

Francine's story



Francine Canepa, born Del Pretis, adopted name Amato: 1936 - 2020

Francine passed away on December 4, 2020. She was my student in genealogy; I am happy that she became my best friend in Marseille. She was a generous person. I owe her a lot.

After having known several foster families, she was adopted at the age of 5. She had loving foster parents and a loving husband. I believe she made good decisions in her life. She always maintained her desire to know where she came from. She was a reserved person, shy even. Despite this, she became a nurse executive in her professional life. In order to find her origins, she accepted that her story be known. For example, by accepting the proposal of a Neapolitan lawyer, Roberto Continisio, to participate in the Italian television show, 'Chi l'ha visto?'
<http://www.rai.it/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-ef6686d5-68dc-4576-9914-b7ff8c809a37.html#p=>

I am not the only person who helped her in her quest. Gabrielle Vitalis, who also brought me to teach genealogy, helped her write her story, which she had privately published as 'An Unhoped For Destiny' in June 2016. On the back cover, she summarized the story of her early life this way:

"For the first five years of my life, I was labeled with funny nicknames: 'ward,' 'natural child,' 'legitimate,' 'assisted,' 'bastard'...

These were the names of the children entrusted to the Assistance Publique.

When one day in 1941, in the middle of the war, Providence put me on the path of this couple who were going to change my life into a wonderful fairy tale".

And then there was Gilbert Michel, tireless and efficient researcher of the 'Genealogie-Italie' group (formerly on Yahoo, now on Google), who reacted as follows to the announcement of Francine's death:

"Ah! Gee !!!!!... Francinette has left us !!!...

She must have been 81 or 82 years old I think...

I read recently, that's the average age of death for a woman, while for men it's 78... but, the death of a close family member or a friend always hurts, ... and worse, when we realize that we are coming up slowly behind... and in the end we feel that our own future is behind us rather than ahead...

...

She left without knowing her origins, ... and God knows, we all looked for hours and days in the Departmental and Municipal Archives in Marseille. I remember walking with her through the cemetery of Ste Marguerite on the road to Cassis, I wanted to show her the grave of a Del Pretis, perhaps one of her own, the same grave where one of the victims of the air crash at Mont St Odile in Alsace was buried, at least 25 years ago.,, we may not have searched enough everywhere... in any case it is for me, one of my rare failures... at the beginning of the investigation, 8 years ago, I thought I would find the answer, since that was usually the case, even after several years' efforts, sometimes... Unfortunately, with Francine, this was not to be, and I regret it very much ... what a pity, it would have given me great pleasure to find her mother and the history of her ancestors, especially as she was a very nice, wonderful lady, whom I was fond of ... "

It's true, the search for her origins has not been successful so far, but it has never been abandoned. Francine herself pursued everything she undertook with great seriousness: as a researcher, she wrote everything down. Faced with the difficulties we encountered - which I will explain below - we decided to look for her origins in a different way, by learning Italian and traveling in Italy (to Corato, of course, as well as other places).

Then, after becoming aware that emigration would have been a major factor in the lives of her biological parents - whether they actually emigrated or not - we also decided to translate together the little book by Pasquale Tandoi on the emigration of the *Coratini* between 1902 and 1959: 'Quando i clandestini eravamo noi'/When we were the illegal immigrants'. This was the starting point of the project as it exists today. Meeting with several people in the course of this second phase of our research - which started in September 2015 - made us realize that it could also benefit the descendants of most *Coratini* emigrants and their families, wherever they might be.

It was the journalist Marina Labartino, at the time director of the local magazine LO STRADONE, who encouraged us to 'continue the adventure'. During an interview in her office in Corato, in November 2018, Francine's story touched her and she wrote an article about it (see our website). This meeting was made possible thanks to Vitantonio (Vito) Tondo, the father of Luigi Tondo, an engineer in Stockholm, whom we met first on the internet and later in Corato. It is also in great measure thanks to Vito that a bilingual Italian/French version of Pasquale Tandoi's book could be printed and published in Corato in June 2019, as Vito (who had a career in the grain industry) introduced us to the Fondazione Vincenzo Casillo. This foundation shared the financing of the publication with Sir Rocco Forte (whose grandfather had emigrated to the United Kingdom), a friend from university days, who was now CEO of Rocco Forte Hotels.

In short, from the moment I agreed to search with her for the identity of her biological mother, the adventure led us to build together the project of which our website www.emigrazione-corato.org is the reflection.

