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¶ BC-APN--Grandfather's Story

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^BC-APN--Grandfather's Story

^AGENCIES AND RADIO OUT From AP Newsfeatures (APN SUNDAY ILLUSTRATIONS:  
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¶ Undated (AP) \_ EDITOR'S NOTE - On the occasion of his 50th wedding anniversary, Domenic Troisi presented to his children and grandchildren his book of memories, the story of his arrival at Ellis Island with hordes of other immigrants in 1907 and his struggle to succeed in a strange land. Here a granddaughter shares this rich slice of her family's history.

By LISA M. HAMM

Associated Press Writer

¶ NEW YORK (AP) - To Domenico Troisi - a 13-year-old Italian boy who had just crossed a vast ocean to escape poverty-stricken Naples - that first view of the Statue of Liberty was dazzling.

¶ A new world bulging with opportunity reached out to my future grandfather as his steamship entered New York Harbor.

¶ In tracing Domenico's first footsteps in America, I found not just the story of one young man's struggle to prosper in a strange land, but a metaphor for the travails of millions of immigrants who have washed onto these shores.

¶ The lad spoke not a word of English and was a blank slate about American ways, but eagerly embraced his new home - even shortening his name to Domenic.

¶ Almost half of all Americans have an ancestor who passed through the Ellis Island immigration station, where Domenic arrived that May with his brothers Dante, 16, and Donato, 9, and their father, Beniamino Troisi.

¶ "The sight of the Statue of Liberty was a joy to every passenger on the liner," Domenic wrote in a memory book he and his wife, Bernardine, presented to their descendants on the couple's 50th wedding anniversary.

¶ Ellis Island handled the largest tide of incoming humanity in the nation's history between 1892 and 1924. About 5,000 people a day poured in during 1907, the peak year, Philip Cowen, an inspector at the immigration station, said in "Memories of an American Jew."

¶ My grandfather arrived on May 2, 1907 on the steamship Bulgaria of the Hamburg-American line. Fifteen steamers came into port that day carrying a staggering 21,755 passengers, Cowen said.

¶ The Bulgaria had left the Bay of Naples on April 15.

¶ "I spent the evening on the top deck to bid my birthplace goodbye," Domenic wrote later. His mother had died the year before after a long, costly illness, and father Beniamino had been forced to move the family into the back of his tailor shop in Naples.

¶ At the urging of a brother-in-law who was enjoying success as a painter in New York, Beniamino decided to start a new life in America.

¶ The Troisi father and sons spent the 17-day voyage to America crammed with about 3,000 other laborers, peasants, blacksmiths and other families in the third-class, or steerage, section of the overflowing steamer.

¶ "We slept on bunks in the lower deck close to the boiler rooms and ate out of mess kits wherever we could find a place to sit," Domenic recalled.

¶ Relegated to community bunkrooms in the bowels of the ship, steerage passengers found sanitary facilities almost nonexistent. The overpowering stench and the constant rocking of the boat made most seasick, so they crowded onto the deck until bedtime.

¶ When the Bulgaria finally entered New York Harbor, it dropped off first- class and second-class passengers at a receiving pier dubbed "Quarantine," and exhausted and filthy steerage passengers scrambled with their few possessions onto barges to Ellis Island.

¶ There, they waited nervously in long lines to undergo medical inspections and legal interrogations and prove their prospects for employment.

¶ Because Beniamino at 57 was considered too old to earn a living and the boys too young, the Troisis were held for three days until Donato Buongiorno, Beniamino's brother-in-law, came to sign bonds assuming financial responsibility for them.

¶ Uncle Donato, a reasonably successful artist and art dealer, found the family a place next door to his own in a brick tenement at 306 East 12th Street, and opened his family's kitchen and living area to them so they'd have room to sleep in their small apartment.

¶ The neighborhood, known as the Lower East Side, was a melange of nationalities: mostly Slavs and East European Jews with a healthy dose of Russians and Italians. A nearby stretch of 2nd Avenue known as Jewish Rialto featured theaters showing immigrant-based melodramas and musical comedies. Ethnic restaurants dotted the street; you could eat Russian borscht pastry, Polish cabbage, Hungarian-Jewish chicken soup or pasta.

¶ Children hung out on the fire escapes that crawled up the dingy buildings like grasping snakes. Inside, families scraped to make ends meet. Many tenements had community bathrooms in the hallways; children bathed in basins in the kitchen; ventilation was poor. Parents worked from sunup until well past sundown, toiling behind pushcarts filled with produce, or bent over in sweatshops sewing ready-to-wear clothing for a pittance.

¶ Domenic's father, Beniamino, took a tailoring job and 16-year-old Donato went to work as a presser in a men's clothing factory.

¶ Meanwhile, Domenic and Dante started school, where the process of turning immigrant children into Americans began.

¶ "My sixth grade teacher, a Miss Anastasia of Italian extraction, took a liking to me and admonished me to 'think American' so I could speak the language better," Domenic wrote. "I used to think in Italian and translate every sentence, most of the times saying it backward - like 'the day beautiful' instead of 'beautiful day.' I carried the experiment home and the three of us boys started talking English to each other in a sort of mixed manner.

¶ "But it was a start in the right direction to learn the new ways."

