

The Historical Roots of Southern Italian Women



The cultural heredity of the Italian American storytellers in this book runs deep into the ancient soil of Calabria, Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Sicily, and Sardinia. Southern Italian women of the lower classes are treated as background figures in history, silent partners who toiled and struggled through the ages alongside men. While foreign armies conquered their territory, women stood on the sidelines of an occupied land whose pivotal position in the Mediterranean divided East from West. The island of Sicily, less than one hundred miles from Northern Africa and two miles from the mainland, made southern Italy a natural stepping stone for civilizations migrating north to Europe.

Don Fabrizio, the Sicilian noble portrayed in Tomaso di Lampedusa's nineteenth-century novel *The Leopard*, somberly described the indelible marks the long history of foreign invasions left on the people of southern Italy: "For over twenty-five centuries, we've been bearing the weight of superb and heterogeneous civilizations, all from outside, none made by

ourselves, none that we could call our own."¹ Don Fabrizio's broad sweep of southern Italy's history began with Greek colonists, followed by Roman administrators, Lombard gastalds, Byzantine governors, Muslim imams, Turkish crusaders, French barons, and Spanish viceroys who conquered and divided the South, leaving their cultural influences on Southern customs, cuisine, architecture, and language.

Southern Italy's first occupiers were ambitious men from Greece known as *ekistes*, who led expeditions to subjugate native tribes, establishing colonies along the perimeters of its eastern and western coastlines, and around the island of Sicily.² Armed with superior military and city-building skills, the Greeks laid the foundation of a social hierarchy where a small land-owning class of aristocrats held the reins of political and economic power. Greek colonizers named their land "Magna Grecia," or Greater Greece, and sometimes incorporated native people into their newly founded cities, or imposed harsher methods, taking women into their homes as slaves.³ In the seventh

century BC, Greek settlers of Selinunte on Sicily's south coast were granted permission to mix their foreign blood with native Emylian women of nearby Segesta in formal marriage agreements known as *epigamia*.⁴ While we know that the lives of indigenous tribes—the Sicels, Sicanians, and Elymians of Sicily, the Lapigi of Puglia, the Oenotrians of Basilicata and Calabria, the Balari, Corsi, Sardi, and Iloai of Sardinia, and the Samnites of Campania, were centered on shepherding and agriculture, no historical accounts that may have shed more light on the lives of women have survived.

Archeological evidence reveals that native tribes in Sicily were quickly incorporated into Greek settlements from their centers of habitation through war or assimilation, and institutions and customs of Greek colonizers were adopted.⁵ Houses where rooms were partitioned into male and female spaces unearthed from the eighth and seventh centuries at Erea (Campania), Megara Iblea (Sicily), Metaponto (Basilicata), Syracuse (Sicily), and the island of Ischia off the coast of Naples provide clues about the roles of ancient Southern women as housekeepers.⁶ Daily life for the women of Magna Grecia was consumed with the preparation and storage of food around a *focolare*, hearth in a central room. For untold generations, ingenious women of the lower classes nurtured and fed large families of agricultural workers with limited

resources. From time-honored recipes passed down from mother to daughter, women created the cuisine of the humble Southern peasant known in modern times as *le cucine dei poveri*, the kitchens of the poor. Though historically overlooked as guardians against the constant threat of hunger, the Italian mothers' ability to feed families often meant the difference between starvation and survival. Incorporating foods introduced by Lombard, Arabic, and Byzantine invaders, Campanian women created simple yet nutritious dishes they transported to American tables, which in recent times have attained the status of haute cuisine in upscale Italian restaurants. In America, the Italian woman's domain became known as "domus," the center of family activity where members not only found sustenance from mother's home cooked meals, but also learned moral principles grounded in the Southern Italian code of righteous behavior.⁷

Homes unearthed in southern Italy shed light on another important aspect of women's lives in Magna Grecia. Special rooms designated for spinning and weaving fabric acted as female workshops in which sewing skills were passed to the next generation. At Paestum in 1934, archeologists discovered the original temple dedicated to the female cult of the goddess Hera in the sixth century BC that incorporated a separate space within the building reserved for *vergini tessitrici*, virgin weavers.