Francine was the secretary of our 'Atelier Généalogique' association from 2019 until her death from a devastating cancer.



Francine with Vito Tondo and Anna Maria Torelli in Corato (October 2017)

Today, it is with pleasure and gratitude that I continue the research initially conceived with Francine, with the agreement and, hopefully, with the participation of her daughter, Magali. It is the kind of quest that the '**Looking for someone?**' section of our website is expected to address. So let's take stock:

The search for the biological parents of Francine Canepa, born Del Pretis, adoption name Amato: where are we at in March 2021?

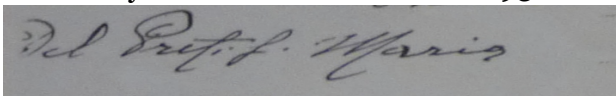
Before Francine underwent DNA testing in September 2015, several hypotheses had been explored:

- her mother was a maid living in the Marseille area, made pregnant out of wedlock;
- she was an Italian immigrant living in the Grenoble area, who came to give birth secretly in Marseille, far enough away from her family;
- she was an inhabitant of Pavia in Lombardy who had come to Marseille "to hide her fault" as she herself had stated at the time she handed over her baby to Social Assistance in 1936...

Two years of research in the Marseille area, in the archives and in the town halls, did not allow us to validate the first hypothesis: that Maria Del Pretis was an inhabitant of Marseille. Nor was she (as she had claimed) an Italian born in Pavia, in Lombardy, nor even in the Pavia area, as we had verified both in Pavia and in almost all the provincial archives available on Familysearch. Nor even in the city of Pavia in Udine, according to the *Stato Civile* of that city. Nor were we able to confirm that she was an immigrant living in Isere : the name Del Pretis could not be found anywhere.

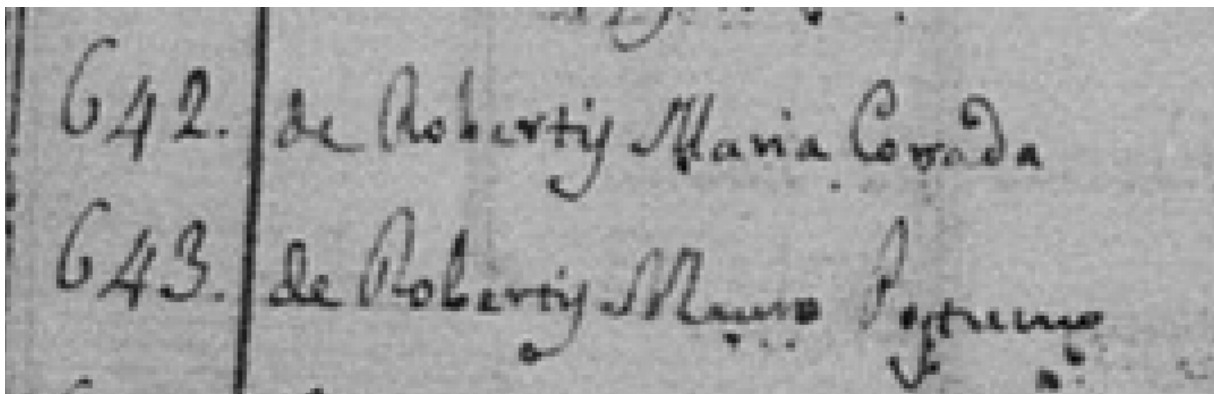
However, we were able to obtain and examine Francine's adoption file, kept at the Conseil Général in Marseille. It contained a few clues :

- it is attested in several documents that her mother, Maria del Pretis, was of Italian nationality;
- She signed her name at least twice with the long 's': this intrigued us because it was a practice that was generally redundant from the end of the 19th century, whereas its use clearly continued at least until 1936:

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive script. The signature reads "Del Pretis Maria" and is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

- when she abandoned Francine at the Assistance Sociale on September 1, 1936, she was accompanied by a certain Madame Roberty: having obtained access to the admissions register by special dispensation, we were able to see that it was very rare for a mother to be accompanied when she abandoned her child. We could therefore formulate the hypothesis that she needed to be accompanied *because she did not speak French*. If our hypothesis is correct, it follows that it is unlikely that she was an immigrant in France.