¶ Beniamino, like many immigrant parents, had more trouble adjusting, and the apartment was the first casualty. "It was more than we could afford on the meager wages my father could earn by his skill as a tailor in a strange land where the demands were more exacting," Domenic remembered.

¶ So the Troisis moved into a smaller, cheaper place nearby. After school Domenic ran the household and cooked dinner, usually a frugal Italian meal such as bean soup or spaghetti with tomato sauce. Meat was a rarity.

¶ When Beniamino got a new job uptown, the family moved to a ground-floor apartment in a tenement at 108th Street and First Avenue in Harlem's Little Italy.

¶ Italian Harlem was a colorful enclave of mostly southern Italians living in slum conditions similar to those on the Lower East Side. To cope, neighbors derived strength from strong family ties, lively music and the passionate celebration of religious holidays.

¶ Sidewalks along First Avenue mirrored an old country village, with vendors hawking olive oil, pasta, fresh fish, Italian bread and produce. Fluttering clotheslines stretched across back alleys from tenement windows.

¶ Domenic, in his midteens, quit school and started working, sewing sleeve linings in his father's shop.

¶ With his youngest son still in school, Beniamino was soon forced to leave his job and start making custom clothes at home.

¶ "I helped him until late at night and Sundays," Domenic said, thus joining the overflowing ranks of immigrant adults and children doing sweatshop work, laboring at home until late at night for just a few dollars a week.

¶ The enterprising Domenic landed a succession of more advanced jobs, each a different type of sweatshop with marginally better pay.

¶ "This finally took me to the job of sewing front edge tape - one of the most skilled tasks in the industry," he wrote. He described his typical day: "The shop was downtown in Chatham Square, hours 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., a half-hour for lunch, 5 1/2 days, 60 hours per week. Routine: up at 5:30, pack lunch in paper bag, make the 6:15 elevated express train to Chatham Square, catch the 6:05 uptown express to return home before 7, eat supper and walk to school 10 blocks away to study English from 8 to 10 p.m. five days a week."

¶ Domenic never complained. Instead he took pride in his perfect attendance at English class.

¶ In 1913, the men's clothing industry went on strike for two months. Photographs from the period show solemn men in dark suits and bowler hats holding signs in various languages demanding better wages.

¶ Domenic was elected shop chairman, but after a week spent loafing in a downtown loft rented by the United Garment Workers of America, he invested \$100 in a six-week course on garment designing.

¶ His performance at the top of the class earned him an offer to design clothing for Interstate Woolen Mills in Jamestown, N.Y., for \$35 a week.

¶ "For me that was \$10 more per week than the new union scale just settled by the strike," Domenic wrote. He accepted and moved, but later returned, "lonesome for the big town," and worked a number of jobs while studying new designing methods in the New York Public Library Technical Room.

¶ When he landed a position running a uniform factory in Williamsport, Pa., Domenic left New York for good.

¶ Scores of nervous, hopeful immigrants have arrived on these shores, holding dearly to their traditions but searching for a life better than the poverty or persecution they left behind. Their influence on the character of New York City is reflected in the evolution of Domenic's neighborhoods.

¶ The Lower East Side is now the East Village, an extension of bohemian Greenwich Village to the west.

¶ Still the home of many Polish and Ukrainian immigrants as well as some Italians and Jews, the East Village also hosts university students, artists, musicians - and, on some major avenues and strategic corners, drug dealers and prostitutes.

¶ One of New York's oldest Italian restaurants, John's, sits next door to 306 East 12th Street, my grandfather's first New York address, but his tenement has been replaced by a simple brick apartment building. Across the street, a row of original tenements stands, faded but glorious with intricate detail work fringing the windows and roofs.

¶ Up north, one of my cousins teaches in a public school a dozen blocks from our grandfather's Italian Harlem home.

¶ Now known as Spanish Harlem, the poverty-stricken tenement area houses mostly Hispanics and some blacks. Most Italians moved to the suburbs or the Bronx over the years as living conditions deteriorated, and newer immigrants moved in, particularly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Signs in grocery store windows advertise "rice" and "arroz" in English and Spanish.

¶ The only Italians left are elderly people reluctant to move.

¶ Although a couple of new public housing developments were built in the 1960s at 108th Street and First Avenue, a boarded-up tenement on the corner beside a Hispanic deli and a vacant lot full of festering garbage betray the neighborhood's stagnation.

¶ People still clutch dearly to their home-country traditions, binding them together but isolating them from the rest of society.

¶ Domenic Troisi retained his Italian Catholic values after he moved to Williamsport, but continued striving to excel in American society. At age 25 he opened his own men's tailoring store. He enlisted in the Army during World War I, joined civic organizations, and courted Bernardine Beiter, an American with no Italian blood.

¶ Domenic even became a U.S. citizen before the wedding so that "Bernardine did not have to marry a foreigner."

¶ He spoke only English at home, and didn't return to his birthplace to visit until his children were grown.

¶ When he died at 79, he was patriarch of 10 children and more than 40 grandchildren. By leaving behind his book of memories, he gave his family a precious gift - he preserved our common heritage, but taught us to embrace the world.

¶ As they say in Italy, grazie, Nonno.

¶ End Adv Sunday Feb. 7

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