

## **Remembrance Ottomanelli Poveromo**

### **Proud Italians Living the American Dream**

**By Camille Poveromo Pesce**

Toritto is an ancient town located some 15 miles from the city of Bari. The origins of the town date back to the early Middle Ages, perhaps around the ninth century. The first attestation dates back to 1069. In fact, in 1171 a document from the archdiocese of Bari testified to the presence of a parish. It is the type of southern Italian town where, if one traces back family trees far enough, the family names intersect each other. It is this town and milieu from which my family originates. It wasn't until the American Dream became known in Toritto that my family began to leave for America. New York City became their new life and home port.

The oldest member of my family to immigrate from there was Michelangelo Ottomanelli. Born on December 20, 1856, he was the son of Vito Pasquale Ottomanelli and Maria Teresa D'Urso. He was named for his maternal grandfather. He listed himself as a landowner when he married Diana Biase in 1887 in their native town. She was born in October 1865 to Giuseppe Biase and Carmina Geronimo. As was the custom, they named their children after their parents. Their first child, Maria Teresa was born the following year on February 8<sup>th</sup>. She was followed by Vito (August 23, 1889), Carmina (February 11, 1895), Maria Gaetana (May 26, 1899), Giuseppe (October 5, 1891). The last child, Vito Michele, was named for a great-grandfather.

In 1899, Michelangelo came to the United States on the *SS Massilia*, arriving in New York on November 24 with his ten-year-old son Vito, and 25 others from his hometown. Michelangelo went into the ice and coal delivery trade, the beginning of what enabled his family to achieve the American Dream. In November 1902, he welcomed his 9-year-old son, Giuseppe, to the United States. Regardless of the young child's age, Giuseppe also became part of the workforce needed for the family to survive. His wife and the remaining children followed in November 1903 on the *SS Patria*. The 1910 census shows the addition of three more children: John, Antoinette and Katie, all born in the United States. The Ottomanellis' are part of my father's maternal family.

My father's paternal side are the Poveromos. In the summer of 1901, my paternal grandfather Antonio Poveromo immigrated to America, on the SS *Calabria*. He too was from Toritto, born on April 30, 1882, the son of Francesco Poveromo of Toritto and Maria Leonardo Morena, a native from San Severo in Foggia. Tony, as he was known in the United States, went to live with his brother Rocco who had preceded him into New York City in the fall of 1900. It so happens that Rocco's brother-in-law, Giuseppe Lomangino was in the ice and coal delivery business. Almost every man from the town of Toritto pursued this occupation and so it was with the men in my family. My grandfather traveled back to his home town for a family visit in September 1904 but returned within five months on the German liner, SS *Prinzess Irene* with a relative, Giuseppe Mercurio. Tony, married my paternal grandmother, Maria Teresa Ottomanelli in New York on April 2, 1906. I was told my grandparents were distant cousins. She was seventeen, he twenty-three. They had six children: Francesco (1907), Maria (1908), Michele (1909), Rocco (1911), Diana (1914) and Carmela (1921). Always reminiscing about their ancestral town, Tony, his wife Maria and daughter Maria sailed back to Toritto in April 1913, leaving their sons with her parents, returning in October 1913.

My grandparents, Antonio and Maria Teresa, believed in the American dream of opportunity, prosperity, and success through hard work. My grandfather toiled many years delivering ice but stopped delivering coal to tenements in Manhattan to build a successful ice business. My father, Michael, was born December 8, 1909 in Manhattan. To help with the family business, my father left school at age twelve to work carrying blocks of ice up many flights of stairs in large apartment buildings in Manhattan. To do this labor, he had to be strong. He was nicknamed "Mike Ice." The three Poveromo sons contributed 100% to the family's successful ice business and there was money sent back to their family in Toritto.

As I recall, the Poveromos loved to sing and dance and had many family parties. I remember a beautiful shiny upright piano and all the old Italian songs with the elders playing the "matches" while singing. It was customary to have big Sunday Italian dinners prepared by the women under watchful eye of my grandmother while the men played bocce in a nearby park. At weddings, I was amazed at how beautifully they danced, gliding around the dance floor. The men were on the dance floor taking turns dancing with all their relatives. Everyone danced. I even got to join in by putting my feet on those of these big men. Some took the stage singing Italian songs and everyone joined in. There was lots of laughter along with the song and dance.

I was only five at the time of my grandmother's death, and seven when my grandfather passed. Even at that young age, I witnessed the love and proud family respect for who we were. There was no laughter in my house and the women wore black for six months. Those were the old traditions from Toritto that continued in America. At the time of their deaths, my grandparents lived in Astoria, Queens where they owned a home on Crescent Street. Interestingly, my grandfather arrived from Italy with just ten dollars. Ownership of this house was proof that the family had achieved the American Dream. I was raised in Astoria with my parents, Michael and Grace, nee Lomangino, also originating from Toritto. My older siblings are Theresa, Anthony, and Michael. All are deceased but their legacies live on through me, my children Grace and Michael, and the families of my nieces and nephews. Our families are presently living in New Jersey although we still consider ourselves New Yorkers. We still believe and are living proof of the American dream. God bless us for the strength, sacrifice, and resolve of all who came before us. We are so thankful!