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## Angela Ciaverella, Nostra Bisnonna

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## **ANGELA CIAVARELLA, NOSTRA BISNONNA**

In Sannicandro there are two main streets. One, the oldest, created centuries ago, is now named after Umberto, one of Italy's kings. The other, probably created early in the last century, is named Via Antonio Gramsci, in honor of a great Italian communist and political theorist. The streets run perpendicular to each other and both run from "il mare" (the sea) to the mountains. Via Umberto is the center of social life and Via Gramsci is the center of Sannicandro's economic life. Gramsci is filled with small shops with everything you could possibly find at a modern shopping mall. The difference is that each shop is individually owned and the owner is a specialist in whatever the product is. For example if you wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes, you go to the tobacconist. If you wanted a key made, you would go to a key maker. When one goes shopping, one meets a lot of people, and needs to go to a lot of shops. It is a way of socializing, too. You meet virtually everyone in town eventually.

Another important way of socializing is the evening walk. Between the hours of nine and midnight or even later in the summer, everyone in the town gets dressed in their finest and walks slowly the distance on Via Umberto from the square in front of the Franciscan monastery at one end of the town to the square in front of the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine (Our Lady of Mount Carmel) at the other end. In each square there are benches for people to sit on, and along the way as well. Each night people stop and talk of politics, families, or whatever else is on their mind. If you haven't seen someone in a long time and need to find them, this is the place to go. Slowly, every night, they walk up and down the street. If you don't get a chance to talk to someone during the first pass at the length of the street, you certainly will during the evening at some point.

My great grandmother lived just off Via Umberto in the old section of the town. By all accounts she was a real force in Sannicandro and everyone came to her for advice on whatever problem they were dealing with at the time. She was a very heavy woman. The first thing everyone told me is that she was very fat. I have a photo of her and it bears this information out. She was kind, too. Although very poor herself, she always had food for people in the town who needed it. She also was a kind of midwife-nurse and would be called on at all hours to visit the pregnant or the sick. She lived on a street now called Via Michele (Michael) Vocino! This Michele Vocino is a very famous Italian historian from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We even have two of his books at the University of Rhode Island.

When my cousin Susan, my Aunt Mary, my grandmother and I went to Italy in 1972, we saw Angela Ciavarella's grave. Her picture was on it. Auntie Angela Bearse looked exactly like her. She was as beautiful as Auntie Ann, too. Her picture is no longer on the grave. When someone dies, their bones are left in the grave and the next person, or the latest to die, has their picture and vital statistics put on the grave. Luckily I took a picture of Angela Ciavarella. Zia Giuseppina, or know as Zia Peppina, my Nonno's sister and Angela's first daughter is now buried in the grave, and her picture can be found there. She lies in death with her mother.

Theresa Monaco, who's father Michele, was born in Sannicandro and came to the U.S. as a very young child recounts a story important to her family's history that seems to confirm Angela Ciavarella's importance in the town. Evidently Theresa's grandparents wanted to get married but there was some bad blood between the two families that prevented the marriage. Angela Ciavarella stepped in and calmed the problem and

brought the two people together so that they could get married. Theresa tells me that her family gives a lot of credit, to this day, to Angela Ciavarella for finally getting her grandparents together.

As an aside, when Luigi Vocino, my Nonno, and son of Angela Ciavarella first came to the U.S., the Monaco's were already here. When he first arrived, he slept in the same bed as Theresa's father, the young Michele Monaco. Michele slept at one end of the bed and Nonno slept at the other. Nonno stayed with them until he was able to find a home of his own which I think was after he and Nonna were married. Their first home was on Joy Street in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Like our Nonna, Angela Ciavarella was born in San Marco in Lamis, a small town in the mountains just above Sannicandro. It is a common practice for the Sannicandrese and the San Marcese to intermarry. Personally, I think that San Marco is a much prettier town than Sannicandro. Sannicandro is still dirt poor in most sections and like most other towns found in Southern Italy, the Mezzogiorno, there is to this day no work to be found for the young and most of them leave to find work elsewhere. Today, most of the work is in Germany, so many Sannicandrese are in Germany. Luckily for us, at the time Nonno was looking for work, work could be found in the U.S. Other Italians found work in Argentina, Chile, Belgium, France and Canada at various times. These countries all have large Italian populations. In fact, Belgium boasts the largest Italian population outside of Italy in Europe. The myth that immigrants came to the U.S. for freedom, either religious or civil, is just that, a myth. The Sannicandrese left Italy, as did Nonno, because he needed to make money to send back to his mother to help support his brothers and sisters. Nonna and Nonno continued to send what little money they could to the family in

Sannicandro right up through World War II. The family in Sannicandro even recounts how they would receive boxes of used clothing from Nonna, and some even say their first long pants came from her.

