

Anisette Cookies

Richard Graziano

As a boy, I remember going to Grandma's house to visit several times a week. To my young perspective, Antonia Grasso Scibelli was very old and very frail. And, she was someone with whom I couldn't converse since she spoke only Italian and I could only speak English. However, she was always very kind, gave me a hug and sat me down at the kitchen table for a glass of milk and several Stella D'Oro Anisette Toast Cookies. To this day, the taste and smell of those treats are associated in my mind with Grandma.



Even then, I wondered why, if she lived in the United States, she couldn't speak the language, especially since my mother, her youngest child, was born here in 1917 which meant that Grandma had been in the U.S. for at least fifty years. But, South Jamaica, the neighborhood in which she lived, was home to many Italians, including those who owned or worked in the butcher shop, the fruit store, the bakery, etc. That meant that she didn't need to speak English to be able to function, especially since Italian was spoken in their home.

The dominant person in in my grandparents' house, however, was my grandfather, Sebastiano Scibelli. He appeared to me as a stern man who always wore a vest, smoked a pipe or De Nobili cigars, made and drank his own wine and planted a garden in the backyard. Unlike many immigrants from the south of Italy, he was highly literate. He read the Italian newspaper, *Il Progresso*, every day. My Mom related a story that he once asked her to go to the Queens Library to get him some books in Italian. She returned with several novels that might be called popular fiction. He took one look and said, "What did you bring me? Go back and bring me Dante!" I also learned that he had been in training for the priesthood but left the seminary for financial reasons. He was in the Italian army, discharged and subsequently emigrated to the United States where he worked as a plumber. I was also told that in their home town of Quindici in Avellino Province in the Campania Region of Italy, my grandparents were next-door neighbors who had been childhood sweethearts.



In my genealogical research, I've gathered much information that filled in gaps and found many documents from Italy and the U.S. that confirmed what I had learned. My grandfather came to this country in 1903 on the SS *Sardegna* to meet his father and younger brother. Accompanied by several chaperones, my grandmother followed two years later on the SS *Neustria*. Her ship's manifest states that she was coming to meet her husband even though they were not yet married. Although my grandfather had settled in Jamaica, Queens and that is where his prospective bride would meet him, several weeks after her arrival, they were married in Our Lady of Loreto Church, the Italian National Church in Brooklyn. Since she was born in 1878, a year before him, I've been told that Grandpa frequently teased her saying that he had married an "older" woman.

Despite the fact that they married in New York, I also found a record of their marriage in Quindici. Apparently, Sebastiano's father, Gennaro Scibelli, had returned to the town and registered the marriage. The document contained all the expected information and stated that they were married by Reverend Vincenzo Sorrentino, pastor of *la Chiesa Cattolica di Maria SS. ma (Santissima) di Loreto in East New York, Diocesi di Brooklin, N.Y. Stati Uniti di America*. A note about the marriage was added to each of their birth records in their *comune*.

They had eight children, six girls and two boys. My mother was the youngest. My Grandfather naturalized in 1924.

Alien Registration No. 3659287		Birth date August 27 1878 <small>(Month) (Day) (Year)</small>
Name: Antoinette Russo Scibelli <small>(First name) (Middle name) (Last name)</small>		Born in Quindici Quindici Italy <small>(City) (Province) (Country)</small>
RIGHT INDEX FINGERPRINT		Citizen or subject of Last Italy <small>(Country)</small>
[Fingerprint]		Length of residence in United States 36 yrs., 7 mos.
[Portrait of Antoinette Scibelli]		Address of residence 146-49 105 Avenue Jamaica Queens New York <small>(Street address or rural route) (City) (County) (State)</small>
Witnessed by: [Signature] (Signature of holder) Antoinette Russo Scibelli		Height 5 ft., 1 in.
10-20150-1		Weight 151 lb.
		Color of hair grey
		Distinctive marks none
		[Stamp: JAMAICA, N.Y. FEB 19 1942 M.O.B.]
		[Signature: Evelyn G. Shore] (Signature of Identification Official)
		Application filed in Alien Registration Division. Copy filed with Federal Bureau of Investigation office at NEW YORK, N.Y.

Grandma never did and, therefore, had to register as a resident alien during World War II. When it came to raising his children, Grandpa had an interesting concept. To ensure that they would be able to face the world on their own merits, each child including the girls, was to learn a skill or become a member of a profession. Consequently, there was a teacher, a secretary, a

hairdresser, an artist, a seamstress and, of course, a doctor whose education consumed a large portion of the family's resources. Grandpa was ahead of his time in that he insisted that even his daughters would be able to function in society whether or not they married. Three of the children attended college.

They lived in a house they owned in South Jamaica. I have many memories of that place: the coal-fired boiler, the dank wine cellar and most especially, the large family gatherings for holidays with lots of food and all my cousins in attendance. Grandpa died in 1960 and Grandma five years later.

Not long ago, when volunteering at the Manhattan Family History Center, I shared the story of my grandmother and the anisette cookies with the missionaries who supervised the facility. They had never tasted them. When I arrived for my next scheduled session, I brought a package of the cookies. During a lull when there weren't any clients seeking help with their family history, we enjoyed the anisette treats and breathed in their distinctive aroma. It's amazing how that taste and smell are still able to trigger fond memories of my grandparents and those moments at the kitchen table with the cookies and my Grandma!