

A Californian Mayor, Italian Style

Letizia Airos (September 20, 2009)



An informal meeting with Larry Guidi, the Italian-American mayor of Hawthorne, a city just outside of Los Angeles. "I am proud of my heritage. Everyone knows that I am an Italian mayor."

He seems like a typical Californian, tanned and healthy. You could run into him at the beach without



even realizing that you have something in common. But it wouldn't be the same thing if you ran into him at the supermarket. His shopping cart would definitely "speak Italian."

Larry Guidi, with his family originally from Bagni di Lucca, has a subtle Tuscan inflection when he speaks Italian. He is the mayor of Hawthorne, a city in southwestern Los Angeles.

We sat down with him and his relatives in the garden at his home and from there we headed to a restaurant – needless to say, an Italian one.

His story begins with his father. In 1953, not finding any work in Italy, he decided to reunite with family members who lived in Limano and then with his brother in America. "He came to see my uncle who was already working in North America. I was born here in '56. I am an American son. The Golden Boy. My father worked very hard and lived in a three-room house with seven others."

The mayor remembers those times. "My uncle moved from Buffalo to Los Angeles. Even in the west there wasn't any work. And for me, it was hard growing up in the Los Angeles area. We were always foreigners; they frequently used the term 'mafioso.' This was when I was little and I was going to school. Growing up, it was difficult for Italians to find work. I suffered many attacks in this sense." The decision to enter politics wasn't an easy one. "I succeeded in gaining respect in the world of work and times seemed to be changing. But this wasn't the case for political life. Larry Guidi, who no one knew, was a gangster."

Public life remained difficult for an Italian. For Guidi, negative stereotypes strongly persist and are used by the opposing side. "For this reason I support NIAF; I have never watched the Sopranos. I do it on principle"

His last name, Guidi, can be a play on the word "guidos." "They still attack me as if I were the Godfather. Not watching the Sopranos is my own personal way of boycotting. The mafia is not only Italian, but it is present in other countries such as Mexico and Russia. But here it's still associated with Italy...with the Sopranos, enormous pinky rings, open shirts, gold chains..." We point out that Italians are loved in California nevertheless.

"Yes, it's true, everyone loves Italy. But I am a politician and a politician always has adversaries ready to attack him. There are as many prejudices as there could be, especially in electoral races. They called me every name in the book. They attacked me as an Italian."

The mayor of Hawthorne also speaks Italian well. "My mother taught it to me to the point where she didn't make me speak English until the third grade. To this day she still speaks Italian when she gets excited. Many Italians changed their names but that wasn't the case for me; my name is Guidi. I read a lot in Italian. I've recently begun to force myself to write in Italian thanks to the Internet."

Italy runs deep inside of him. "I try to go back every year. I take a lot of photos. Italian architecture fascinates me. America destroys its own history. In my own way, I try to maintain Italian culture at home."

There is also a connection to Mussolini in his family.

"My father was a soldier in the Duce's army in Libya and I'm a distant relative of Rachele Guidi, his wife. Every time I go back to Bagni di Lucca, doors open because of my name. They say that I'm a distant cousin. My uncle knew the real story, but he passed away."

His family wasn't involved in politics before him. "I like Italian politics. In Italy, I'd go with Berlusconi. He's a typical Italian. He has the same problems as Obama. People can agree or not agree. They both have several problems to solve, and they are both afraid to make decisions. Berlusconi started with a hard line but he now seems to have eased up. Immigration must be handled with a firm hand."

Guidi is categorical on this issue. We ask him how a child of immigrants can think this way about other immigrants. Wouldn't this experience imply more sensitivity?

"When we came here we were bound by quotas for Italians. They could control our arrival, and we would do the work that no one else wanted to do. Today it's still necessary to control the flow of migration. We can't encourage them to come without providing homes, jobs, healthcare. This is what I oppose."

"The government cannot allow people to come into the country without knowing how to give them with what they need. In Florence, for example, I saw counterfeit merchandise being sold outside of a Gucci shop. It's wrong for the economy, for the people who pay taxes, for everyone. We need to fix



the problem!"

"We have a similar problem here in America. We must legalize the immigrants we need and take away the false hopes. Everyone wants to come to America, but it's also a question of security. They can successfully bring in illegal fireworks for holidays. Who knows what else they can bring."

We go into more detail and discuss the image of Italian-Americans in his line of work. "I consider myself moderate; I try to strike a balance. Nothing is black and white, especially when you are dealing with multiculturalism as we are today."

He talks about his mother's fascination with Kennedy and the importance for a politician to have charisma. We ask him point-blank if he thinks he has this charisma as well.

"Charisma means that people listen to you when you speak, that they look you in the eyes and understand that you want to help them; it means being heard. It means to be recognized as a fair person. Kennedy had it. As far as whether or not I have it, that's a difficult question to answer. They've told me that a mayor like me is either loved or hated, that there is no in between. For the rest, there are people who condemn me and people who work very hard on my behalf. I have suffered every possible attack. But in the end I think that this is why I've been at it for 18 years. When I started I had no particular political aspirations. I'm still intimidated by crowds but I must be strong."

And now he uses his Italian heritage as a source of strength.

"I am proud of my heritage. Everyone knows that I am an Italian mayor." He continues to talk in the garden at his home, in front of an espresso machine and a huge collection of espresso cups. "I've never forgotten where I came from; I've eaten pasta and polenta. And family is very important to us. My granddaughter loves caciocavallo and she eats mozzarella. My wife is Dutch, but she cooks Italian – lasagna, sausage and peppers, even rabbit until someone made a comment about Bugs Bunny.... My mother made gnocchi."

"Every Sunday I have at least 30 family members over at my house, food and wine on the table for everyone. But no smoking and no piercings."

Guidi continues to bring his Italian heritage to his political activities, almost to the point of mocking every stereotype.

"I've organized many initiatives that have distinguished me as an Italian mayor. For example, I created a space for the elderly to play bocce, the Italian festival, and a spaghetti contest – a pound of spaghetti eaten with no hands... I promote my culture for my family, my children, my grandchildren."

He makes an espresso for us with mastery. Despite so much time he has spent in the United States, we can see that he operates as a true expert. He even warms the cup before pouring the coffee.

There are many Italian elements in his house, ornaments, paintings, a puppet that sings "That's Amore" which his granddaughter adores, a garden full of fruit and vegetables.

"I wouldn't change any of this.... If someone said to me, 'I'll make you an American Yankee,' I'd say no. I love being Italian. I was the first in my family to become an elected official and unfortunately my father passed away before then."

Does he think the United States will ever have a president of Italian descent?

"After Obama, anything is possible. Even I can. Up until recently no one wanted an African-American. He opened the door for every ethnic group."

He goes on with pride: "In 18 years they have used every stereotype to fight me.... They said I was Capone's grandson... Today I have made my being Italian-American a point of strength. I have overturned every stereotype. The message that I want to share is never allow anyone to use your culture against you. So, there's the Italian festival, the spaghetti contest, the mozzarella factory...." Yes, the mozzarella factory. Guidi has devoted a lot to the opening of the first Italian mozzarella factory in Los Angeles and perhaps in the United States. Real machinery and real professionals who make mozzarella in Campania have been imported directly from Italy.

He is determined: "I want to bring truffles here; I want to open a production company to make olive oil just as it's made in Italy. I want to help develop an industrial sector that is truly Italian. I want to bring the real Italy here."

We leave his energy and his authentic Italian-American story with Italy running deep inside of him. (Special thanks to Darrell Fusaro)



Links

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/guidi004.jpg>