Then we looked for a long time for this "Mme Roberty" in Marseille. Roberty was a well-known name in Marseille at the time and this led us to believe that Francine's mother was a domestic worker and that she had been impregnated by someone from the wealthy Roberty family. This lead went nowhere. Then one day we saw in a register that the Italian name "De Robertis" was spelled like this:

A photograph of a handwritten register with two entries. The first entry is "642. de Robertis Maria Covada" and the second entry is "643. de Robertis Maria Robertis". The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat faded.

There was no written document in Francine's file at the General Council bearing Mrs. Roberty's signature. However, since it says that she expected to check on the baby, it seems plausible that she would have had to produce some form of identification, or sign a paper...while the unmarried mother was not required to formally identify herself. It is therefore possible that the welfare official confused "Robertis" with "Roberty" (ignoring the particle), as the "is" with a long "s" looks very much like a "y."

We also considered whether the name 'Del Pretis' was plausible or not. A philologist we consulted at the National Archives in Rome assured us that this name was grammatically incorrect because the 'Del' (singular) could not be added to the 'Pretis' - ostensibly the plural of preti - priest). The name is also not to be confused with Depretis (which for a long time led us to pursue the hypothesis that Francine could be related to the family of the Italian statesman, Agostino Depretis, who was from Lombardy). However, 'Del Pretis' is not to be found in Italy, according to the site cognomix.it.

However, the name exists. On Facebook, there are 9 people with the surname Delpretis or Del Pretis. They seem to live mostly in Spanish-speaking countries, sometimes with an Italian-sounding forename, like Vincenzo or Paolo. In the course of our research, we have found traces of a family that arrived in Argentina in 1890, coming from Genoa:

RESULTADOS ~

Búsqueda: DEL PRETIS -

Apellido y Nombre	Edad	Estado Civil	Profesión	Religión	Nacionalidad	Barco	Procedencia	Datos de arribo		Nacido en
								Fecha de arribo / Puerto		
DEL PRETIS, ANNA	14	S	CONTADINO	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, CAROLINA	7	S	DESCONOCIDA	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, DELFINA	41	C	CONTADINO	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, GIUSEPPE	5	S	DESCONOCIDA	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, LUCIO	10	S	DESCONOCIDA	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, MARGHERITA	15	S	CONTADINO	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, MICHELLE	3	S	DESCONOCIDA	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO
DEL PRETIS, TERESA	9	S	DESCONOCIDA	CATOLICA	ITALIANA	ADELAIDE LAVARELLO	GENOVA	03/06/1890 - BUENOS AIRES		DESCONOCIDO

Primera Anterior Siguiente Última

Resultados: 1 al 8 de 8

This avenue remains to be explored, as our efforts have not been successful so far; but the results of the DNA tests lead us to think that it is an implausible option, as we will see later.

In the end, we prefer the hypothesis that Francine's mother, while being careful not to leave any inconsistencies in her story, by getting dates or other details wrong, probably wanted to cover her tracks all the way by inventing the name 'Del Pretis'. For example, we know that there was a ceramic warehouse of the Del Prete brothers at 229, avenue du Prado, where Francine said she lived "with friends" in Marseille. So did she make a contraction between 'Del Prete' and 'De Robertis' to create 'Del Pretis'?

Following the taking of DNA tests (Ancestry, 23andMe) by Francine in September 2015

When taking a DNA test, the results include a list of 'matches': these are other testers who share a certain amount of chromosomes (calculated in cM - centimorgans) with the subject.

What the Ancestry DNA test unequivocally shows is that Francine was the daughter of Coratini, because all of her best matches - from 111cM to 50cM - are descendants of Coratini emigrants.

At first we thought that she could be an American Coratina - possibly a married woman - who came to France ostensibly "to visit her family" and yet gave birth far from the eyes of the branch left behind on the other side of the Atlantic.

Today, we think that this hypothesis is unlikely, because, when we examine the DNA matches of the testers who are descendants of emigrants to the United States, we see that the quantities of chromosomes shared with them are much higher than

Francine's matches:

- US tester 1 (JQ): from 649cM to 334cM: 7 matches
- US tester 2 (LQ) : from 542cM to 223cM : 8 matches
- US 3 (GT) tester: from 685cM to 146cM: 6 matches
- US 4 (PM) tester: from 425cM to 255cM: 7 matches
- Francine : from 111cM to 70cM : 8 matches

This can be explained by the fact that the vast majority of DNA tests performed with Ancestry kits (about 20 million to date) have been done by Americans. It is therefore logical that close cousins of the US testers have also done tests.

