

The Unfortunate Pilgrim

Jerry Krase (October 14, 2015)



A Slavic Sicilian American recalls his trip to his ancestral village and finds that in the final analysis, “You can’t get there from here.”

Every October, or “Italian Heritage and Culture Month” as it known in La Grande Mela, I have mixed feelings. Few count me as Italian American despite treasuring my mysterious patrimony, including the fact that all Italians are anarchists until they are in charge.

Despite having been a Founder of the American Italian Coalition of Organizations, and President of the American Italian Historical Association, I never apply for anything with “Italian” or “American Studies” in the title. As to “onlyreal Italians need apply” I’ve had too manybad experiences.



For example, when I was Director of the Brooklyn College Center for Italian American Studies (1975-1984) several “real” Italian American professors complained that a “non-Italian” held the post.

My research on Italian American college students helped establish the Distinguished Professorship of Italian American Studies. However, when someone mistakenly nominated me for the post, I received a call from a prominent Italian American starting with “How dare you....” My identity problem has a long history. When I started dating my wife Suzanne Nicoletti in 1958, her parents wanted to know my “nationality.” As I didn’t know I looked through some family papers and discovered that my mother’s maiden name was “Cangelosi.” When I asked her why never told us she was Italian she replied, “We’re not,” explaining that her mother said they were “Sicilian.”

I thought this was a positive, so I told Suzanne the “good news,” which for her un-Sicilian parents was rather bad. Most of her relatives still think I’m Irish because most of the “mixed marriages” they know of are Irish-Italian. Three decades later, I got a PSC/CUNY grant to do “Photographic Research in Southern Italy.” Suzanne’s relatives encouraged us to visit their hometown in Laurino, Province of Salerno.

A borrowed Italian Auto Club road map showed a direct route from Potenzano Laurino on an ominously colored Strada Provinciale (county road) 11e and 11f. As I drove I asked pedestrians along the way “È questa strada per Laurino?” But the responses were incomprehensible: “Sì, ma bla, bla, bla, bla.” (“Is this the road to Laurino? Yes, but blah, blah, blah, blah”).

The road morphed from two paved lanes, to two unpaved lanes, to one unimproved lane where we encountered goats and herders. After several hours of breath-taking views and backbreaking bumps the roadway improved and we entered Laurino.

We asked people for the residence of la famiglia De Gregorio and were energetically pointed the way to a three-story stuccoed building situated on a steep incline where we knocked on the door. The small, yet three-generation, extended family was just finishing dinner. When we explained who we were, they treated us like lost, royal, relatives. The table was quickly re-set and after we finished eating and drinking we were invited to stay longer (even a few days).

We thanked them for their kind invitation but explained we were on our way to meet people in Sorrento and needed to make up for the time lost in the mountains. The men took us to a bar and introduced to neighbors and friends. There were some tears when we left and we felt as though we were leaving “home”, but understood our real home was in Brooklyn. Back in “The States,” I decided to explore the “conversation” I had with people along Strada provinciale 11 to Laurino. I sent the e-mail message below to some of my academic Italian friends.

Their responses reveal a great deal about authentic Italian bontà: Amici/eli need help with a translation of phrase from English into Italian for a paper I am writing about my own, and my wife Suzanne’s, search for our roots in Italy.

It regards traveling to a remote village in Campania (Italy) and asking people along the way whether this was the road to the town. The question I asked, perhaps incorrectly, was: “È questa la strada per Laurino?” The answer in Italian was (credo): “Yes, but you can’t get there from here.”; “Yes, but you can’t get there this way.”; or “Yes, but the road turns into a goat path” (which it did). Grazie tante, Mino Cangelosi Kruse.

These were the replies:1. “Sì, ma non ci arriva da qui; Sì, ma non è questa la strada; Sì, ma la strada diventa una strada da capre.” Hope to see you soon. All the best Mino Vianello.2. Traduzione: “E’ questa la strada per Laurino? Sì, ma non ci si arriva da qui. La strada diventa una mulattiera (mule trail).” Saluti, Maddalena Tirabassi.3. “Sì, ma non ci si arriva da qui; Sì, ma la strada va a finire in un sentiero (but I would not know how to translate ‘goat path.’)” Best, Cristina Allemann-Ghionda.4.

Dear Jerry: My translation: “Sì, ma non ci si arriva da qui; Sì, ma non ci si arriva da questa parte; “Sì, ma la strada diventa una mulattiera.” Best, Stefano Luconi.5. Jerry, I am on my way to Venice for a MA thesis discussion where I acted as co-supervisor. “Sì, ma non puoi/può andarci da qui...” Will get back to you soon again, best! Paolo Ruspini.6. The most Italianate response, which I gratefully received from my Italian colleagues was as follows: Jerry: the question “E’ questa la strada per Laurino?” is perfect, in Italian. The problem is that, encountering a “native” in Italy, then a native — only to be kind — tends to reply to the question as if it were: “Is this the one best way to Laurino?”; so that the reply is: “Ok, this way is good, inasmuch as it goes to Laurino; the best way, however, is ...” In fact, replying: “No, it’s wrong, the good way is another one” the native could have felt uneasy, since the reply would be a bit rude. Anyway: your question was classical; I also would have used the same linguistic form; and I would have had the same reaction. Bye.

Leonardo Cannavo. I replied to Leonard, thusly: grazie tante, ma come si dice in italiano le frasi? How would you say it in Italian? And can I quote you in my paper? I think your understanding of the situation is perfect. La tua comprensione della situazione è perfetta! To which he wrote: Ok, sorry, I didn’t get the point. The easiest translations for the three phrases is as follows: “Yes, but you can’t get there from here” = “Sì, ma da qui non ci può arrivare.” “Yes, but you can’t get there this way” = “Sì, ma da questa strada non ci può arrivare.” “Yes, but the road turns into a goat path” = “Sì, ma la strada diventa un sentiero per capre.” If you quote me in a paper of yours, it will be an honor; you need not ask for permission.

Most unfortunately, few methodologists (and consider that I feel uneasy wearing the hat of a methodologist) refuse to consider the cultural and psychosocial frames of their job. Speech interaction is both amusing and revealing. Bye. L. As a child, I had attended a few Italian “football” weddings, and as an adult I went to a rather unsatisfying Cangelosi reunion, more like a picnic, in Garfield, New Jersey. I hoped the Cangelosi clan gathering would be like the Sicilian wedding scene from the Godfather, Part II.

For people like me expectations or “demands” for authentic experiences can’t be met because we never experienced them. We move through the scenes but have never been, and will never be, part of them. To be American is to be uprooted, if not rootless, in the sense of having roots elsewhere, and our journey in search of our imaginary Italian home made that clear. In searching for my roots I became an unfortunate pilgrim, because in the final analysis “You can’t get there from here.”

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