name then the famous, "And where are your people from?" I would always respond, "Guardia dei Lombardi, Italy" because it is the truth. The confused asker would then remark, "But you don't look Italian and Rewt isn't an Italian name!"

Rewt may not have been an Italian name but by the time I was 18 I felt more Italian than anything. At that point in my life I began to learn Italian and I began researching my family's history. The closer I got to Italy, the farther away Lithuania felt until, finally, when I was 21 it disappeared forever when I legally took my mother's maiden name, Longo, as my own. It wasn't that I was ashamed of my Lithuanian heritage because I am not; rather, I feel more connected to my Italian roots. I am more my mother's daughter than my father's daughter, despite what DNA has to say.

At this point in American history, it is difficult to find a "purebred" Italian-American like my mother. With intermarriage between the various ethnicities of our immigrant forebears, our ethnic traditions are in danger of disappearing not because of the intermarriage but because of carelessness. Had my father remained in my life and cared enough to teach me about his family's history, perhaps I would feel both Italian and Lithuanian, but he did not. My mother cared enough to teach me her family's traditions and now these stories have been woven into the fabric of my life. My grandparents' legacy will be passed down to my children; my children will be Italian-American, even if I marry outside my heritage.

Ethnicity is a choice. We can choose to remember our heritage or we can choose to ignore it in an attempt to be more "American". This was the mistake of my grandparents' generation; my mother often comments about how much she wishes her parents taught her Italian. Our heritage is our lifeline to our collective history; if we don't know our past, how can we understand our present and future?

As Italian-Americans of the third, fourth, and, perhaps, even fifth generation, we need to remember who we are and where we came from but we also need to remember where we're going. As an ethnic group, we need to take precautions now to preserve our heritage and history because, if we don't, they will be lost forever.

I encourage everyone who is reading this to join I-Italy's social networking group, to read up on their family's ancestral town, to learn how to cook a traditional Italian meal... anything meaningful to you that will keep our heritage alive in your life. You won't be sorry.



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