Millennia later, in 1897, Salvatore Salomone-Marino, a noted Sicilian physician, observed the continuation of the ancient sewing tradition in a study of Sicilian peasants. He found a space in many homes reserved for the loom where “the housewife or daughters sit alternately and produce the *rigatino* (striped cloth) for their own clothing, or the *faustian* for the men, or more frequently the *tela*, homespun linen for ordinary sheets and skirts and underclothing for daily use, or that fine linen called *alessandrina*, which compares to the finest in Holland today.”⁸ In the twentieth century, Italian women transported centuries-old sewing skills to Connecticut’s burgeoning textile industry as expert dressmakers and seamstresses. In 1938, Phyllis H. Williams wrote *Southern Folkways*, a handbook for social workers that surveyed the cultural traits of the large population of New Haven’s Southern Italians. She observed that Italian women had descended from a culture where “young girls learned sewing and, in country places, weaving and spinning even before their small hands could properly handle the necessary tools.”⁹ Williams’s book was written during the Depression when many men had lost their jobs, creating a desperate need for alternative sources of income for struggling immigrant families. Italian women and their American-born children put their sewing skills to use, finding jobs in Connecticut’s needle trades. Because of economic need at home,

many girls left school at fourteen, sacrificing careers as nurses, bookkeepers, and schoolteachers to work in sweatshops.

Women in southern Italy’s patriarchal society were subject to the will of their fathers and husbands, and grew up under strict parental supervision that guaranteed an unmarried woman’s chastity in the name of protecting family honor. The women of Magna Grecia had their mates chosen by parents, and ceded their rights to their dowry at marriage, but were given the responsibility to raise children and run the household.¹⁰ Senofante, a fourth-century BC Greek historian whose writings were known in Magna Grecia, recorded in *Economics* the statement of a married man who described the division of responsibility between husbands and wives in the Greek world, “I’m never at home at all because my wife is very capable of running all the business of the household.”¹¹

Magna Grecia produced an important woman Pythagorean philosopher whose works survive. In the fourth century BC, Aesara of Lucania (Basilicata) wrote *Book on Human Nature*, a treatise that reflected the ideal role of women in southern Italy. Aesara envisioned women’s work as focused not only on raising children based on the moral principle of “becoming just, harmonious individuals,” but also on “how a Pythagorean woman analyzed the ways in which the principle of *armonia* could be applied in the living of

everyday life.”¹² Pythagorean philosophers in southern Italy believed a man’s responsibility was to create harmony and justice in the city while women applied the same principles to their children in the home. Men received recognition in the outside world as workers, hunters, and warriors; women’s sphere of influence was the home where they found self-expression in household arts. Men built coliseums and temples; women’s daily work was invisible. Men created historical events and wrote histories; women told stories and kept family history alive. This dichotomy is reflected in the burial customs of the ancient Samnites who marked the graves of men with spears rather than inscriptions, women with their well-worn spindles.¹³

Women in Southern society were valued not only for their homemaking skills, but also their adherence to a strict code of morality based on familial loyalty, deference to male authority, and the ability to work tirelessly from dawn to dusk. These qualities formed the basis of the ethos southern Italian women transported to Connecticut and transmitted to their American-born children. Connecticut’s second and third generation Italian American women eventually found emancipation from the closed society of limited opportunity their mothers and grandmothers experienced in Italy. In the 1920s and ’30s, when husbands faced work reductions, seasonal employment, and factory closings, women entered the workforce as breadwinners, a change that began to alter the dynamics

of male authority in marriage. Many found empowerment in the union movement as industrial feminists. Some with prior experience in Italy became entrepreneurs and started their own businesses. Others lent money from their corner grocery stores, offering their customers loans at reasonable rates. Still others recognized the financial opportunities of owning property and invested in real estate, owning multiple apartment buildings with rented street-level storefronts.

In 1928, as Italian immigrant women were helping families climb out of poverty and into Connecticut’s working class, the anthropologist Charlotte Gower traveled to Milocca in rural southwest Sicily. Living among the townspeople, she observed women still living in a society where men enjoyed a wider range of possibilities of self-expression as “natural protectors” and “masters” of women.¹⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, social conditions for wives and daughters of *viddani*, tenant farmers in Sicily, and *mezzadri*, sharecroppers in Campania, had changed little since the eighth century BC. Having lived by a script they had not written, poor women in southern Italy faced three possible futures: arranged marriages established through chaperoned courtships, life in the convent, or a life of maidenhood dedicated to the care of family members.

