

The bridge to my past

Why I'm no longer ashamed

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I WENT to Italy looking for something. I didn't know quite what but was fairly certain it was there, if it was anywhere.

An Italian-American who spent nearly a half-century in the country responsible for the second half of that hyphenation, I finally made it to the country responsible for the first. To borrow a phrase from an Alitalia ad, I went someplace I had never been before . . . home.

Now I have been back in the United States for several months, mulling over whether I found that something or not. The conclusion I've come to is that I did, indeed, find something.

If this sounds murky, perhaps a little personal background will sharpen the focus. For me as much as for you.

I am a third-generation Italian-American. My grandparents were born in Italy. My parents were born in the United States and though they both speak Italian — after a fashion — English was the language they spoke at home. They used Italian only when they

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did not want me to understand something. It was their language of secrecy, something private. The psychological imprint that left, not surprisingly, was that Italian was something not for me.

Not only language, but all things Italian were a mystery to me, and being Italian-American meant very little most of my life. It was a fact. Like being right-handed. But little more. I was aware of my Italian roots, but hardly at all concerned about them, save in negative ways. If anybody asked, I was "just an American."

When I was a child growing up in New York — a city, by the way, that has more people of Italian ancestry than any city in Italy — I walked by the ethnic reference points all around me like a conditioned mouse going through a maze. I hardly ever touched them.

I could have, for example, attended an Italian church. There were plenty in New York and one was fairly close to home. But my family opted for an "American" church. That meant one where the sermons were said in English. Like most Catholic churches then, the "American" one we attended was really Irish.

In high school I could have studied Italian. I chose Spanish. I can still recall an uncle, a typical second-generation ethnic who had tasted the full force of prejudice and tried desperately hard to avoid its sting whenever possible, advising me to study Spanish. "Italian is a dying language," he would say. A ridiculous statement on its face. A language that is spoken by 60 million people in Italy and perhaps another 60 million around the world can hardly be regarded as dying. (It is, incidentally, the third most widely spoken language in the United States — after English and Spanish.) Nevertheless, at the time, I agreed with my uncle's reasoning. In fact, I still did when the language choice came up in college. Again, I opted for Spanish.

DURING MY dating days I hardly ever went out with an Italian-American woman. I tended to look

upon them as if they had leprosy. It was probably just as well, since many Italian-American women regarded Italian-American men similarly. We were part of a generation destined to avoid each other. We were uncomfortable with ourselves and tended to shun people who reminded us of ourselves. Many, if not most of us, wound up marrying Irish-Americans, a group whose own ethnic crises neatly dovetailed with ours.

Perhaps the only Italian reference point I willingly referred to and the only positive one was food. Italian food hadn't quite made the big time the way it has now, what with places that sell espresso or gelato or pasta or pizza just about everywhere. Nevertheless, it was something that most people — even the Italo-phobes — liked, if they knew it at all. Grocery shopping with my father in Little Italy in the Arthur Avenue section of The Bronx was an incredible childhood treat. We didn't live there, but would travel from an ethnically homogenized neighborhood a few miles away to buy foods we couldn't get in the "American" stores. The sounds, the aromas, the food, the music of Arthur Avenue were better than the circus. And it came every week.

Apart from food, the only time I was conscious of my ancestry was when others confronted me with it. These were almost always negative experiences. While I can't say I faced much overt bigotry of the type my grandparents and parents faced, there were always the Italian jokes, the ridiculing laughter over Italian names that Anglo tongues could not pronounce, the suggestions that if an Italian-American failed at something it was because he was Italian and that if he succeeded it was because he was "connected." American society, when I was growing up in the '40s and '50s, made it plain that being Italian was a liability.

My response to all of this was to downplay my background, almost wipe it out. I even considered changing my name. I avoided Italian organizations. I avoided Italian friendships. I moved to a place where Italians were less numerous.

