

Growing Up on the Near West Side in the 1920s

Tony Sorrentino (1913-2005) was one of the most admirable Italian American leaders in the history of Chicago. Presented below is an autobiographical account of his early years as an immigrant child growing up in the Taylor Street neighborhood. Later in life Tony earned a masters degree in sociology from the University of Chicago and became a key player in the University's Chicago Area Project. Under Professor Clifford Shaw, Tony worked for many years to develop an anti-delinquency program among Italian American youth, based on the concept of indigenous Italian American leadership. From the late 1940s to the early 1990s Sorrentino, with the aid of his gifted wife, Ann, served as executive director of several Chicago Italian American organizations, most notably the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans. He combined ethnic advocacy with his generous and liberal spirit to become the community's foremost diplomat. He was a fatherly mentor to many, including Dominic Candeloro and Fred Gardaphé. The piece quoted below is from *Organizing Against Crime: Redeveloping the Neighborhood*, Human Sciences Press, 1977. Sorrentino was also the author of *Organizing the Ethnic Community: An Account of the Origin, History and Development of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans 1952-1995*, Center for Migration Studies, 1995. His papers are on file at the Chicago Historical Museum.

By Anthony Sorrentino

I arrived with my family at the age of six, a small immigrant boy who could not speak English, and I remained in and around the Near West Side of Chicago for almost 40 years. My difficulties were typical of what almost every boy who lives in a poor, deteriorated community confronts. I remember it was a cold day in 1919 when I entered this strange new land, this huge metropolis with its somber atmosphere and peculiar traffic noises. We seemed to be Lilliputians in the land of the giants. The never ending stream of cars, trucks and horse-drawn wagons and teams on the main streets seemed like demons of death in contrast to the tranquility of the scene of our home in Sicily.

With us was nostalgia for our native land and uncertainty about the future. My mother would look out from our dingy flat to the drab streets and cry for "Marsala Bella." Our loneliness lasted some months, but gradually we began to experience some joys and good fortune and became better accustomed to our new way of life. We realized that this new land had many things to attract us. The innumerable shops and stores displayed a great variety of foods, packages of candies and sweets, and colorful boxes, cans, and

appliances. All were available for all to see, if not to have, in practically every neighborhood store. From that moment on I have never ceased to marvel at the abundance of food and goods available in this country.

Like many, if not most, of the immigrants who have come here, we settled for a short time at the home of relatives. After we landed at Ellis Island in New York, we spent the first week with my father's brother in Brooklyn. My uncle Pietro wanted us to stay there, but my father, who was a man of his word, had promised his brother Carlo that we were going to Chicago. In addition to my parents, my family consisted of Nancy, an older sister, and James, a younger brother. My father contrived to allot each of us sufficient space on the one bed to give us a relatively restful night. My father joined his brother in a candy factory, and my mother went to work with my aunt in a tailor shop. My sister, then nine years old, functioned for a time as the mother of the house and ministered to our needs in our parents' absence. Our aunt warned us to remain indoors and admonished us not to open the door to strangers. When the representative from the gas company called to read the meter—an entirely unknown contrivance to us, we unwittingly created a neighborhood furor. The man knocked and knocked on the door until finally three neighbors, led by a kindly old lady, came to our door and persuaded us in familiar Italian voices to open the door.

After that it was comforting to know that Mrs. Panico would be there if other strangers intruded. I recall that in those early days we were often apprehensive when we were left alone, listening to sounds totally unfamiliar to us. Intermittently throughout the day, peddlers in horse-drawn wagons hawked their wares in tones which often seemed garbled to us. In the distance a peddler mournfully chanted, "Rags a line" (rags and old iron). The fruit and vegetable peddlers were a familiar sight; they were also common in Sicily. Totally unfamiliar to us were the exciting noises of the horse-drawn fire engines galloping through the streets. But perhaps the most depressing, almost sickening sound we heard was the funeral march played by an Italian band that accompanied the hearses. The trumpet player of this band was Louis Panico, the landlady's son, who shortly after became the leader of his own band. A few years later his very popular orchestra played in nightclubs, and he became known as the "King of the Wabash Blues."

Another street sound we became acquainted with in those early days and which continued right through the Depression was the coal peddler. In those days virtually every home was heated with coal, ordered by the ton. However, some families used up the supply before they had enough money to reorder in quantity. In the interim they would purchase coal from the peddler, usually three bushels for a dollar.

After listening to the sounds of peddlers, fire engines, and funeral marches during the day, we were delighted with the return of our parents. My father always brought home candy, and my mother usually brought home groceries and bakery goods.

After living with my uncle and aunt for six months my parents were able to save a little money, and they rented a flat nearby on Aberdeen and Harrison streets. From this moment on we made regular visits to the 12th Street Department Store (owned by Phillip & Son, but referred to as "Filliposon") to purchase furniture and household goods, all on the monthly installment plan. Unlike in Italy, material desires in America could be gratified instantly, a few dollars down and the balance a few dollars a week or monthly. One of the big purchases, I remember, was the Victor Victrola, where we played records by Caruso and other famous singers. For laughter and hilarity, we played Italian records by "Nofrio," a Sicilian comedian. His anecdotes and stories usually dealt with the everyday problems of living and with the frustrations of an Italian trying to express himself as he struggled to speak English when he tried to use the telephone (there were no dial telephones in those days), to order a meal in a restaurant, or purchase special articles in stores.