In 1898, the Sicilian sociologist Alfredo Niceforo observed the social status of women in Sicilian society, noting men still practiced what he called “Arabic”

oppression of women.¹⁵ In *How Fascism Ruled Women*, Victoria DeGrazia referenced the lingering traces of Arabic culture at the turn of the twentieth century, referring to the “Islamicized” society of the island’s west where “women lived in cloistered domesticity.”¹⁶ In stark contrast to northern Italy, which absorbed Celtic and Germanic influences through the ages, the South remained Greek and Arabic in origin, part of a larger Mediterranean culture whose imprints lasted into the late nineteenth century. Greek temples in southern Italy stand in majestic testimony not only to the cultural brilliance of Magna Grecia, which once rivaled Athens, but also as holy shrines to venerate the supernatural powers of goddesses to protect and nurture. Millennia after the temple at Paestum was dedicated to Hera, the Greek goddess of childbirth and marriage, her image reappeared in the Christian iconography of the Madonna of Granato (Saint Mary of the Pomegranate) who holds Hera’s pomegranate, the ancient symbol of fertility, and bears her classical facial expression of quiet nobility.¹⁷ In 1935, the Turinese writer Cesare Pavese was exiled to Brancaleone in Calabria for his anti-Fascist politics. There he observed women who still spoke with Hellenic cadence and a people whose hospitality and kindness to strangers he attributed to *qui, una volta la civiltà Greca* (here there was once the civilization of the Greeks).¹⁸ Sicilian women carried the name of their ancestral town to Middletown, which reflected

their Arabic roots: Melilli was originally “Malillah,” named after the North African tribe of conquering Berbers who lived there from the ninth to eleventh century when Arabic culture in Sicily had reached its zenith, with Palermo as the crown jewel of the Islamic world.¹⁹ In the great migration, when women uprooted themselves to follow husbands to the New World, they severed deep familial ties to ancestral villages, yet they carried a rich cultural memory of southern Italy that reached back millennia. Once in the new world, Southern Italian women lived by the dictates of their ancient culture and transmitted those values to their American-born children.

“The Horse Stopped”

Antoinette Tommasi Mazzotta said her father Tommasi’s wine was well known in the area of Pachino in Sicily. People often recited this rhyme: “*Ó vino di Pachino/È sempre fino*, The wine of Pachino is always fine.”

My parents were newlyweds in November nineteen-oh-eight. They were married in Melilli, Sicily, and then they went to their home in Pachino. It was their first Christmas and they were going back to Melilli to celebrate the holiday with her family. There were no cars in those days and they were traveling by

horse and buggy. The horse stopped. And he wouldn't move. They were hitting him and he wouldn't move. They stayed there for a while. My mother kept saying, "But why isn't he going?" So they just had to wait until he felt like moving. When they got to Melilli, the people were saying, "*C'è stato un terremoto a Messina! È distrutto completamente!*" There was the earthquake in Messina and the city is completely destroyed!" It was the earthquake of nineteen-oh-eight in Messina. Thousands and thousands of people were killed; they had to build a new Messina because the whole city was destroyed. That's when that horse felt the ground shaking under his feet, and he wouldn't budge. They couldn't feel it. They didn't know why he stopped.

"The Dowry"

During our interview, ninety-three-year-old Francesca Grillo paused for a moment to recall one of her mother's sayings, "*Non ti sgomentare/Che Dio vede e provvede*, Don't despair/God sees and provides." At times, she spoke in her Pugliese dialect.

In Italy in the nineteen twenties, when my aunt was ready to get married, like here we have showers, over there the bride's family and

the groom's family got together. And they'd say, "What are you going to give your daughter?" And the family of the bride would say, "We'll give her six sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths, towels, handkerchiefs." Then they asked the husband's side, "And what are you going to give?" "Well, we're going to give him this piece of land, that piece of land," whatever they had. But the bride had to have linens for the house. So I remember when my aunt was getting married. They had a wall in the house or they put it on a table, what they promised to give when they got married. That was called *u currète*, the dowry.

The families had a special somebody [*u aggestatore*] to make sure everything was legal. So now they have all this stuff on the wall, and everybody gets together because it's a small town and everybody knows everybody and they want to know what's going on, so they all gather. So this man or woman the families picked to make sure everything goes well says, "*Va bene, cominciamo*, Okay, let's begin." And with a pencil and paper, "*Sei lenzuoli*, six sheets," and they count one, two, three, four, five, six, "*Eh, va bene*, that's good." Then six towels, "*Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque e sei, eh, va bene*." So now there's only five tablecloths, one, two three, four, five, *va*

bene, okay. If the paper said you were giving six tablecloths, you counted one, two, three, four, five, and then they go, “Five? *Alda volde!* Let’s count that again! [laughing] *Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque, e basta!* One, two, three, four, five, and that’s it, no more! You’re trying to cheat, where’s the sixth one? *Spiegami che successo*, Explain to me what happened here.” And so one looked at the other one and said, “Eh.” And the other one looked at the other one and said, “Eh.” That was it, “*Va bene, il matrimonio non esiste piu!* All right, the wedding is off!” There were a lot of marriages that didn’t take place, and they’d stop people from getting married in Terlizzi [Puglia] even for a handkerchief sometimes.