Most of my life, certainly most of my adult life, I spent being "just American." But like so many other ethnics who have gone down this road, I was left with an inner hunger.

I found myself gravitating to things and people Hispanic, Puerto Rican while I lived in the East, Mexican after moving West. There was a similarity of lifestyle between Latin Americans and Italians that I found appealing, even though I didn't recognize then what the nature of the attraction was.

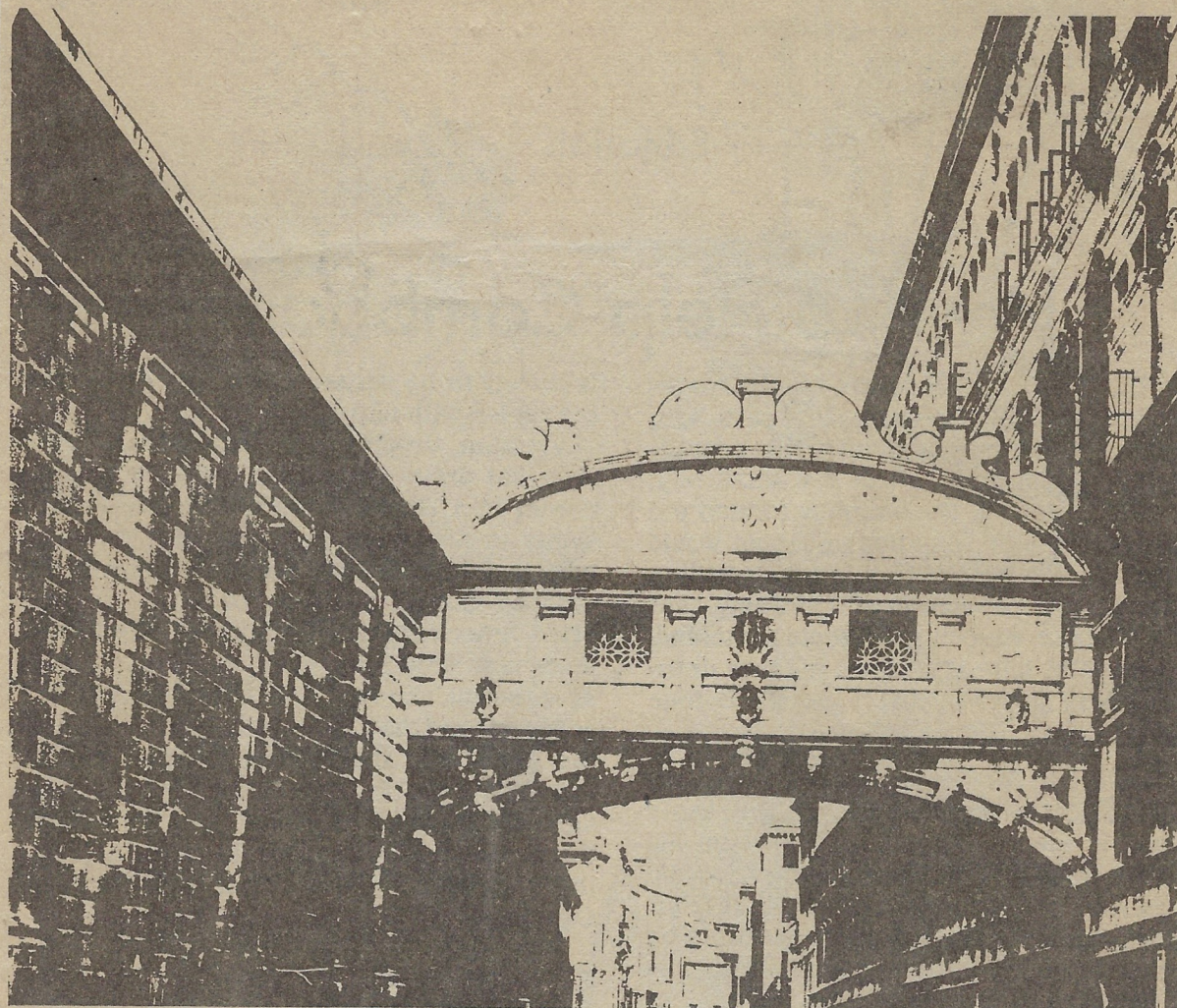
Yet, I knew always that I was an outsider. Hispanics may have been spiritual, linguistic, religious and philosophical cousins. They were not siblings. Many of them, ironically, regarded me as an Anglo. So I spent years in a cultural limbo. Not quite an Anglo, not quite a Latino, and not in any meaningful sense an Italian-American.

