

## Childhood Memories

By John B. Susa

February 7, 1944 was a cold evening in Orio Canavese, an Italian Alpine village to the north of Turin in Piedmont. My mother, Natalina Maria Ponzetto, and her parents did what they did every winter night during the Second World War. They went into their barn to sleep among the warmth of their animals. What made that night different, however, was that I was born.

During the war, fuel for the kitchen stove was often scarce, so many families would retire to the first floor or barn among their oxen, sheep, and pigs. They would drape blankets over the animals to create a tent and sleep in the warm space between them. Reclining on the hay between a pair of oxen, my mother went into labor and delivered me, Gianbatista Ponzetto, named after my grandfather. I was given the family name, because nine months previously my mother had been sexually assaulted by an Italian soldier, who was never identified.

About a year later, February 4, 1945 a blonde Lithuanian, who served with the German army in northern Italy, surrendered to Italian partisans as a prisoner of war. He identified himself as Pranas Susa, born in Medszekeimoor area of Heydekrug (now Silute), Lithuania. After the war, he wandered around northern Italy looking for work and a place to stay, eventually finding his way to Orio Canavese, He was hired as a farmhand and met my mother. They married the following year on February 28, 1946 and received a pig as a wedding present. We all lived at number 8 Via Garibaldi. Pranas, known under his Italian name of Francesco, worked on the subsistence of my mother's many relatives. On September 22, 1946, Francesco Susa adopted me as his son and I became Gianbatista Susa. A short time later, before the traditional slaughter, the pig died. I would later learn that my parents held each other in tears because they were counting on the sustenance from that animal to keep us from starving in the coming winter.

My first childhood memory is tipping over while sitting in my highchair and breaking my left arm as a result. My father picked me up and carried me to the only motor vehicle in town, a pickup truck owned by the proprietor of the only store in town. Our destination was Colusso, a town about ten miles away that was large enough to have a doctor. After the bone was set, the doctor put a plaster cast on my arm and sent us back home.

Another early childhood memory involved a gift that I received from a visiting cousin who was in the US Merchant Marine. Nino Barbero, a relative on my grandmother's side of the family, gave me a pack of American chewing gum. He must have done this in front of all my friends because I can remember them crowding around me for a stick of the gum. I refused, so they chased me all the way to my uncle's house. I climbed the large fig tree in front of his house to wait them out, and I never shared that gum with anybody else. It was not until later in life that I learned what a celebrity he was in Orio. He had been captain of a US Liberty Ship during the Second World War.

In those days, everyone, young and old, worked communally on the family farm. As a four-year-old, my job was to tend our small herd of sheep and goats. I don't think I did much other than amble around and try to keep the animals together. But I do remember once trying to get a fairly large billy goat to go somewhere he didn't want to go. When I turned my back, he lowered his head and butted me. I still have a scar where he stuck one of his horns into my gluteus maximus.

We had oxen to help us do the heavy farm work. They pulled our wagons and plows. However, the person controlling the plow could not see to guide the ox in a straight line. My task at age 5 was to lead the ox while holding a rope that was attached to the ring in his nose. I would sight an object on the other side of the field and would walk in a straight line toward it, so the furrows were cut straight and parallel to each other. Little did any of us realize the perilous nature of that job!

One summer afternoon, two oxen pulling a farm cart unexpectedly appeared at my Uncle Tony's barn. My uncle knew that my grandfather had been using them earlier in the day. He found it suspicious that they should appear without him, so he went out looking for him and found his body on the road between the farm and the barn. A deep head wound appeared to have been made by the tongue of the wagon hitting him on the back of the head. The family surmised that the oxen gained on my grandfather who was leading them, their heads bobbing up and down as they walked. The accidental strike may have killed him on the spot.

This memory and others such as cutting wheat with a sickle make me realize how farming techniques in our isolated village during the mid-1900's were similar to those used in the United States in the early nineteenth century. One would bring wheat or corn to the water-powered grist mill to be turned into flour. The mill owner would keep a percentage of the product as payment, and the ground flour would be brought home for baking. Many people, like our family, did not have any way to bake the bread they made with their flour. My mother would prepare her bread dough and then bring it to the village baker who had a beehive oven that he would rent to people for their use. Later, my mother would send me to retrieve the bread after it had been baked. Occasionally, she would put what she owed the baker at the bottom of my basket. Cash was scarce and needed to be guarded with great care. On one occasion, I was pretending to be a knight in armor as I bounced down the mountainside. I flipped my breadbasket upside down and pulled it over my head like a helmet. When the baker looked for the money, he didn't find it, but he gave me the bread anyway. When my mother asked me about what happened to the money, I confessed to having probably lost it. She proceeded to give me the first and only spanking of my life.

