

Nunzio and family : memoirs of the Corato Americans

Growing up in Endicott, NY, in a neighbourhood full of cousins.

Cousin Domenic of Canada gave us more than just great insight into his father, my Uncle Joe Quercia, and his family's history- he has inspired me, for one, to review my own experiences and understanding of Uncle Joe's brother, my own father Nunzio Quercia, and his history. I won't try to match Dom's eloquence at telling the story, but I'll put down the things I remember, from what my Dad told me, and my memories of him. I asked him a lot of questions about his life while I was growing up. I always believed the stories, but use your own judgment. If you know of corrections in this history, please-keep them to yourself (just kidding).

I would like to encourage the rest of our relatives to do the same so we can all enjoy more memories.



This picture is (Grampa) Domenic Quercia and his family: (left to right) Phil, Nunzio, Grampa's wife Anna Maldera, little Rose, Domenic, Joe, and Mary, around 1917.

My Dad Nunzio Quercia was the youngest son of Domenic Quercia, born in Corato, Bari, Italy, in 1913.

When he was 7 years old he was told by his father that he arranged for Nunzio to work in a barber shop to help support the family. Nunzio didn't want to, and didn't like it. Life was hard in Corato then, and his father didn't take no for an answer. Nunzio remained a barber the rest of his life.

My Dad told me the old barber he worked for wasn't nice all the time, and would smack my Dad if he didn't do things right. So my Dad tried hard to do things right, be exact, and not miss anything. After awhile, the old barber trusted Nunzio enough with haircuts to let him do them on his own.

One day the old barber was leaving for awhile and told Nunzio that the mayor of Bari was coming in for a haircut. He was bald on the top, so it didn't seem like a big job. However, the old barber told Nunzio that the mayor liked a hot towel on his face first, which would put him to sleep.

Then he told Nunzio that he had to make sure to shave all the hair off his head, nice and clean. After the barber left, the mayor showed up, so Nunzio did what he was told and sat the man down and put a hot towel on his face- no problem so far, the mayor liked it and fell right to sleep. Nunzio eventually took the towel off and while the mayor was asleep, proceeded to shave off the little hair that the mayor had on the sides of his head. Nunzio was happy that went well, and innocently proceeded to finish the job he was told to do, by shaving off the man's eyebrows also. But he didn't stop there; the man had this pesky waxed handlebar mustache that obviously had to go, so Nunzio shaved that clean too. He looked at his finished job and he was very proud- no cuts, not a hair left on the mayor's head- and he didn't even wake him during the process. When the mayor woke and looked in the big mirror in front of him, my Dad said his the man's eye's got huge and he screamed- then he looked at Nunzio and started cursing as only the Italian man knows how to do and he chased Dad down the street. Dad got away, but not for long. His Dad gave him a licking he said he'd never forget.

I didn't learn too much about my Gramma Anna Quercia, except one cool thing: her father Felice Maldera was one of the Italian war hero Garibaldi's 1000 men that fought off several thousand men trying to invade Italy in WWI.

Two stories my dad told me involved the fact that the family couldn't afford doctors when he was growing up, so the Quercias relied on home remedies and a lot of prayer. He said they even depended on miracles since they had no other way - and apparently Gramma Anna was quite a prayer and a believer.

One of Nunzio's first memories had to do with an older sister (Savinella I believe) who eventually died at 18 of a disease which I can't remember. When they were younger, the Quercia kids were playing with sticks in the front of their house. My dad says he remembers his sister started screaming- she accidentally was poked in the eye with a stick, and her eye literally exploded and was all over her cheek. Anna came running out of the house, took one look, picked up the girl, scooped the eye contents back into the socket, and proceeded to run to the church down the street, barking directions at the rest of the kids to hurry with her and to keep praying to God. She was wailing prayers as she ran, as they all ran into the church, and kept yelling to the kids to pray. Anna sat rocking the girl and wailing prayers, with her hand over her daughter's eye My Dad said it seemed like forever that his sister was screaming, though after awhile she started getting quieter. Then she stopped crying, and Mom stopped wailing. Anna took her hand off the girl's eye, and there in the socket was the eye, as good as new, except for one thing- the little girl had brown eyes before, but now, and for the rest of her life, this new eye was blue.

The second prayer story had to do with a time when Nunzio's dad got very sick with pneumonia, and was in a coma for days. Anna called the priest over for last rights because it appeared my Grampa was gonna die soon. One night when it didn't look like he would survive the night, Anna took matters into her hands and told the kids to pray in front of a large picture of St. Cosmo, as her husband laid comatose near them. As she prayed aloud, my Dad says the glass in the picture suddenly shattered to the floor. Then they heard Domenic suddenly awake behind them say, "Can I have a little water?" (in Italian, of course).

Life was hard in Italy during that time. My Dad said a pizza in Italy when he was growing up was flat bread with a tomato broken up on it, and maybe some garlic. They usually ate beans or just bread a lot of the time. Domenic heard that life in America was better, so he left the family and came to America

to work, sending money back to Italy as he could. Eventually he got his whole family to America, but his wife died in 1918 in Italy.