“The Dream of Cosimo and Damiano”

Francesca Grillo recalled celebrating Christmas in nearby Ruvo in Puglia, with a Nativity scene cast with real people and animals. She said, “It made you feel warm and accepted in God’s way.”

I was born in nineteen seventeen in Terlizzi, in Puglia. When I was ten years old I had a cold, my father called the doctor, and he came and gave me medicine. After about a week, I was getting worse. I lost my voice, and I was

losing my hair and had sores all over my body. I was getting high fevers. So my father went to the city to call the specialist. He came and my father told him, “The regular doctor says she’s gonna die. I want a consultation.” The specialist said, “Where’s that jackass doctor? She hasn’t got a cold, she’s got typhoid!” He told the family to put me in isolation because it was very catchy.

My uncle Joe, he was the only one that had the nerve whenever there was a bubble on my body, and the skin broke from the medicine I was taking, he pressed it to get all the poison out. It went up from my body to my eyes. So the specialist said to call my father. “She’s gonna die anyway, so let’s try something. Go get me a keg of ice, put it next to her bed and get some hot water and put it in a tub. Take her, put her in hot water, then take her out of the hot water and put her on the ice. If it’s meant for her to live, she’ll live, but I wouldn’t . . .” So in the meantime while they were saying I was going to die and that it was just a matter of time, they called the carpenter to take the measurements for the coffin. People used to come by and ask, “Did she die yet?” The doctor came by too; “Is she gone yet?” They did all this in the afternoon and my father used to lie down on the floor in

the *salotto*, the living room next to me, so he could help me. My mother was with the kids on the other side of the house because they didn't want to come near me. So my uncle would come and take care of me.

So all of a sudden one day when Zi' Pep-pin, Uncle Joe, came and it [the infection] started to go up on my body, he told my father, "I see red marks on her face and pretty soon it's gonna go up to her and it will be good-bye." That very night they thought I was going to die, and they were waiting for me to die. That night I had a dream about *I Santi Medici*, The Holy Doctors, and we always went to our church named for Cosimo and Damiano. I dreamt of these saints, Cosimo and Damiano, who were doctors. I felt it, one on one side and one on the other side of me. And they rubbed my face with their hands. One had a pen with long feathers. And one said to the other, "Put her name in the book." And they wrote my name in this book. And up to that time I couldn't talk and I yelled, "Ma!" And my mother and father came running in the room because it was the first time I talked. I called my mother and right away she ran in, and my father called my mother, "Marietta! Marietta! She's okay! She's gonna be all right."

The next morning my uncle came to take care of my things and he said to my father, "My God, what happened to her face?" because he was expecting to press the sores on my face. I started to get better. So my father said, "*Un miracolo, un miracolo!* It's a miracle!" After that I don't know what my father promised them every year, what he gave or what he did. He was a fanatical Catholic.

"We Were Carbonai and Boscaioli"

Michelina Venditti chuckled when she compared her first job in New Haven as a cigar maker in the early 1970s to the hard physical labor as a lumberman in the Campania region of Italy.

From the day I was born I grew up in the woods. We were considered *boscaioli*, woodsmen, the name for the life we led in the mountains.

During the six warm months, we went up to the mountains to work and we lived in a one-room shanty made of *legno e terra*, wood and earth. My parents and eight children lived there. There was no school for us. I learned how to read and write those nights after we finished eating when my parents taught only



Figure 1.1. Montuori family in the mountains of Matese, 1940s.

the boys. I learned myself without any schooling by just watching my father teach the boys. My father never wanted the girls to learn. He said, "*Scrivi ai fidanzati quando facete grande*, You'll learn how to write to your boyfriends when you get older."

The girls had to wash the clothes, get water, and do the shopping. To get our water to cook our food and to wash ourselves, we

had to walk about two hours to get spring water and then carry it back in wooden barrels, balancing them on our heads without using our hands. It took us three, four hours on foot with baskets on our heads to get to the store to buy macaroni, wine, and everything we needed. Luckily we had a donkey to help us carry things, though a lot of the other families didn't have one. To wash our clothes we had

to go to a small river where the freezing water ran under a big cliff, and as we washed the clothes in that freezing water our hands froze. Then we had to carry the clothes on our heads back to our shanty.