In order for Francine's DNA matches on Ancestry to share a greater amount of chromosomes with Francine, Francine's close family members would have had to have emigrated to the United States. This does not appear to be the case: Francine's matches are, at best, third cousins.

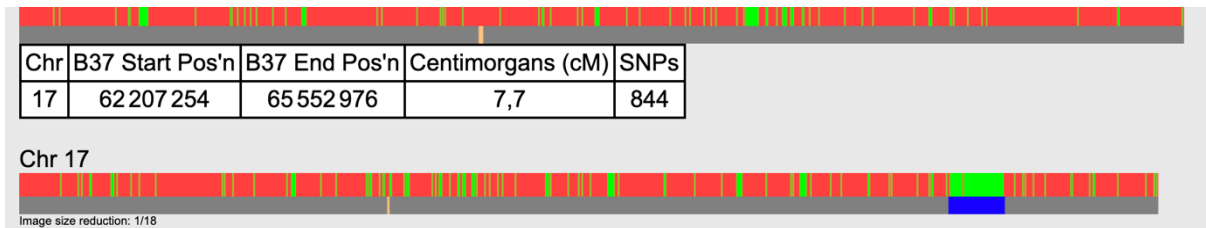
Furthermore, when searching Francine's 4030 distant cousins who tested with Ancestry, there are very few testers with a person born in Argentina or Venezuela in their family tree. The highest match is only 16cM with a tester having a person born in Argentina; for Venezuela, the corresponding figure is 21cM. We can probably rule out the hypothesis of emigration to one of these two countries.

If we are right in thinking that Francine's mother did not speak French, this does not support the hypothesis that her mother was an immigrant in France. A comparison similar to the one made above, but on MyHeritage - an Israeli company specializing in the sale of DNA tests in Europe - is a bit distorted by the fact that DNA tests have not been legalized in France and are therefore far less numerous. Nevertheless the comparison gives the following result:

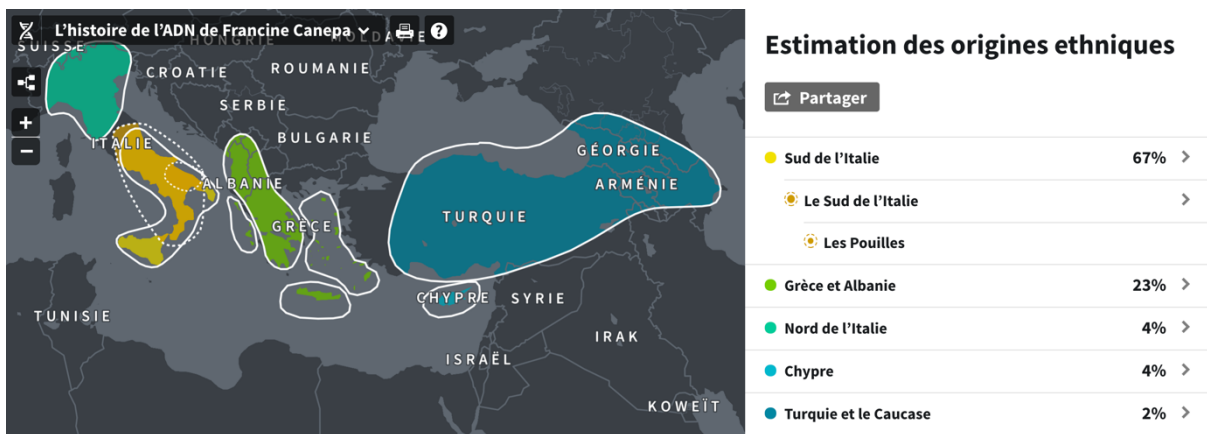
- French tester 1 (LL): from 397cM to 78cM (8 matches)
- French tester 2 (FT) : from 89cM to 63cM (9 matches)
- Francine: from 80cM to 67cM (9 matches)

While it is not entirely impossible that Francine's mother was an immigrant in France, the name 'Maria des Pretis' does not appear in the national social security database, at least if it was her real name. It seems to us that the most likely thing is that she came directly from Italy to Marseille to give birth. Then, she could have come either from Corato itself, or from another place in Italy where she would have emigrated, possibly not far from the French border: from Milan, or from Turin, for example.