Now, however, the families, or at least most of them, are as prosperous as their American counterparts. Indeed, I would say that some of them, all college educated are professionals such as judges, lawyers, physicians, dentists, city planners, and civil administrators and are even more prosperous than their American counterparts.

Of the numerous first cousins of our parents, I would say that at least seven are single and in their forties or fifties or more. I thought I was the only one not to get married, but here, there are many.

One of my father's first cousins, Giuseppe Vocino, a son of Nonno's brother, Zio Antonio and his wife, Zia Nannina (Giovanna) Vigilante, was recently made a Knight of the Italian Republic in recognition for his many years of service to the state. He was the chief of police in the large city of Ravenna early in his career and later served as head of a section of the Italian state police that is comparable to the Secret Service. He served as mayor of a number of towns and cities in Italy such as Lecce in the South. He was appointed mayor of these cities when the state tried to clean up these municipalities suffering under Mafioso corruption during the 1980s and 1990s. He would also serve as bodyguard to visiting heads of state such as Prince Charles. When the Pope traveled outside the Vatican, it was Giuseppe and his Unit who would protect him. He has many photos of himself with these dignitaries.

Therefore, it is important for us to know that our relatives who stayed in Italy have made successful lives for themselves and their families. Other members of the

family have found work at the Agnelli factories in Turin making Fiats. Others still serve as butchers in the town of Sannicandro. Michele Vocino, Giuseppe's brother, and my main host while I am in Sannicandro, is a member of the town council, as was his brother Vincenzo, and still serves as a judge for the region. He no longer serves in criminal court, but decides minor civil and traffic cases from his courtroom in Apricena. He will be seventy-one on his next birthday. All the others in the family living in Sannicandro call him "Don Michele" jokingly because he knows virtually everyone and when you need to get something done, you first go to Michele for advice and he then goes to the person who can get you what you need. He has been an invaluable go-between for me during my times in Italy. In fact, he also secured Jonmichael, Theresa's son, when his father took him to Italy and wouldn't let Theresa have him back. Auntie Ann and Theresa came to Italy and talked with Michele and he helped get the child returned to Theresa.

Michele also still has important state responsibilities. Last January, the Mayor of the town was charged (and later released for lack of evidence) with corruption. Michele was asked by the state to sign the arrest warrant for the early morning raid on the Mayor's home. I happened to be in the house on that January day when all this happened.

The local village archpriest, the representative of the Archbishop, is a cousin. His name is Dom Vincenzino Palmieri, a monsignor. He is eighty-two now, and was the priest for the town's cathedral until recently. He was appointed to oversee the Church of Saint John, a recently restored church that is not a parish but serves as the Archbishop's Church and his seat of authority in Sannicandro. His mother was a Vocino. When he

saw me on the church stairs for the first time this summer, he yelled, “How is our Americano?” He came over and gave me the traditional dual kisses, and made some small talk about me loving Italy and the town.

Another relative was General Matteo Palmieri whose mother and grandmother on his father’s side were Vocinos. He was a distinguished World War I general and also served in North Africa during World War II. His grave is the most ornate in the cemetery in Sannicandro.

Angela Ciavarella and her husband, Michele Vocino, Nonno’s parents died relatively young. Both were in their early sixties. They had eight children, all of whom lived except one, Matteo, who died as a young child. All of the remaining seven children, of whom Nonno was the oldest, lived into their eighties and nineties. Little is known of Michele Vocino, Nonno’s father because he died before many of the cousins were born in 1921. Angela, who was younger by many years, died in 1936. Michele, like all of our relatives before him, was a peasant farmer who had a small piece of land that he worked in the day. The land was outside of the town and all the farmers came back to the town at night. Sannicandro is still surrounded by farmland, but the town is growing rapidly at the outskirts, as people want to move out of the old city to the “suburbs” to newer, larger and modernized apartments. Many move to the outskirts because the newer sections have wide and straight streets that accommodate automobiles. The newer sections have garages, too. They are called “boxes” here and are vital to save your car. Auto theft is rampant in the Southern towns of Italy and Sannicandro is no exception.