My *mestiere*, my job, from when I was fifteen years old in the 1930s until I was twenty-three, was a *taglialegna*, a lumberman. My father taught me everything about tree cutting. We cut down the biggest trees in the mountainous area around Gallo Matesa! After we cut them down we had to carry them on our shoulders to the *spazziale*, a small clearing in the forest we made with our rakes and *á vanga*, a spade. We called it our *l'aria per carbone*, the coal area, where we built *ó catuózzo*, which looked like a miniature Mount Vesuvius in Naples. It was this big cage-like form that looked just like a volcano with a hole on top of it where the smoke came out, about the size of a garage, with logs piled up about eight or nine feet high. We used ladders to build it up and then we covered the whole thing with dirt and leaves. Then we used twigs and leaves to start a fire inside and we burned the logs for eight or nine straight days to make coal. It had *fucarol*, little holes all around it, where we put the small logs in day and night to keep the fire burning. After that time, we pulled

out all the *carbone di legno*, wood charcoal, and our faces were covered with so much soot that we looked blacker than black people, like chimney cleaners.

At the end of nine days, we cooled the fire down by throwing water on it, then we filled up sacks with the coal, and brought it by *i sommari*, mules, to the *magazzino*, warehouse, where we sold it to the owner who in turn sold to people who had *fornacelle*, wood stoves. The bigger the sack, the more money. But the wood there wasn't always good. Sometimes we'd find good, other times not, because we cut them down every five years. Up in Matese, it was every twenty-five years.

We used our wood charcoal in our *braciere*, a round pot framed with a wooden footrest so we could sit around it, put our feet around it, and stay warm. At night we'd leave the coals burning, but you had to be careful of carbon monoxide, so we'd put orange skins on the coal. This coal was different than *carbone fossile*, which they used to power trains.

For six months we stayed in mountains until the snows came. In September, when the snow started to fall, we came down from the mountains to our home in Piedimonte Matese in the region of Campania for a month and we worked in the forest and on the plains where

it was warmer. The girls washed, ironed, and repaired all the clothes for when we returned to work in the mountains. Compared to living in the mountains, when we came down to our home we lived like *i signori*, rich people. We went to mass, to the cemetery every night. But no movies and no enjoyments! On Sundays my mother took one of the daughters to mass, but never did we all go at once. When Christmas and Easter came around, my father took us to mass on Christmas Eve and Easter. Later my parents went to the first mass and we *signorine*, young ladies, went at eleven in the morning. At home, when our boyfriends came to visit, my father and mother sat on either side of the boyfriend. I sat across from him. (Translated from Italian)

“We Lived *Oggi per Domani*”

Marietta Scalzo Notaro recited a well-known saying of the farmers of Calabria: “*Se non si fa á campagna, che fa á mangiá?* If there are no farms then there is nothing to eat.”

My father came to America at fifteen, and was a track boss on the Rio Grande Railroad. In nineteen twenty, he went back to his village of Decollatura in the province of Catanzaro

in Calabria to marry my mother. Her parents were millers in the town and they made flour. They owned land, so they didn’t want their daughter to marry my father and leave to go to America.

My sister was born in nineteen twenty-one, and my father sent for them. I was born in Green River, Utah. We lived in the mountains, and it used to get very cold. My father had to be away for work, and my two sisters and mother and I were left alone a lot. After a few years my father developed serious heart problems and decided the best thing to do was to return to Italy. He said, “At least if I die in Italy my wife can be with her family.” When he died in nineteen thirty-four, my mother was left with nothing because my father had loaned a lot of money, and after he died the people refused to pay her the money they owed my father. So we returned to working on my mother’s family farm in the town of Decollatura in Calabria.

When I was ten years old, I started working alongside my mother growing beans, potatoes, wheat and tomatoes. I only went to school up to the fourth grade, and because I was an American citizen I couldn’t attend school. Sometimes, when a lot of farmers needed help during the summer, my mother hired me out

as a day worker, a sharecropper. This was in nineteen thirty-nine, nineteen forty. In September, from morning from six until eight at night, I dug potatoes, hoeing all day for about ten, twenty lira a day, maybe a hundred lira a month. Ooh, how my back hurt after hoeing all day long! With what I earned I bought high-cut leather shoes with iron nails in the soles for walking on rough terrain in the hills gathering chestnuts. We'd pick for more than a month, and they'd protect you from the *spini*, the thorns and thistles, as you picked chestnuts. We put three leather *ditali*, thimbles, on our fingers to protect us. After they stuck you, how those thorns burned! At noon the owners of the farm brought us *pasta e fagioli*, macaroni and beans, *pasta e piseddi*, macaroni and peas, meat and sausage, bread and fruits. In July, my mother and I used to help in the fields cutting down the wheat. How hot it was, *mama mia!* I drank a lot of spring water, I had breakfast and lunch, and rarely ate a night.

