

Memories of a Young Child

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My name is Raffaella Maria Cermola. I am the first child of Giovanni Cermola and Caterina Carolina Maturi, born in Amorosi, Benevento Campania. My family came to America on the SS Independence arriving on August 2, 1954. The first three years of my life in Italy were idyllic but World War II changed all that. During the German occupation, my town was destroyed. My family lost everything: our house, business and all our belongings. To



add to the tragedy, my younger sister, Anna Maria, become sick with fever and died. When the war ended, I returned to the town to find that most of the buildings were in ruin. The only thing standing was the church, but its clock, while still working, had lost its numbers. The only section of our house that remained was the corner where my baby sister's crib was located. My favorite book, *Fables and Tales* by Brothers Grimm, that my mother once read to me, was lost under the mass of bricks and stones. My mother and my aunts cried but they had the burden of finding shelter and everything needed to start anew since neither my father nor my uncles had yet to be discharged from the Army.

When the war ended my father, a well-respected tailor with an established clientele, had to rebuild his business from scratch. Goods were at a premium and prices were extremely high so a barter system was used whenever possible. My father did his best to procure fabric and thread to make or mend suits, coats, jackets and pants for his clients both adults and children. Many times, his clients did not have a choice of fabric or color. Even the smallest of pieces of material were used to patch whatever garment the patrons brought in. He did much of the work on credit or in exchange for items such as flour, eggs, oil or whatever they had. My mother helped by pulling threads from scraps of different kinds of fabric. She would use them to sew button holes, attach buttons, and stitch linings and hems since spool thread had to be saved for the sewing machine.

I also had a job, one I did gladly because there was a reward. I picked up every scrap and thread that my father had discarded on the floor. I saved it for when the *stracciaio* came. This rag man/peddler would buy scraps, rags, and even ladies' long hair. He came with his donkey-drawn cart at least once a month. People would barter whatever they had for his goods. They would offer, flour, oil, fruits and vegetables for pot and pans, tablecloths, drinking glasses and whatever other items he had available. I waited for him and would get my little bag of scraps as soon as I heard the donkey's bell in the distance. I would sit by the front door,



or on the sidewalk and dream of what he would be able to offer me for my bits of cloth. I traded for some small toys and other things. I treasured everything I received and took good care of each and every item. When I came to the United States as a teenager, I brought two of these “treasures” with me, terracotta amphora shaped vases with colorful flowers painted on one side. They are less than three inches tall and have no monetary value. But to me, they are more precious than a rare Fabergé egg or a painting by one of the great masters. I still have them.

But I also brought with me many childhood memories. One treasured recollection involved a doll that would open and close its eyes and say “Mamma.” I would comb her hair and arrange it in different styles. I remember the day when my sister with her tiny fingers twisted the doll’s head off. She wanted to know what made the doll speak. She was holding it as we sat on the balcony of our home watching Mussolini’s brown-shirted youths as they marched and drilled in the piazza. For the longest time, I could not get out of my head the doll’s last call for “Mamma.” Now, I don’t dare to mention it because my sister is no longer with us. I never got another doll.

These were dark times for my family but they did their best to shield me from the reality of life during and in the aftermath of war. However, they are forever etched in one’s memory. These are just some of the thoughts that I brought with me to America.