

Searching For Roots In Senerchia

The empty branches on my family tree had always disturbed me. Those blank spaces — the result of unknown information — presented a challenge to my sense of order and my need for things to be complete.

For a time it appeared the challenge would go unmet. No one in my family knew the name of the village in Italy from which our grandparents and great-grandmother had emigrated. Like so many turn-of-the-century immigrants, they had put ashore at Ellis Island and left the Old World behind. Once settled in Chicago, all three — the young couple and her mother — turned their full attention to finding work and securing the necessities of life.

As I grew older, the empty branches continued to bother me. I was determined to find my

roots, but without the name of the town, filling in the blanks seemed nearly impossible.

When pressed, my aunts and uncles concluded that the town was in the province of Avellino in the south and that its name began with S-E-N. This led me to a directory where Senerchia was the only — but a very iffy — prospect.

Once in Naples, the man at the car rental agency helped by writing “*Mia nonna é nata qui*” (my grandmother was born here) on the back of the envelope containing the rental agreement. Following his directions, I took the autostrada and miles of scenic country lanes to a quiet village with a single main street. My shiny red Fiat created a stir. The men drinking espresso at tables under the trees stared, the school children stared, and the old

women dressed in black stared.

The police station seemed like a good place to start my search. Inside, two men sat drinking



Senerchiesi love to cook, and they enjoy eating in picturesque settings like this garden.

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Caterina Izzo and her daughter Angela Del-Giudice with five of Angela's nine children (including my mother). Chicago, circa 1930

coffee in a rather bare office. One seemed to belong to the big desk in the room and the other appeared to be a visitor. They understood what I was after without looking at the envelope. Yes, there were records, but why did I want to look up records in books? It was easier, they assured me, just to ask the old people of the village. I didn't think this would be helpful, but I recognized the determined look in their eyes as one I'd seen in my mother many times and didn't bother protesting.

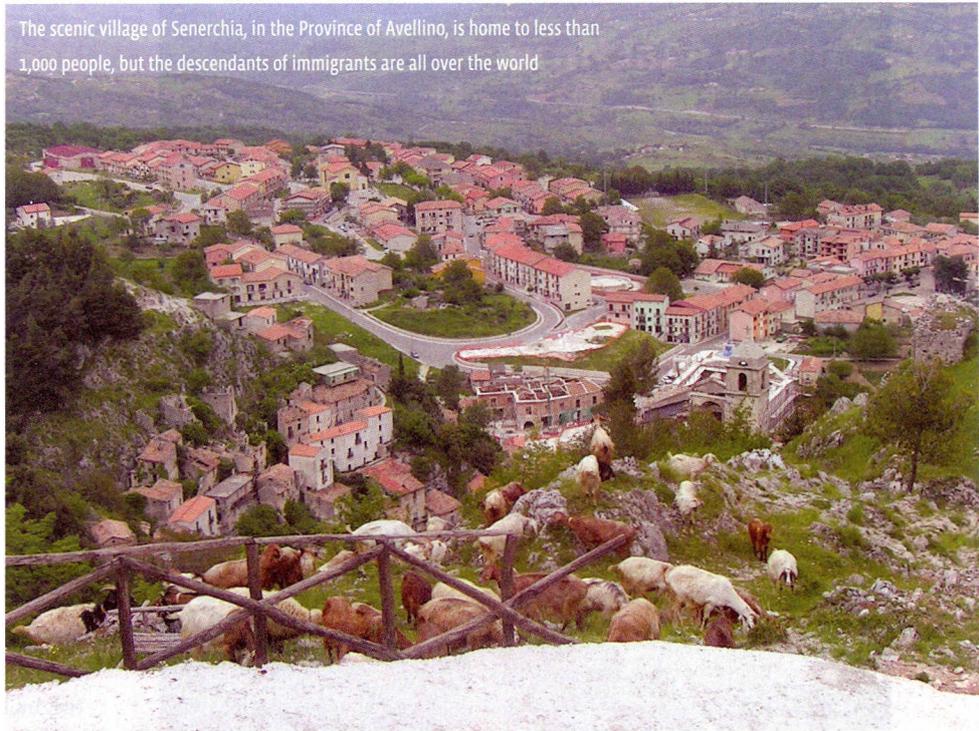
The three of us walked out into the square and our leader, the one who belonged to the desk, began calling to people who came out onto their balconies. He told them

the names of my relatives and they recited them over and over, but the litany didn't spark a memory. Lots of del Giudices, but no Angela. Lots of Izzos, but no Caterina. Before long the piazza was full of people milling around — some repeating “Izzo, Caterina” and others reciting “Chee-ca-go” as if it was a mantra.

Soon my escorts were summoned to their midday meal. But what, I wanted to know, about “mia nonna?” They shrugged. I reminded them about the records, but they said it would take too long to go through them. I offered to do it myself after lunch, and they reluctantly agreed.

They were already at work when I arrived. The documents — contained in huge dusty tomes — were in two rooms. The visitor had taken the room with the older, bundled books, and was already waist deep in brown wrapping paper. I joined the man

The scenic village of Senerchia, in the Province of Avellino, is home to less than 1,000 people, but the descendants of immigrants are all over the world



who belonged to the desk. The records were written in Old Italian script that was difficult to read, but eventually we found the birth certificate of the bambina Caterina Izzo, dated 1852.

That bambina was my great-grandmother, and this discovery erased any doubt I'd had about

being in the right place. Eventually, we located her marriage certificate and many other family records. I gave both of the men a big hug, and in doing so realized that my eyes weren't the only wet ones in the room. I offered to help them clean up the mess we'd created. It was late. They'd do it *domani*.

As I drove back to Naples, I savored my discoveries. It's satisfying to know where I'm from, even if it doesn't change who I am.

I still can't speak Italian, and my spaghetti sauce remains to be not quite as good as my mother's. I do, however, get tears in my eyes when I hear Pavarotti sing “O Sole Mio” — but then I always have.

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Fresh produce, haggled for at a market such as this one, is the focus of home-cooked Italian meals

