
YES, PLEASE TELL YOUR FAMILY STORIES

BY STEVEN DECKER

As a local author, I've had the good fortune to meet hundreds of Italian -Americans at book signings in and around Chicago. It is always my great pleasure to sign books and to chat a bit with book purchasers.

The comments I heard most frequently from my customers were something like this: "I should write a book about my ancestors" or "I can tell you a story about my grandparents."

I always listened to their tales and encouraged them to tell their stories before the generation who came here from the Old Country is forgotten.

This is not to say that the only nationality that had a tough time was the Italians. The opposite is true: the Irish, the Germans, the Swedes and practically all ethnic groups struggled. Immigration is a struggle to this day.

I write about the Italians because I am descended from Sicilian grandparents on my mother's side. Their culture has always been in my heart and I grew up hearing stories about their experiences, some funny, some sad, some tragic.

Since I started researching and writing, my fear has become that the bravery and the struggle of Italian immigrants from a century ago will be forgotten simply because their stories are not being told. Instead of understanding who the real heroes were, too many people today think of Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans as gangsters and thugs because that's the story too often presented by Hollywood.

Thankfully, that's not entirely true. Hollywood, over the years, has produced many great movies about Italians and Italian -Americans. These are films like

Moonstruck, 29 th Street, Marty, Big Night, Everybody Wants to Be Italian and others.

But while the film industry has produced some wonderful movies, it has chosen more to glamorize Italian and Italian -American thugs and criminals, making them into nearly folk heroes. Think of The Godfather, Casino, Goodfellas, The Sopranos, The Irishman, Bronx Tale and many more.

Now let's face it: we all love gangster movies but the untold story - which is the amazing and true history of the Italy - to - America immigration experience - is really the story that cried out to be told.

Put yourself in immigrant shoes: Leaving your homeland and the people you love, grandparents saying goodbye to their grandbabies, knowing they will never see them again, and fathers, mothers, sons and daughters parting forever. It is unthinkable - and yet millions of families did exactly that.

How did the immigrants survive in a racist country that didn't welcome or even want them here? It's hard to understand how they succeeded, especially since most of them came here with little money, did not speak the language, faced enormous prejudice, and got little or no police protection or other social services.

Making their transition even more difficult, the period of time leading up to the 1920s was a time of enormous social upheaval in the U.S.

- 1918 and 1919, a million soldiers came home from World War One and took the jobs, leaving only scraps for immigrants. Thirty eight people were killed in race riots in Chicago in 1919.
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- Between 1917 and 1920, the Spanish Flu killed 675,000 Americans.
- In 1919, Prohibition became the law of the land, spawning dozen of criminal enterprises.
- On August 18 th , 1920, American women finally got the right to vote. With that, came a sense of rebirth and freedom which fundamentally changed the U.S.
- Crime infested the United States, mostly in the big cities. The first victims were often new arrivals to this country, making assimilation even more difficult.

Institutional prejudice against Italians, especially those from southern Italy, was rampant. Jobs ads often specified “No Italians Hired.” Making matters worse, Italian immigrants were often victimized by their own countrymen. Gangs like The Black Hand, the Mafia and the Capone’s Outfit in Chicago would ruthlessly steal, extort, and beat new arrivals, making their lives even more difficult.

In an incredibly racist move, in 1924 our Congress passed The Immigration Act, made law mostly to stop Italians from coming to the country. It reduced immigration by 90%.

Things were tough here. Millions of immigrants went back to Italy - but millions more stayed, believing that they would survive and with the determination and belief that their children would be Americans. Against enormous odds, they struggled and survived. To do so, they developed a community survival code.

First of all, Italian immigrants had an incredible belief in the strength of Family. They stayed together, loved, supported, encouraged and protected each other.

Their Faith in God was powerful and undeniable. They put their trust in a higher power, prayed and supported their local churches.

Immigrants brought their customs, including celebrating their holidays and their food, to their new homeland.

New arrivals to the U.S. shared their commonality and supported each other in their national enclaves and neighborhoods. They bought from and sold to each other and helped their businesses to thrive.

Immigrants encouraged their kids to become educated, to speak English and to become Americans.

The history of immigration cannot be told without saluting the women who were equal partners and who were as important as the men. Without those strong, determined women, immigration would probably have failed. They were the glue and the silent power that held families together, kept the men focused and working and insured their survival.

So yes, please tell your family stories. Write them. Record them. Make sure this generation and the ones to follow know what was done for them by the heroic men and women who came here a century ago.

And Hollywood – it’s time for you to finally tell their story. ©



Chicagoan Steven Decker is the author of the popular novel **Cambridge Street**, which tells the story of the bravery and struggle of Italian immigrants who arrive in Chicago at the dawning of the Roaring Twenties.

Available on CambridgeStreet.net, Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.