

## **My Ancestral Home**

Essay writing      Susan (Liboria Rammacca di Sala) Josephs      August 2018

“You possess only whatever cannot be lost in a shipwreck.”

The Way of the Sufi by Idries Shah

With time for an espresso, (okay, a cannoli too) we board the small plane to Palermo after arriving in Milano from New York.

Stretching out, I fall into a deep sleep. An hour later the stewardess gently asks me to buckle my seatbelt. We’re landing in Sicilia, my father’s birthplace. Gazing out the window, my eyes slowly focus. My breath halts. DNA memories flood and tears tickle my cheeks. White-washed and turquoise adobe houses, faded-red tile roofs, sun-bleached laundry, brilliant sky, scraggily palms, lemon trees, azure blue waters, emotionally overwhelm. I’d attributed my love of these elements to my fondness for the Southwest. They are more deeply rooted.

I am ancestrally home.

Our daughter Rachel, who’s living and working in Paris, meets us at Falcone-Borsellino Airport (named for two judges murdered by the Mafia – Oy!) Off we go to our boutique, seaside hotel in Mondello, on Palermo’s outskirts. Valentina, the daughter of a Sicilian couple, who’d done their PhD’s at the University of Wisconsin, will be our guide and help find my relatives.

The next day, Valentina navigates, as Michael drives, like a true Palermitano, she tells him, to Termini Imerese. Up a hillside with the cemetery before us, the ancient church on our right, and three stately villas to our left, the courthouse is not here. Driving down the hillside we find the “new” 1862 courthouse. Three employees try to shoo us away. They’re computerizing. “Come back tomorrow.” Valentina explains this is the time we have. I unfold my father’s birth certificate. The clerk lifts ancient

leather-bound volumes from the shelves. Beautifully calligraphied tomes inscribe family trees. Alfredo Giuseppe Rammacca di Sala is not among them.

The gentleman queries, "What was your grandmother's maiden name?" "Liboria Papania." "Papania.... you're a Papania? I'm a Papania! My cousin married your cousin. That's a different story!" he excitedly exclaims. He calls my cousin who asks for time to ready the house. Our new relative takes us to his favorite espresso bar. Standing, we have another cup of Italian elixir. He shows us the home where my father was born.

Then, back up the hill, the cemetery in front, the ancient church on our right, and my grandmother's villa is in the center of the three on the left. I'd recently spent painstaking hours selecting and painting my Connecticut home's plaster walls, choosing Tuscan gold, the precise shade of my grandmother's villa. Walking up the internal stairs, terra cotta and cobalt blue tiles, like the ones I'd used in my kitchen, line these walls. The living room features the identical Indian chotchikies I love.

Relatives from Ravenna, Milano, Siracusa, Termini, Palermo, have gathered for a family reunion, all looking like variations of my American relatives and me.

My ancestors' spirits course through me. I'm rooted in such an unfamiliar way.

Speaking without cease, Valentina attempts to translate the vibrant conversation. (We're Sicilians after all!) My cousin finds photos of my sister and me that our parents had brought some 50 years earlier. Since my grandmother was female, her oldest brother inherited the family home; now **his** descendants live here.

Returning to Connecticut, I call my only living aunt. "Aunt Elvira, I found our relatives in Grandma's house in Termini." I thought she'd be excited. "Those-ah bastards. They stole-ah everything-ah from us-ah," is her still accented lament.

I don't have my aunt's memories of loss and displacement. For me the sense of home is embedded in my DNA, a thread that nourishes me. Deeply grateful for the place from which I come, I take this home with me wherever I go.