I have a little car, a Renault, about ten years old. It needed to be repaired, and Michele and his brother Vincenzo's son, Antonio, gave it to me for the cost of repairs. It was Antonio's first car as a youngster. I had new tires put on the car, and had a few motor repairs made. It cost me about \$300 total. I take it to the beach every morning about 8 a.m. and to other locations within driving distance of Sannicandro when I am not at the beach. Michele takes the car at night and puts it in the garden of his beautiful home (virtually a little castle) in the center of town. In the morning he picks me up before eight, I drive him down the street so that he can go to Mass and then after my day driving around, he comes and takes it to the garden for protection. Obviously, if I am going to stay here I need to find a "box."

Driving in this town is an experience unto itself. The streets, mine, Via Palestro included, are no wider than the Renault I just described. In fact, some cars need to draw in their side-view mirrors to make it up some of the streets. This experience, driving, deserves a little article of its own that I will try and write later.

My neighbors here in Via Palestro are wonderful to me. At night everyone sits outside his or her homes in this very narrow street and they talk. They talk mostly of the "old" days. Next-door is a couple, Gilda and Marcello. Marcello's mother lived here all of her life and died last year. All of Marcello's brothers and sisters visit and stay in the mother's home across the via. Marcello and Gilda, though they own part of the mother's home, rent this home next to me because they stay here most of the summer. Around the corner, the mother's sister, Costanza, lives with her family. They all come at night and sit in the Via Palestro, too. Some nights we have all bought pizza and eaten it at tables put into the street. One of Marcello's brothers, Gino (Luigi) and his wife stayed for a

month. They live in Milano. Their son and his girlfriend were here for a couple of weeks, too. The son, Matteo, speaks English very well and is an engineering student at the University of Milan. He is probably one of the most handsome men I have ever seen, and very polite and gentle. I was sorry to see him leave, I like looking at him as much as I liked having someone translate English for me when I didn't understand some of the local dialect. His girlfriend was just as pleasant, also a student, and very beautiful. Matteo looked very American and had the habit of wearing his baseball cap backwards like most American students.

Antonio, another neighbor, is probably my best friend in the via. He is about sixty and lives with his wife Lucia next to Marcello and Gilda. He owns all three floors of the building he lives in and spent most of his life in France working as a carpenter. Both of his sons were born in France. They both speak excellent English as well as Italian, perfect French, and the local Italian dialect. One son is a radiologist in the Italian-speaking province of Switzerland. The other son works in the French civil service in Orleans. Both speak English with a French accent that I thought was very funny. Both are married and have children. Both as gentle and kind as Antonio.

Antonio is an excellent carpenter. I've seen photos of his work on major projects in France. All of them very impressive. Antonio has made a small coffee table for me as well as a new tabletop for my dining room table (an old table was left here for me with a formica top and although I liked the legs, I hated the formica.) Both are in natural wood that he bought and showed me before accepting the commission. The total cost in Euros was under two hundred dollars. I designed the coffee table. He also drilled holes in these old stonewalls so that I could hang pictures. He has a great sense of humor and has been

very protective of me. He makes sure that I understand everything that anyone is saying to me when I have difficulty understanding Sannicandrese. He translates into Italian for me. I watched Antonio make my tables. His “laboratorio” or his workshop is just two doors down from my house and across the Via Palestro. I am also going to have him make a credenza for my bedroom while I am away this winter. I just wish I could find a carpenter as reasonable and available as him in Kingston.

Another neighbor is Lucia, an older woman also in her early sixties who lives with her husband, Vincenzo. Vincenzo had a stroke a year ago and walks haltingly with a cane and cannot move his left arm. He walks, every day, twice a day, to the center of town for exercise. To get to the center from my house means walking down a very steep hill and up the same hill to return. He sits in the town all day long with all the other old men at a park with a fountain and shade trees. He is also wonderful to me. Whenever he sees me walking the town, he calls me over and asks me to sit and join in whatever is happening with the old men. Each time he passes my home, as does every one else, he says, “Ciao, Michele. Tutti aposto?” (Hello, Michael. Everything OK?) I still can’t believe that he makes that journey –roundtrip—twice a day. He has a lot of courage.

Well, it’s noontime now, and I need to prepare my lunch for 1:30. Today is one of the few days that the family lets me feed myself.

I just heard a knock on the door and there stood my next-door neighbor with a dish of pasta she had made by hand. I don’t get to feed myself today. Gilda and Marcello have provided.