A FEW YEARS ago, while browsing in a library, I came across Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood*. A brilliant book, it thoroughly and lovingly analyzed the dilemma of Italian-Americans. It was for Italian-Americans what *The Feminine Mystique* was for women: a road map showing where we were and some possible ways out.

Still, for all the effect the book had on my thinking, I would have been alone had not William Cerruti, the founder of the Italian Cultural Society in Sacramento, called me. I did not know him, but he had seen my byline in *The Bee* and thought I might be interested in his new organization. If for that alone, I'm now glad I didn't change my name.

I got involved with the Society. Learned a lot about

to be an Italian-American



my background. Read many more books about it. Met more Italian-Americans than I thought lived in Sacramento. (And learned, since, that Italian-Americans are the largest European ethnic group in the greater Sacramento area — a surprise to most locals, even the Italian-Americans.)

I began to study the Italian language. Helped start an Italian radio program ("Festa Italiana," now in its third year, on KJAY, 1430 AM, noon to 1:30 Saturdays). Became involved in building the only Italian-American library in the area (one that now has over 1,000 volumes).

My ethnicity was, for the first time in my life, becoming positive, personally enriching. I suppose it was just a matter of time before I decided I had to see Italy, the place where the ethnicity began.

Learning that the Università per Stranieri (University for Foreigners) in Perugia (the city that makes those fancy candies many department stores feature) offered short courses in Italian language and culture, I decided to go there for the month of October.

The experience was incredible in many ways. Not as a tourist or gourmet destination, though those aspects of it were certainly memorable. Nor for the linguistic skill I acquired. I still don't *parlo come un nativo*. Primarily, I enjoyed the trip because it finally put that ethnic hunger to rest.

Italy was different than America, to be sure. But not that different. The nagging suspicion that all victims of bigotry hold, that the bigots' views might somehow be correct, was demolished. Italians, on a day-to-day basis, function much the way Americans do. The dreams and aspirations and material possessions of people in the Italian cities I visited (Perugia, Assisi, Florence and Rome) were largely the same as

those of the people in Sacramento. Physically, Italians are as well off as Americans. They dress as well or better. Their roads and cars are as good and, per capita, more plentiful. The bounty of their food stores — smaller but more numerous than in America — is mind- and palate-boggling.

THERE ARE, of course, good and bad aspects to every society. Some things about Italy that I found preferable were the inviting and sociable espresso bars, the excellent public transportation systems, the abundance of art in every sense and in almost every place; some things I found objectionable were inconvenient store hours, the excessive but superficial interest in politics of most residents, and the graffiti on buildings (most of which were politically inspired).

But none of these things, good or bad, mattered that much. What I found in Italy that mattered was more intangible.

What was it? After months of asking myself that question I think I have come up with the answer: an assurance that my roots were planted in a rich soil, one of which I have nothing to be ashamed. Additionally, for the first time and on the deepest level, a consciousness of what it means — and does not mean — to be an American.

It doesn't mean being an Anglo-Saxon clone. It does mean being many things: European (not just Anglo), African, Latino and Asian. Christian, Jewish and non-religious. Being American is being an amalgam. And an important part of the mixture, important as any other, is being Italian.

That, I'm reasonably certain, is what I found in Italy.