He worked at EJ in Endicott, New York, making shoes at the time. He made sacrifices to get his family to America. Dad said his father would bring a sandwich to work on Monday, and at lunchtime, he'd eat with everyone else. He'd wrap his bag around the bottom of the sandwich and eat the bread while pulling the meat in the sandwich back into the bag. He'd bring the meat home, make another sandwich, and repeat this until Friday, when he'd finally eat the meat, all to save money. By being dedicated to his family in Italy, Domenic was able to save about enough money in one year to bring at least one of his children at a time to America, starting with the oldest. His kids in Italy stayed with relatives there (I believe their mother died sometime before this), until they were able to come to America. Since Domenic had 6 children, Nunzio didn't see his father Domenic for years until he got on that ship that brought him to Ellis Island in New York City, where all the immigrants had to go first in order to obtain their citizenship. They had to be able to say (in English) who the first president was, had to say the name of the country in English, etc. before being allowed to proceed. So everyone on the ship made a point to learn this very important task.

Grampa Domenic had to be resourceful to make ends meet; he also made wine in the basement at 221 Hill Avenue. He'd sell it to the local Italians and everyone loved his wine; however- and this is my Dad's story mind you-

One year this guy came back to Domenic complaining and yelling about the wine he paid good money for, saying that Domenic gave him the "cheap stuff" instead of the "good stuff", and that if Domenic didn't make it right, he'd make sure everyone knew not to buy from Domenic anymore. Domenic nodded and took the bottle of wine from the man, saying he'd be right back. He went down into his wine cellar. He noticed there was about a glass of wine gone from the man's bottle, so he peed into the bottle until it was filled again, and brought the bottle back up to the man with a cork in it. The man took the cork off and took a sip from the bottle, and with a smile he says, "Now THAT'S the good stuff!"

From what I understand, the Quercia kids all arrived from Italy as money would allow, and when my Dad finally made it in 1930, he weighed about 80 pounds, he always said. His Dad had a celebration as soon as he came. That day Nunzio was in his father's house looking at things he'd never seen before; he was a little shy; everyone was partying outside. He saw an icebox (no refrigerators yet) and opened it. He saw about a dozen eggs, more that he'd ever seen at once before- and he'd only had eggs 2 or 3 times until then. He couldn't resist; he poked holes in about 8 or 9 eggs and sucked 'em down as fast as he could, hoping he wouldn't get caught. Then he felt guilty and ran outside and under the porch. Eventually his father and everyone else started looking for him and calling for him. He was afraid he was in trouble for eating all those eggs. When he couldn't stand hiding any longer, he crawled out from under the house. His dad saw him and asked him "Mi figlio (my son), What were you under the house for?" Nunzio started crying and confessed to his dad that he had eaten the eggs because he was so hungry, and told him that he was sorry and that he'd never do it again. He said he thought he might get whacked any moment while crying and looking downward. When nothing happened and he finally looked up, he said his father Domenic had big tears in his eyes and said "Son you can have anything you want out of the icebox anytime you want."

I'm not sure of the timeline on some of this stuff, so bear with me please.

Nunzio and his brothers Joe and Phil stayed in New York City for awhile when they were young, relying on their care for each other and their creativity to live at times. Even though America had better opportunity for them than Italy, it was still hard for them here at times, especially at first. This story from my Dad goes like this:

My dad said the 3 of them were really hungry and were looking for some way to get a meal. They got an idea. They borrowed some better clothes from some acquaintances and targeted a nice restaurant. Then they went and found a bum in worst shape than themselves and took interest in him, asking him if he'd like a hot meal.

The bum accepted gladly, and they went to the restaurant, where they told him to order anything he wants. When the food came, the Brothers Quercia told their new friend they had an important meeting so they would need to eat fast and go, but not to worry, because they would simply pay the bill to the guy up front, and they told him to just wave when they point him out to the cashier, that he was with them. So the brothers ate quickly and left the guy sitting at the table eating. They went to the cashier and said "That man waving there will cover the bill." The man waved and off they went with full bellies.

My Dad met my mom, Filomena DiPalma, through his brother Phil. Phil had an interest in Filomena and had asked her to go someplace with him, but they needed someone else to go as chaperones. I don't remember who all went, but my dad was one of the party, and he really liked Filomena. Phil knew that too. I don't know the dynamics of how it happened but Uncle Phil had other interests, and my dad wanted to get more serious with Filomena, and hang out with her. He did realize that to keep Italian tradition and keep her an honest woman, his intention better be to marry her. This was only normal for that time. Filomena was living with her Uncle at the time, a mean drunkard, but it was the only family she had at the time in the states.

When Nunzio expressed interest in Filomena to the uncle, the uncle was not receptive to the idea, since it would have meant a good cook and housekeeper would be leaving the house. One day the Uncle came home drunk and wanted Philomena to drop everything and do a chore. She said she would after she finished the work she was already doing. He fell into a rage and stuck a pair of scissors in her back. Luckily it wasn't too bad of a wound and she was okay, but when Nunzio heard about it, he came to her house, packed her up and took her away to get married right now, uncle or not.

