

Columbus and the Road to Glory

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In fourth grade, we chanted
"In Fourteen Hundred and Ninety-two,
Columbus sailed the ocean blue."
We recited the names of his ships,
the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria,
and gave them back on test after test.
In our history books, Columbus was a hero,
part of the fabric of our American lives,
the lump in our throat when we heard
The Star Spangled Banner or
recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

In Paterson, my father joined the Societa Cilentanna
formed by those Southern Italians
spewed out of the mountain villages in Campagna,
those people
that Henry Cabot Lodge called an "inferior species,"
though they were welcome in America,
cheap, unskilled labor for the jobs
no one else wanted.

My father was grateful
to get a job as a dyer's helper in a silk mill.
And when he hurt his back lifting
the heavy rolls of silk,
he became a night watchman in a school
and when he could no longer
walk the rounds ten times a night,
he got a job in a rubber factory,
gauging the pressure on steam boilers
to make sure they didn't explode.
He worked the night shift for 19 years,
the boilers so loud he lost 90%
of the hearing in both ears.

My father, who at 86 still balances
my checkbook, worked for a man
who screamed at him
as though he were a fool,
but by teaching himself the basic laws of the U.S.A.,
he learned to negotiate the system
in his broken English,
spoke up for the immigrants
when they were afraid to speak,
helped them sell property in Italy
or send for their wives and children

On Columbus Day, dressed
in his one good suit,
his shirt, starched and white,
his dark-colored, sedate tie,
appropriate for solemn occasions,
my father stood at the podium,
loving America, believing it to be

the best and most beautiful country
in the world,
a place where his children
and the children of others
could go to school, get jobs.
On Columbus Day,
he could forget the laughter
of the Americans who spit at him
on the street, called him
"Dago, Guinea, Wop, Gangster,
Garlic Eater, Mafioso,"
their eyes sliding sideways
when they came near
and the rules--

"No Italians need apply."
For those Italians, living
in their tenements, surviving ten hours a day
at menial jobs, Columbus Day was their Day
to shine, like my father's tuba, polished
for the occasion, my father, grinning
and marching, practicing his patriotic speech.

When I see the Italians need to cling
to Columbus as their hero, I remember
that the biggest mass lynching
in American history was of Italians
and I remember the Italians of Frankfurt, Illinois,
dragged from their houses and beaten and lynched,
and their houses burned to the ground,
and the Italians lynched in Wiltsville, Ohio
and New Orleans and Florida
but most of all, I remember the men at the Societa,
the way they brought Columbus out once a year,
dusted him off, and presented him
to the world as their hero
so that on that one day, they, too,
could walk tall and be proud.

And in this year of political correctness,
when I am asked to sign a petition
written by Italian American Writers
boycotting Columbus, I am angry
and I wonder: have things changed so much for us?
Why are we always the last in line, either, ginzoes
in gold chains or mafiosos, found guilty
by reason of our names.
Now even this one day
set aside for Italian pride
is being ripped from our hands.

Sta Citta, Don't make trouble!
Non far mala figura, " my mother always said
but I say: let us tell our mothers "Sta Citta,"
Let us tell them we don't care about mala figura

Let us put the pieces of Columbus back together,
and if the cracks show, the imperfections,
can we blame him
for not seeing with 20th Century eyes?

Let us pick up our flawed hero
march him through the streets of the city,
the way we carried the statue
of the Blessed Virgin at Festa.

Let us forget our mothers orders.
Not to make trouble.
Not to call attention to ourselves
and in honor of my father and the men of the Societa
and in honor of my mother
and the courage and pride she taught me,

I say: No to being silent,
No to calling us names
No to giving up Columbus,
we have a right
with our Italian American voices
to celebrate our American lives.

COLUMBUS CORNER

Columbus is an important part of the Italian American heritage. Nationwide, Columbus Day is observed as a holiday for recognizing the immigrant roots of the United States. Italian Americans view Columbus as the first Italian immigrant and celebrate Columbus Day as a symbol of their own coming to America and their continuing presence in this nation.

The mass migration of Italians from Italy to America around the turn of the century was the largest migration in history of a people from one continent to another. In fact, the Italians were the last large European group to immigrate to the United States and most of that immigration took place in this century. As a result, the Italian presence in America in large numbers is of recent origin. It is no wonder that Italian Americans are close to their immigrant roots and need to celebrate their transition from immigrant to American.

Italian Americans are often referred to by historians as the "Children of Columbus" and have adopted Columbus Day as their holiday on which they celebrate being both Italian and American. Italian immigration to the United States, especially in the West, reflected the regional diversity of the Italian Peninsula. It was in America that Italians, an immigrant people fragmented by regional origins, dialects and economic class, forged a national Italian American identity. Celebrating Columbus Day nationwide was an important unifying force in building a common Italian American ethnic identity among a people dispersed across this country in thousands of communities.

Columbus Day is a sacred day to Italian Americans as are Columbus Day rituals and communal activities. For Italian Americans, Columbus Day activities are not only an expression of pride, but also a tribute to the memory of their immigrant ancestors. Last years Columbus Day activities in the Italian American community were marred by threats of violence, intimidation and harassment by various segments of American society with a different and hostile agenda. This assault on our activities left a sense of outrage among Italian Americans over how they were treated by the media nationwide and by the lack of sympathy they received from local political leaders.

To many Italian Americans, the controversy over Columbus has very little to do with truth, and almost everything to do with politics and the critics of Western values and European civilization. The heightened media criticism and Columbus bashing during 1992 is a reminder that diverse cultures view the Columbus legacy from vastly different perspectives. In 1992, the perspective of Italian Americans was ignored. We think its time for the media and political leaders to recognize the important contributions made by the Italian people in the United States and to stop being part of the hate campaign against Columbus Day and Italian Americans.