I remember how many times there was nothing to eat after a day of working, and I'd fall asleep exhausted and hungry. The water came from underground springs, and it was so good to drink, and it had a lot of minerals to help with digestion. In my whole life I never



Figure 1.2. Marietta Scalzo Notaro (right) with sister Rosina (standing left) and Marietta Gentile, Soveria, Calabria, 1949.

drank a soda! It didn't exist! On our farm we had chestnut and walnut trees, which saved us during winters. Sometimes I'd eat chestnuts for breakfast as I did my housework. In October when the *noci*, the walnuts, dried up on the trees we'd hit the branches with a stick to make them fall to the ground, and we used to eat fresh walnuts with bread. Everything we ate was natural.

In October, from seven in the morning until sundown, we picked chestnuts with

baskets. We placed them in the *castagnaru*, a storage building made of stone the size of a garage where everyone in the fields stored and sold their chestnuts. People from Naples used to come and buy them, and sometimes a truck would come and take them to northern Italy. Sometimes we boiled them and they were sweet-tasting! We roasted them, put them in burlap sacks, and with one person on each end, banged them together to take the peels off. Then we put them in wicker baskets, shook them to get the rest of the peels off, and later sold them to buy bread and macaroni.

Sometimes we made bread from *farina di castagne*, chestnut flour, mixed it with a little *farina bianca*, white flour, added *il levito*, the yeast when the bread rose, and put it in *il forno*, the wood oven, to bake. It was delicious bread! We used to say, “*Pane per una sera, salute per sempre*,” Bread for an evening, health for life. What it really meant, though, was that if there was health, bread will follow. As long as you have health, everything is okay. If you’re sick, you can’t work, but if you’re healthy, you can always make bread.

We made macaroni with the chestnut flour, too. Some chestnuts we gave to the pigs to

fatten them up before they were slaughtered. During summers, my mother and I went into the woods to cut as much wood as we could to put away for winter. I remember carrying it on our heads many times in the pouring rain. Sometimes we ran out of wood by January. Then we would have to go back out into the woods to cut down trees and carry them back on our heads.

It snowed in the winter where we lived in Calabria, and we needed wood to cook our food in our *focolaio*, the hearth. We lived *oggi per domani*, day to day. My mother cried a lot because she had four children to feed, and there was no help. Things got so bad my mother sent my oldest sister to *la maestra di ricamo*, the embroidery teacher, to learn how to become a tailor. She earned a little money at home as a tailor sewing suits and clothes, and I used to help her. During the winter I used to sit around the *braciare*, a round copper pot that held the burning coal with a wooden edge around it where you put your feet to stay warm. I used to sew shirts and pants until around ten at night until there was no more light. Many people paid her for her work, but a lot didn’t. Sometimes people bartered. Right after my daughter Pina was born

in Decollatura, Calabria, in the nineteen fifties, my friend had a boy and couldn't breast-feed him.

There was no milk for children in those days, no such thing as going to *la farmacia*, the pharmacy, to buy milk. In Calabria in those days you had to travel too far to find milk. So many newborns died in Calabria in the early nineteen fifties because mothers couldn't find milk for their babies in the first few days of childbirth. Sometimes they used *ó latte ru cucchio*, donkey milk, because it was *dolce*, sweet, but many times it was hard to find. Cow milk was a little too heavy and difficult to digest and the children still died.



Figure 1.3. Marietta Scalzo Notaro and her daughter Pina.

Sometimes they gave the babies *camomidda*, chamomile tea they grew, but it wasn't nutritious like milk. So my friend's husband said, "*Per favore, viene e mi da un po' di latte a mia figlia, perche se no, mia figlia muore, á mamma non avia latte*, Please come and give my daughter milk because she'll die, her mother has no milk." I went there for a month to give the daughter my milk and they were so grateful to me for saving their daughter's life. At the same time a lawyer from Catanzaro had a little boy and his wife had no milk to give him. He asked me to come and give him milk for two months. He paid me as a *levatrice*, a midwife. At the same time I was also feeding my daughter and he became *un fratello di latte*, a nursing brother, with my daughter Pina. There were few doctors around. Once, when I went back to Italy, I saw the little girl I had breastfed years ago, who was now a grown woman. When she saw me she said, "*Mama, mi ha salvato! Mama, you saved me!*" (Translated from Calabrian dialect)

"Hard Labor"

Giuseppina Naclerio was ninety-five at the time of our interview. One of her favorite sayings was, "*Quando*

fa una giornata buona, pigliatela, che domani non ci sta,
When it's a good day, take it because you don't know
what tomorrow brings."