An interesting side note : When my sister Nina was a teenager, and had never been out with a guy, my brother Domenic had a high school friend Mike Celeste. When he saw Nina, he really liked her, and wanted to take her out. He asked her to go out, and Nina told him that she couldn't go unless her dad said it was OK. So Mike thought that was worth it. He went to Nunzio and asked if he could take Nina out. My Dad said, "What are your intentions?" Mike asked what he meant. My Dad said, "If you tell me you plan on marrying her, then you can take her out."

This was pretty common European procedure back in the fifties, and even now with some Europeans keeping that mindset.

Mike made his mind up right then and there (according to Mike) and said OK.

I was born Joseph Domenic Quercia in 1954, the 3rd child of my parents. My brother Domenic was 16 years older than I, my sister Nina was 3 years older. We lived upstate in Endicott, New York, a very Italian town bordering Binghamton, the home of IBM. My brother worked for IBM all of his life.

About 75-80% of Endicott at the time was Italians. In the 1950's You couldn't go anywhere without passing something Italian, like an Italian bakery, or an Italian deli. Everything was named by the Italian owners of the establishment at the time. People on the street were talking Italian.

My dad, as I said, was a barber. He also played mandolin and sang Italian songs with his little group of musicians, which included a jovial Italian man named Charlie Putrino on accordian and a guitar player who's name escapes me now. They played almost every weekend in the neighborhood, under the lights strung across a makeshift beer garden in someones backyard. Of course this meant the women were making pizza. More than anyone could possibly eat.

When the family got together for these weekends, I and all of many cousins would be playing in the yard, when something magical would happen. We'd hear the loud boisterous Italian baritone of my Uncle Joe as he was arriving- always singing as he came- and we would go running to him, screaming, because we knew what would come next. As he danced up the driveway he'd be reaching into his pockets and flinging coins onto the ground around him, as we scrambled to get them. Not hard to know why we thought he was our favorite uncle.

My siblings were raised to be "American-Italians". That means the old ways were taught to them more than the ways of "L'Americans" They spoke Italian before they spoke English. My brother was kicked out of school the first day there because he didn't understand English. He learned fast. That's partly why when I came along years later, I was raised to be an "Italian-American"- I spoke English first, and was spoken to more in English than Italian (though I do know a bit of Italian).

When I was 3 years old my parents took a trip back to Italy to visit my mom's parents and the rest of what family remained there. Of course things had changed in 24 years, and my parents hadn't seen many Italian relatives from there in awhile. My dad decided what he should do is invite over the Quercias of the village of Corato where he grew up to a giant party at my grandparent's home there, and have a giant celebration. He sent the word out by mouth to those he knew there.

This was a bad idea.

From what I understand, there were buses full of folks who showed up, like half the town. My dad spent the evening having to vet out the imposters from the real Quercias.

So I grew up on Hill Avenue, in a big old fashioned four-plex, on the "Northside" of town as they called it, a rougher part of town. We lived next to the schoolyard which was attached to George Washington Elementary School. My grandfather lived in the front part of the house, we lived in the back part. My grandfather was right there watching me if I played outside because, well, bigger kids could beat up younger kids like me for any reason at all. He'd sit there on the front porch with a hatchet in his lap, ready to defend me. Hey, I guess he thought if its okay in Corato, its okay in Endicott. The kids thought he was nuts.

One day I wandered over to the playground, pretty much ignorant of the fact that grampa was watching me playing around there. Suddenly these kids came out of nowhere and began taunting me. Before they could lay a hand on me, you could hear the Italian expletives of this old Italian guy swinging a small ax over his head, running towards us in the schoolyard. The older kids let out a scream, one of them pointing and yelling something about "crazy old man Domenic". They were running very fast, but it seemed as if grampa was gonna catch them, until they were out of the playground. He then came back to me and lovingly escorted me back to house.

As mentioned, Grampa Domenico grew purple grapes on the overhead trellises off the front porch of our house. He had these giant barrels in the basement he would use to make wine out of the grapes. He would make about 80 bottles of year. Sometimes I'd meander down into the cellar when he was there, and I remember him giving me a bit of wine in a small glass.

One day- and I don't know how many times he did it, I was only about 4 or 5 years old- he decided to let me have more than normal. I remember him then bringing me to the top step of the cellar and shoing me out into our little area in front of the porch, where he watched me weave, pretty inebriated. My mom came out of the back of the house and took a look at me, and yelled in disbelief (this conversation was in Italian), "Pa, what are you doing, getting a little boy drunk?" She went on and on about it, while he just threw his hand at her, and said over the top of her voice, "Aww, don't worry, its good for him."

That's the way it started here in America for those folks from Corato. The family continued to expand like most families, and the stories kept happening, and keep happening to this day. Better than fiction, by far.