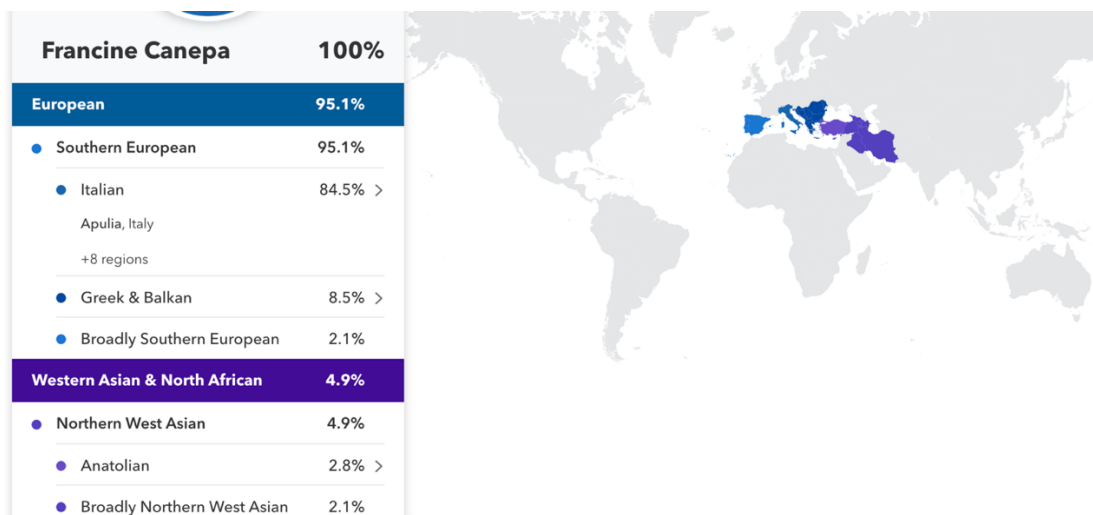
What we also know, from the Gedmatch genetic genealogy site, is that Francine's parents were related, if only in a very distant way (7cM, the common ancestor being 7 generations away, see below). Unless I am mistaken, it is therefore almost certain that both her parents were of Coratin origin.



The various companies doing DNA tests all give an estimate of the ethnic origin of the tester. One can only observe that these estimates are quite divergent. For example, on Ancestry, Francine's ethnicity includes a significant proportion of Greek and Balkan origin:



This Greek and Balkan share is lower on 23andMe: 8.5%.



However, when compared with the ethnicity estimates of other testers who took a DNA test with Ancestry and whose parents were both from Puglia - and whose results we were able to see - we find a similar ethnic mix, with a higher or lower percentage of Greek or Balkan origins. Through the centuries, mixtures with people from

neighboring countries have certainly taken place. Therefore, it does not seem that this mixture is the result of a recent migration.

Perspectives

Until the beginning of 2019, the family tree built during the research for Francine was private: this was the recommendation made by the DNAAdoption.com exchange group - in which I participated - in order to allow the inclusion of experimental elements. The current tree is public: this was decided and approved by Francine so that the work done could potentially benefit a maximum of descendants of Coratini emigrants who are looking for their origins. Francine herself does not appear in the tree, but it still contains some experiments, such as the inclusion of 'hypothetical' children, named, for example, 'Hypothetical Amorese-Procacci', in order to examine the theoretical degree of relationship with the home person of the tree (which can be changed depending on the genealogical line that is being studied). Also, some people have an asterisk after their first name: this is to indicate that they are part of a shared genealogical line with at least one (or, more often, several) DNA testers.

In fact, this public dissemination of the tree, called *albero genealogico coratino*, is in line with what we had thought as a strategy for the continuation of the research: **to make Francine's story well known** in order to hope that, sooner or later, someone will come forward to say: "we know - or "I know" - this story". With some much-needed luck, Francine's mother may have been alive until the 1980s. Then it is possible that a granddaughter, for example, may have been in the know about the baby abandoned in Marseille in 1936. A painful story, no doubt, but we do not throw stones and hope rather that a generous person will agree to let Francine's daughter and grandchildren know the truth about their *Coratini* origins.

