

Il Ritorno

Louis Tallarini and Anthony J. Tamburri (October 13, 2008)



Calitri (Avellino) 1980



New Rochelle (New York) 1966

The President of the Columbus Citizens Foundation and the Dean of the Calandra Italian American Institute talk about Italy, the "land of their return". And about their first experience with an Italian "piazza".



Anthony Tamburri*: For Virgil's Aeneas, Italy was the "land of our return"—the place his ancestor Darmanus left generations earlier. How would you describe your return to Italy, when you went to there to receive the "Filippo Mazzei" award and you visited the towns of Lacedonia and Calitri for the first time?

Louis Tallarini**: That trip was three years ago. The award ceremony organizers called me to find out where my Italian family was from, but I did not have much information to give them. Being a third-generation Italian American, I lost some of my historical background. Luckily, they managed to find my mother's first and second cousins in [Lacedonia](#) [2] and [Calitri](#) [3]. At the award ceremony, which was held in [Bonito](#) [4], in the Province of Avellino, I met members of both families: the Panico family from Lacedonia and the Rainone family from Calitri. It was a very moving reunion. Over the next few days, they gave me a tour not only of the towns but also of my family's birthplaces, like the house where my grandfather was born in Lacedonia and the little cave-like construction on a mountainside near Calitri where my grandmother was born. There was an incredible view there—no wonder why they call Calitri the "Positano of Avellino". I also visited the ruins of the castle of Gesualdo near where my great-grandfather had his butcher shop. It is still there.

AT: When I visited my grandparents' hometown for the first time (and I am getting to the main topic of this print edition of i-Italy.org), I could see that the focal point of the village was the piazza, the square where everything took place. I was truly marveled by this. I wonder if you had the same experience.

LT: Yes, in both Lacedonia and Calitri there is a main "piazza" where concerts and social gatherings are held. Everyone goes to spend the evening there.

AT: In Stamford, Connecticut we had some place like a piazza. There was an area where our grandparents used to hang out in the warm weather and they would speak some form of Italian. It was not standard Italian; it was mainly dialect mixed with English. Did you have this in New Rochelle?

LT: Yes, I recall this form of English. We called it "Pidgin English". That was the language spoken in the so-called "Dutch ghetto" where people gathered on their neighbors' doorsteps to spend time together.

AT: This brings us to the question of the Italian language. I remember that when I was younger I used to buy the "Progresso" Italian-American newspaper for my grandfather. When I tried to read it I could recognize maybe five words on each page. My situation was not uncommon. Your dedication to the cause of preserving the study of the Italian language in the United States has been remarkable. I was among those who asked you to discuss possible scholarships to send high school teachers to Italy. Instead, and to our great benefit, you ended up doing much more.

LT: At the [Columbus Foundation](#) [5], we know that language is the foundation of every culture. Italian was not encouraged after World War II amongst the early Italian immigrants. They were focused on Americanizing their children. The formal teaching of the Italian language as seen in the Italian schools was not a part of American schools. Looking back, this is sad. Now, people of my generation are middle aged and getting older and lack the skills in the Italian language necessary to spread our culture into America's future. That is why, Anthony, when you brought this mission to me, to the Columbus Foundation's leadership we recognized how important it is to promote the Italian language as a building block of our culture.

AT: And now we have the [Italian Language Foundation](#) [6].

LT: Yes, I am happy that I could support the effort for the Italian language teaching, both on an administrative and on a financial level. But, we need everybody's efforts so we can continue. Teachers, administrators, and leaders of various organizations are indeed welcome to step forward and send donations to us through the foundation's website. This will help us in our effort of promoting Italian language programs in the United States.



AT: Let's turn to Italian-American youth. You are the president of an organization that gives out millions of dollars every year in scholarships. I know that recently the Columbus Foundation put emphasis on language as being part of the criteria for some of the scholarships. How has the Internet, in your opinion, changed the youngest generations' approach to Italy, Italian, and Italian-American culture?

LT: I think that it is kind of eye-opening that Italian language courses at the A.P. level only exist since 2006. We realized that we never had an Italian requirement in any of the scholarships we granted. We have 58 high schools that we gave scholarships to last year; only some of them teach Italian at the A.P. level. Some of these high schools do not offer Italian courses at all. From now on, knowledge of Italian will be a stipulation for scholarships given at the high school level. As far as the Internet is concerned, I can say that I was one of those who spearheaded the effort to create the new website for the Italian Language Foundation. Also, working with my 14-year-old son Matthew helped me to realize that the resources available on the web to study Italian are just incredible.

AT: Let's close with the idea of the Columbus Citizen Foundation as a "piazza", as a meeting place.

LT: I do believe that the Foundation is a piazza. First of all, we are a centralized source of information for Columbus Day celebrations, the largest event in honor of Italian culture in the world. The parade, the exhibitions at Grand Central Terminal, the gala, and the memorial service at Columbus Circle...it takes a year to organize these events. Our building has also become the center of an international exchange of ideas within the Italian-American community, just like a piazza.

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[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/calitri-newrochelle-col1223909034.jpg>

[2] <http://www.lacedonia.com>

[3] <http://www.visitcalitri.com>

[4] <http://www.comunedibonito.it>

[5] <http://www.columbuscitizensfd.org>

[6] <http://www.italianlanguagefoundation.org>