Sometime between 1947 and 1948 the Italian government decided that they wanted to send all the remaining German soldiers out of Italy. Since Lithuania had been absorbed into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, my father did not want our family to be sent there. He was given a status of a World War II refugee and was, as part of the Marshall Plan, offered the opportunity to be re-settled in the United States, Brazil,

Argentina, or Australia. My father told me that although he preferred Australia, where he thought he could become a successful farmer because of his farming education in trade school, he selected the United States because my mother had a sister and other relatives living in the area around Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The resettlement process for those who came to the U.S. required that children be left behind until the family had reached a number of milestones such as employment, a place to live and enough money to be able to take care of any children. I would stay in Orio with my grandparents until I could be sent for by my parents. My parents left for the U.S. sometime in March of 1950, departing from Bremerhaven, Germany. They went to live temporarily with my mother's sister, Margarita, and her husband, Carlo Ponzetti, in Stratford, Connecticut.

Meanwhile, I lived with my grandparents only a few months, but after my grandfather was killed in that terrible incident involving the oxen, my grandmother and I moved into the house/barn where I had been born. It was the home of Paulina and Antonio Ponzetti. Paulina was one of my mother's older sisters. They had a daughter, Rena, who was about 10 years older than I. Like most Italian farming families, they made their own wine. The process included the famous stomping of the grapes, usually done by the children. I remember that after one of those times, Rena drew my attention to my purple-stained legs and warned me that drinking wine would also result in my insides turning purple. I had believed that my insides were as pale as my skin and I was very distressed at this news. This convinced me, by age six, that I would no longer drink any wine.

Two other memories were related to the farming activities of our family. One was my role in butchering a large pig as our meat source for the winter. My job was to collect its blood in a large cast iron skillet. My grandmother would then fry it as our first meal from that animal. My other memory is that Uncle Tony had what I thought was the world's biggest fig tree in his yard. I did two things with that tree: one I climbed it all the time, and the other was that I ate fresh figs, which to this day are my favorite fruit.

By mid-summer of 1950, my parents had qualified to have me join them in the United States. As a result, with Uncle Tony, I took my first train ride from Turin to Naples to arrange for my sea voyage with the Italian and American authorities. The Italian passenger liner, the *Saturnia*, was to depart on August 22, 1951 from the port of Genoa and drop anchor on September 1 in New York City. Uncle Tony and I went to Genoa several days before my departure to find someone to look after me. With the help of the cruise line, two American teachers who spoke Italian were convinced to have me share their upgraded state room. Uncle Tony thought that while caring for me, these women might even start teaching me a little English. As it turned out, they did not see their responsibility extending beyond letting me sleep on a folding bed in their state room during the ten-day voyage.

This seven-year-old kid spent ten days wandering all over the large ship with no adult supervision other than an occasional crewmember shooing me away from places I

wasn't supposed to be. I had spent much of my early childhood wandering alone in the Italian Alps where my only fear had been the voracious wolves who might migrate out of central Europe. Since I correctly concluded there were no wolves prowling the ship, I had nothing to worry about, so I roamed around freely. One of the fun things I really enjoyed doing was standing at the bow of the ship to watch a variety of fish being pushed aside as we cruised along. My biggest problem was the strange American food that that was served in the dining hall. As far as I can remember I did not keep down a single American style breakfast. Cold cereal and milk were particularly problematic. I would eat it and then throw it up over the side of the ship every single day.

The ship arrived in New York early in the morning on Saturday, September 1. I quickly found my way to the bow of the ship one last time and watched as we passed the Statue of Liberty. Once the ship docked at the Hudson River piers on the west side of Manhattan, a crew member took me into the captain's quarters, where I waited until my parents were brought aboard to retrieve me. Even though I had every confidence they would come for me, the reunion was the glorious start of my life in the United States.