If we have not been able to identify a sure lead to Francine's biological parents so far, we venture to say that it is mainly because genetic genealogy has not yet produced methodological tools to overcome the obstacle of too many cousins: this is one of the characteristics of an endogamous society, where people used to marry between people from the same small town. We believe that it is normal that genetic genealogy, which has developed mainly in the United States, has produced essentially instruments that are suitable for a 'melting pot' society, where people moved easily from one part of the country to another: in this context, the methodology used consists of following the probable surnames identified by DNA tests, as well as the places of residence, in order to proceed, by elimination, to the identification of the grandparents and, subsequently, of the probable biological mother.

On the other hand, in the following example we show how endogamy distorts the search, by producing too many cousins. This is part of an Excel table based on Family Tree Maker software showing the relationship to the main tree's home person (the second column from the left contains the names of trees created for some of Francine's matches):

21406	Salvagione	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	1st cousin 2x removed
21407	jdiadora	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	4th cousin 1x removed
21408	Quercia	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	4th cousin 1x removed
21409	Quercia	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	4th cousin 1x removed
21410	Strippoli	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	4th cousin 1x removed
21411	Picerno	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	5th cousin 1x removed
21412	Mazzilli	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Niece of wife of 2nd cousin 3x
21413	Mazzilli	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Niece of wife of 3rd cousin 2x
21414	DiNoia	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Sister-in-law of 1st cousin 1x removed
21415	D'Introno	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 3rd cousin 2x removed
21416	Lops	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 3rd cousin 2x removed
21417	Mazzilli	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 3rd cousin 2x removed
21418	Tondo	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 3rd cousin 2x removed
21419	Mazzilli	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 4th cousin 1x removed
21420	Giacon2A	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 4th cousin 2x removed
21421	mayre_m	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 4th cousin 2x removed
21422	xchief	Salvaggione, Maria	31-Dec-06	Wife of 4th cousin 2x removed

There are signs, however, that genetic genealogy methodologies are evolving, and in a direction that has interested us for a few years now: towards a better consideration of the mode of transmission of chromosome 23, the X. This last chromosome is transmitted by the mother to all her children, and by the father to his daughters. Consequently, this offers more specific possibilities for identifying genealogical lines, **provided that there is no break (or as little as possible) in the transmission trajectory.** This supposes working with trees big enough to avoid this break, and this is what we try to do with our *albero genealogico coratino*. It also supposes that there is an algorithm that will allow the trajectories of the X in this tree to be followed automatically, and to extend them, if necessary.

In due course, we will seek collaborations with companies that already have such algorithms, such as Wikitree, or are working on them, such as DNAPainter. The size of our tree, which now numbers over 20,000, should be an asset in such a collaboration. We are regularly expanding this tree, incorporating trees built from Francine's matches. At the same time, we are building and updating a database of authentic acts that have allowed us to identify the relationships between the people in the tree. Recall that Francine tested with Ancestry and with 23andMe; and that her DNA 'raw data' was transferred to MyHeritage, Family Tree DNA, Gedmatch, LivingDNA and Geneanet, resulting in the identification of many DNA matches.

Our website

Our website www.emigrazione-corato.org went live in late October 2020. Our priority has been to make sure that the database search works well, as it could save hundreds of hours of research for someone who has learned to use it.

As part of our project 'A Tale of Two Twinned Cities: Corato and Grenoble', which aims to liberalize resources useful for both genealogical and historical research, our website will hopefully improve access to existing resources.

The site also has another function, characterized by the section '**Looking for someone?**' which is designed to try to find people who have been 'lost to time', but who are generally alive: like the French TV show of a few years ago, it is a matter of

investigation, in which genealogical research has a place. This is also what the Italian program 'Chi l'ha visto?', in which Francine participated, tries to do. It can be, as in Francine's case, to try to identify biological parents; or to find people, or a branch, of a family that has emigrated. In the field of historical and socio-economic research, we hope that our project, served by its website, will allow us to identify people who can provide testimonies to feed this research.

In the search for people, facial recognition has a prominent place, because there are testimonies that testify that reunions are made thanks to the conviction of the members of a family that “yes, this person is indeed part of our family”. Research in cemeteries, too - a classic methodology - could also bear fruit, especially since Italian graves usually display photos of the deceased.

Ultimately, however, DNA will have to be used again, once good leads have been identified. After internet research, DNA testing is undoubtedly an essential tool in this type of investigation. Unfortunately, DNA testing is still declared illegal in France, a country that still accepts anonymous births. In Italy, tests are allowed, but are not yet widespread.

James Smith, Marseille, March 2021

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