When I was a young girl of five in Agerola in the region of Campania in the nineteen twenties, my father died and I had to go work. I was the fifth born of three girls and two boys.

When I was fourteen I went with my older sister to work the land as laborers to make a

little money. It was hard labor, clearing the land of the rocks and large stones. The builders used these rocks for their foundations for houses and retaining walls. Sometimes they used the rocks for making stalls for the animals. Then I worked for the local farmers picking crops and weeding. We used to go to the hillside to cut fire wood and tall grass to feed to the farm animals. This was my life until I was twenty-two when a young man named



Figure 1.4. Giuseppina Brancati Naclerio in Agerola, standing third from left, 1920s.

Nicola came along and asked my mother for permission to court me. I got married and did a lot of the same work on my own farm.

“Life in Castellabate”

Anna Fasano explained how good jobs in her area of Italy were always controlled by politically connected families, “*Ó padre lascia, ó figlio piglia*, when the father leaves the job, the son takes it.”

When I was a young girl in Castellabate in Campania in the nineteen twenties, we had the best food to eat. The rich people bought the seconds. What were the rich people thinking the way they carried themselves, as if they were better than us? They weren't better than us! We had the best of everything, the best food.

One day I walked past the house of this rich woman. She stopped me and said, “Young girl, the next time you walk past my house and see me there, you have to say, ‘*Buona sera, Eccellenza*,’ Good evening Your Excellence.” I looked at her and said, “The next time I pass by here, I'm not saying good evening or *Excellenza*! Arrivederci!” She called my mother and said, “Your daughter is a *scostumata*, *senza edu-*

cazione, rude and has no manners, and she's ignorant. So my mother, knowing what kind of person she was, said to her, “What do you want me to do, kill her?”

When my mother got home I said, “So mom, how many beatings are you going to give me?” She said to me, “That's just the way that woman is.” I said, Mom, “That's the way I want it and that's it.” My mother said, “But she said you were a *scostumata*, a person with no manners.” I said, “I don't care. When I walk by her the next time I'm not saying anything to her, even if you beat me, you kill me, I'm not saying anything to her.” My mother said, “All right, now just stop it, or today I really will kill you.” But from that day on I never greeted that woman again. (Translated from Italian)

“Making Cheese with My Father”

Antonette Becce Padula spoke about her mother's life in Tolve as her nieces Lucia Becce Mudd and Joanna Becce Herman listened. She recited her bedtime lullaby: “*Ninna, nonna, ti voglio riposar/ Ninna, nonna, ti voglio cantar/ Ninna, nonna, ti voglio suonar*, Ninna, nonna, I want you to rest/ *Ninna, nonna, I want to sing to you/ Ninna, nonna, I want you to sleep.*”

Her father wanted her to go to school, but instead of going in the morning she'd go to the *massaria*, the dairy farm, with the cows right there to make cheese with her father and uncle. She was very attached to her father and didn't care about school. She'd rather be out in the fields.

Her father was in the dairy business, exported cheese all over. She learned how to make *monte ca*, cheese with butter in the middle, *la treccia*, braided mozzarella cheese, and provolone. They made it all from scratch, they milked their own cows. They went out to the pastures, sometimes for a week at a time. My mother Lucia Santorsa was privileged because she was the oldest child.

They had olive and almond trees. Her father hired all the women from the city of Tolve in the province of Potenza to pick them when they were ripe. Then they made their own oil from it. They raised their own wheat, threshed it, and took it to the mill to have their flour made for bread. All she talked about was her father, she never mentioned her mother. It was always her father; she was very close to him.

They made the cheese right out there on the *massaria* and her uncle, Zi' Gerardo, took

the little cheese and made it into little birds with feathers and wings and horses and little figure toys for the children. They were masters of art. In Italy, her uncle, Zi' Gerardo, made her a regular doll. She said, "It was so beautiful," but then it got *tuost*, hard, fell on the ground and broke. She said, "I cried and I cried." So then her mother took the doll and put it in the *minestra*, the soup! She cried, "I want my doll back." Her uncle said, "All right, Lucia, all right," and he would make more cheese toys for her.

When I had my daughter, my mother Lucia made little rings of cheese as teething rings for her grandchildren. She dried them out until they got hard and gave it to them to bite and suck on when they were teething. It was nourishing.

"La Festa Maggiore"

Francesca Grillo's eyes lit up as she described the religious festivals she experienced as a young girl in Italy.

The fifteenth of August is La Festa Maggiore. The men of Terlizzi in the region of Puglia used to start way before the summer, and they used to build a *carro*, a float, like an altar. They

put benches where the kids would sit and on the top, and then they put La Madonna di Sovereto. She was the patron saint of a little town of Sovereto next to Terlizzi and they used to bring it into that church until the festa. Then they took the Madonna from Sovereto to Terlizzi and put her on this altar. And then the kids would get dressed up, my mother used to make us our dresses.

