

Coffee with Grandma

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Vincenzo and Louise
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I have often heard my mother say that if she smelled coffee when she came home from school, she knew there were visitors in the house. I recently inherited my grandmothers' clear Pyrex percolating coffee pot. It brought back a flood of memories for me. So, I have taken the time to grab my binder that contained journey in the 1920s. With this binder – and a cup of coffee – I settled down for a visit with them. I'm grateful to my Aunt Vinny for putting together her memories about her parents' immigrant journey. She acted as an oral historian, and, through the years, bits and pieces of the paper trail surfaced to verify her story. When she would visit, or babysit, or just pop in on a rainy Sunday afternoon, she would start to tell different stories to us – the children of the next generation.

I wondered what had brought them here from Airola, Italy in the first place. I had to look at the broader picture and learned that Italy was going through some hard economic times, especially with crop failures that led to famine and poverty. My grandparents' families were both farmers. My grandmother, Luigia Ruggiero Vicariello, would tell us that sometimes there were only onions and bread to eat. America was considered the land of opportunity. However, my grandparents and other Italian were not always welcome. They would be turned down for jobs and housing because of their heritage. My grandparents moved many, many times in the first few years they lived in the U.S. Once they moved to Staten Island, NY – first as renters of a small, cramped apartment and finally to a little unheated bungalow – they never moved again. It was a home for my grandparents and their three daughters. Over the years the daughters would return home with husbands and children in tow. Somehow, they always made the house big enough for everyone.



1929 Moved to Staten Island

Over the past few years, papers for my grandfather's naturalization and citizenship came to light. They were yellow and folded in quarters, showing that he became an American citizen in 1920. I copied the original papers and put them in my folder and refolded the originals into their original positions. He must have been proud to become a citizen and carried these papers in his wallet for his whole life. When I researched the censuses of the 1930s and 40s, they showed he was employed by the Department of Sanitation, a stable job to support his growing family.

Grandma had to learn English and had to learn everything she could from the Italian families she came in contact with. When her children went to school, they were taught English and were told to speak English at home. She picked up more of the language from them. This helped her learn to use the bus system on Staten Island. Their bungalow was very near Hyland Boulevard, the main route for the No. 103 bus. Using the bus, she was able to visit her daughters and grandchildren and occasionally take a trip to lower Manhattan to meet up with some friends and visit Ferrara's pastry shop in Little Italy for espresso and biscotti. In later years, her children and grandchildren drove her to different places to visit but she always loved traveling on the bus and the independence it brought her.

Once I asked my grandmother if she had wanted to return to Italy. She slowly shook her head no. She would never get on a boat again in her life. The Italy that she left had been under Mussolini's control. She

was the youngest of eight and had lost at least one brother in World War I. She didn't have anything or anyone to go back to see.

I've come to appreciate the little clues that have been uncovered in my efforts to learn about my immigrant ancestors. I can appreciate the drama of coming to a new country without knowing the language or skills to earn a living. I can appreciate them surviving through a depression and world wars and continuing to prosper.

The world was a different place and life was at a slower pace back then. Looking back has made me very thankful that I live in this country and proud of what they had accomplished. It inspires me to be the oral historian for my family from this point forward.



Early 1940s the family keeps growing

So I recommend getting yourself a cup of coffee and sitting down to look at the facts of your family tree from a different angle. Enjoy your coffee with your own grandma!