The other major diversion was visiting friends and relatives. In addition to my uncle and aunt, who were childless, there were many paesani from Marsala who frequently came to our house with, of course, reciprocal visits. Here the adults conversed at length about their families and experiences in Sicily while drinking wine or eating homemade cakes and pastries and sipping anisette, strega, and other Italian liqueurs. The folktales they narrated, both humorous and serious, were entertaining and instructive. They also had proverbs for every occasion. I have long since forgotten most of them, but somehow a few on money matters stick in my mind. "Sensa soldi non si canta la messa, they would say, meaning the Mass is not said without payment, or the priest will not say the Mass without money.

The conversation at other times was on the somber, mystical side. There were sometimes references to the *malocchio*, the evil eye; if a person had a persistent headache and was restless, it was suspected that someone had given him the evil eye. To deal with the phenomenon there was a method of both prevention and treatment; my mother would go around sewing or tying pieces of red ribbon cloth on our garments, or she would make the sign of the Cross. If a person appeared to be suffering from the *malocchio*, then the treatment consisted of ritual *preghiere*, prayers, which usually some old lady was especially versed in performing. If the old lady began to get tired and started to yawn, this was a sign that the person had actually been afflicted with *malocchio*. After a few minutes, both the old lady and the patient would begin to feel normal and return to their duties as

though nothing had happened. Then there were the "worms." Here again special prayers were said by the old lady, who crossed your forehead or stomach with olive oil. Oftentimes a person so treated was reported to be miraculously cured.

My father was well liked and respected by the paesani. As the oldest son of a large family he was considered a leader, and hence members of the family or relatives asked for his advice or his mediation of family disputes. He was regarded as fair in his judgments, and his character was held to be of unquestioned integrity. He sought to instill these same qualities in our family and often spoke of the importance of honesty and maintaining a good name. His guiding principles for family living were obedience, loyalty, love, respect, and honorable actions at all times.

I recall a lesson he taught me on the importance of respect. When entering the home we children were expected to acknowledge our father by obediently saying, "*Vossia me benedeca*" (give me your blessing); we were to address all of our elders in this manner. After a few years in America, I was beginning to think this was old-fashioned, and one day I refused to say it. Firmly and sternly my father ordered me out the door, telling me to come back when I was prepared to enter like a Christian. Somewhat rebellious, I entered again but stubbornly refused to utter the acceptable words. Again I was whisked out the door. Finally, after I had virtually frozen myself on the outdoor porch, I meekly re-entered and dutifully, but *sotte voce* said, "*Vossia mi benedeca*." My father responded, "*Dio ti benedice*" (God bless you).

This sounds as though my father were religious, but he was not. Like many Sicilians in those days, my parents were only nominal Catholics. However, they adhered to many of the religious rituals, paying devotion to special saints and remembering their birthdays. A story was told that my father once prayed to St. Nicholas for the job he was seeking on his first trip to America a few years before we arrived. One day, after a fruitless search in Detroit, he came home worn out and frozen. He was so mad at St. Nicholas for not answering his prayers that he took the statue of the saint out on the back porch and said, "Now it's your turn to freeze."

While my father was a man of vigor and vitality, my mother was docile, had little initiative, and gradually became virtually dependent. Except for working during the first year of our arrival in Chicago, she was always confined to the house and local neighborhood; she never did learn to speak English. She died at the age of 76.

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With the beginning of the new year, we were told that my sister and I had to go to school. My brother, who was not of school age, was boarded during school hours at the home of a distant relative. Most children from very poor homes, especially from immigrant families, are not ready for school, their first great experience outside the family. They are not emotionally prepared with assurances, explanations and the introductions to some of the elementary tools of learning which children usually receive from middle-class families. Besides this lack, my sister and I were confronted with an even greater barrier in our old-world cultural traits and language. No friendly voice put us at ease. Fear and misery clutched us and remained within us for a long time. I'm not sure whether the bruising effect this had on our personalities has ever really healed.

The huge school buildings, the regimented appearance of things in the school, the tall, rigid-looking teachers who flaunted authority and exuded a pungent odor of powder and perfume. This was a strange, disturbing world. The principal was a tall middle-aged man, well fed, with a serious frown on his face and a stern, glassy look in his large eyes, which seemed out of focus. I thought of him as the dominant ruler of the institution who meted out punishment to transgressors, not as a kind human being whom I could like. I realized all too soon that my Italian lingo and Italian-made garments set me apart from the other children. This feeling of being different and peculiar in the eyes of others further contributed to what sociologist Robert E. Park refers to as "that sickening sense of inferiority." There were constant reminders of this. "Dago, dago, eats nothing but potatoes," the boys would sing, with threatening gestures.

I reacted with some fear and a feeling that to strike back would be futile, so for the time being I retreated and sought a friendly response in a different way. For one thing, I tried to be "good" in the classroom in hopes that I would be rewarded with the approving glances of the teacher. But deep within I had the feeling that this was going to be a rough world, that I was going to be pushed around and dealt with by hostile forces which my child's mind could then little understand. I now believe these new pressures had a profound effect upon my childhood personality.