My dress for the feast was a black velvet dress with a white lace collar and a big ribbon. And you'd sit on these seats that these men built on this altar with the Madonna up there. And the procession, you'd go get the Madonna with respect [tapping table] and to bring it to Terlizzi. You'd have a long thick candle for everyone who wanted to be in *la processione*, the procession, and you'd light these candles and walk with the lit candles with the Madonna from Sovereto to Terlizzi to bring the Madonna there. Mostly everybody in town—big ones, small ones, old ones, and young ones—would light their candles and bring the Madonna.

When they built this *carro* they built it up high because you didn't have horses pulling them those years. Honest, when I think of it,

what I wouldn't give for another day! There were a lot of men carrying the Madonna and carrying these kids on the altar. The men had pads on their shoulders, and boy those men walked slowly. Who knows how many men, carrying this thing! And as you go along, it's like a parade, and people are watching, and once in a while, they'd come up and put money on the Madonna's dress. The money went to the church. It was a wonderful thing when my mother and my grandfather would say, "You're going *sopra al carro*, up on the float." And then my mother would be busy making my dress.

Then at night at the Festa Maggiore, that's when my grandfather would take me by the hand and say, "Don't tell your father that we're going to see the fireworks." Because my father was always giving him hell because he'd go under the fireworks. He'd go too near and he was so afraid that my grandfather was going to get hurt. But I used to love it! The town used to shake it used to be so strong. My grandfather would be right next to it. He used to take his jacket and put it over my head and squeeze me. Oh God bless his heart, honest to God!

“I Was His Son”

Francesca Grillo spoke about sitting around a *braciere* during the cold months, keeping warm by burning dried-out almond shells. Her mother also put woolen shawls over the backs of her children.

My father had the business and we had to help him.

We used to get on the team of horse and wagon in the morning. It was always me because my father wanted me to be a boy. You

know how it is, the Italian people? They want a son. I was born a daughter, but my father always thought that I was his son! So I had to be the head one. I had to set an example for the other ones.

It was always an argument between him and my grandfather. Because my grandfather always said, “*Ma Pasqualino, che fai? È giovane, è piccola, la ragazza.*” But Pasqualino, what are you doing? What do you want from her? She’s just a kid!” I was his team driver. We used to go on with horse and the wagon with the



Figure 1.5. Amodeo family in Terlizzi, Puglia, 1920s.

wood high on one side. And he had property in a place where the mountains were made out of clay. And so there would be men there breaking the clay and fill up the team, to bring it to the *stabilimento*, the factory, and there was a manmade pool of water where they dropped these pieces of clay until it got soft. Then they used to take it out, and you had to knead, work the clay. It was me, together with the men for crying out loud; he used to put me to knead. You kneaded the clay, you'd have a mound of soft clay, broken up in pieces, and you knead it with your feet. and knead and knead until it becomes paste. Then they'd pick it up and put all in one tub.

My father had about a dozen of these pottery wheels. Then they took the clay by the clump and formed things on the wheel. They would put it on a slab of wood, and put it outside in the sun to dry. And after it dried, they'd put it into the *forno*, a big, big oven to bake them. My father would be there throwing in the olive branches to make the fire to bake. I was there all the time.

He expected me to be his bookkeeper. I was only seven, eight years old! He said to me, "You, I want you everyday to put in the book how many vases Francesco made, how

many Petruccio made." Because my father had to make the payroll at the end of the week. So all the workers worked and my father, the *padrone*, the boss, would sit at a desk. And I was right there by his side, with the book! I opened my book and my father would say. "Eh, *va bene Petruccio. Quanti vasi hai fatto Lunedì?* Okay, Peter, and how many vases did you make on Monday." And Petruccio answered, "Sixty." My father said to me, "Embeh, so how much do you have in your book that he made Monday?" I'd say, fifteen, sixteen, seventy-five. It never was the right number, but what the hell did I know? I was so young. I always had to check with the workers, but I never had the right figure according to them. Then my father checked my book, and found the first mistake, and look at me, and "Hummp, *va bene*, all right." Turn another page, "Petruccio, how many vases did you make on Tuesday?" And he'd say the number. Then my father looked back at me and said, "Meh, what do you have in your book?" My heart started to pound. After the third or fourth mistake, he'd take all pencils and the book and I'd run away [laughing]. I'd be quiet and the workers, my brother and sister would be standing there, watching it all