

# **Emigration Chapter**

## **Part 1: In search of a Sicilian grandmother & a Russian cat**

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Trapped in crunched, creeping traffic, the bus from downtown Catania climbed steadily through the scruffy sprawl of typical suburban Italy. I stared with drowsy eyes out the window; storefronts crowded into the street, elbowing for attention, their faded and peeling pastel colors like pale shadows of the fruit stacked in boxes along the curb. Behind rose clustered tower block apartment buildings splotchy with age. The street ascended steeply up Etna, The Mountain, the volcano, Mongibella, the Mother of Sicily, the killer. Then, as we left Nicolosi, cross streets became less frequent and storefronts more scattered, and soon we were in countryside. The street had become a road; it looped back and forth and continued to climb. The air coming in the window cooled and trees became greener; the hard and dry toughened scrub of lowland Sicily giving way to gnarled pines and firs penned within walled estates. We circled a roundabout and the land became a black, choppy, rocky sea. We were now traveling laterally across the slope, the land rising drunkenly from left to right on frothy, black folds on which bobbed porous boulders. Left and right, the land had been ploughed by Vulcan into a desolation of huge chunky black waves and furrows. Tuffs of grass here and there touched the landscape with a green caution of life.

Ahead, Belpasso stretched up the dark slope, a linear highlight of terracotta roofs over a streak of ochre brickwork. A few stubby fingers of steeples poked above the low roofs. Once called “Malpasso”, originally from “mali” for “apple”, meaning “Apple-tree route”, it was so infested with brigands that the popular take on it was “ma-le” as in “bad”, a bad way to pass. In 1669, God took note of the brigands and perhaps also the name and rendered a Sodom and Gamorrah judgment on the place, for a great lava flow literally erased Belpasso, and at the same time one-third of Catania. Malpasso was rebuilt some distance away, on the land

of Baron Moncada and called “Fenice Moncada”. Twenty-four years later, the great 1693 earthquake that leveled all of south-eastern Sicily flattened the place again. The town was again relocated and again rebuilt, this time a kilometer to the west; Etna Sicilians would no more think of abandoning their marriage with their mountain than they would leave a spouse just because of a few violent arguments. The newest town—this now being the Age of Enlightenment—was laid out in strict eighteenth-century grid, stretched lengthwise down the mountain. The name “Malpasso” was reinstated, but the new mayor, sensitive to the alternative interpretation, changed it to “Belpasso”, meaning "beautiful way to go." God has been appeased so far.

The patron saints of Belpasso are Maria, the Madonna, and St. Lucia of Siracusa. In the second rebuilding, the city built a church called “Santa Maria della Guardia” (Saint Mary the Guardian) in the upper town. The church backs up against the volcano, standing between the summit and the town. Etna would have to deal with Mary first before destroying the lives of her people again. Cultivating the favor of a mother in Sicily always is wise: so far there has been no trouble; the Madonna has intimidated the volcano. No one seems to think it at all inconsistent that Etna’s actions are variously (or simultaneously) be credited by the same people as the justified rage of a Christian god about his wayward flock or as the demonic rage of satanic forces from which we need God’s protection (or his Mom’s).

In any case, under Maria guardianship, there have been a malaria plague and a devastating earthquake, but it is understood here that preventing these calamities is not in Maria Guardia’s job description.

Maria Guardia was also my grandmother’s name. Many a girl born in the precinct of the Church of Maria Guardia took the patroness’ name. In April 23, 1886 was born Maria Guardia Chisari, who departed this life on December 22, 1972, when I was there in the room with her still ignorant of all that I needed her to teach me.

In old family photos, I am standing there in stumpy little legs reaching up to hold

Grandma's hand. Until I left for university I was never without her. She spoke to me of many things, but she never spoke of Etna. This is remarkable. She grew to adulthood on this mountain and it seems to me impossible for her to have grown up on a volcano and it not be at the core of her being. For those living on her, the mountain is the ever-present creator and destroyer, every day a looming presence. How could one not be shaped by it? Her very name evoked Etna; yet, Grandma, Maria Guardia, never uttered the word "Etna" in my hearing; it was as if someone grew up on a tiny island, moved to Kansas as an adult, and never spoke of the sea. And though I lived with her from babyhood through my teenage years, I do not recall asking her about her past. Now, living in Sicily, I was three decades past being a self-absorbed teenager, yet still I had hesitated to visit the town of my ancestry, although it was only a few hours away from where I lived in Siracusa. Since grandma never waxed poetic about her hometown, told no stories of her childhood to tie my emotions to the place, I had to want to go out of self-generated yearning for deeper connection of my own story into Sicily's. And that feeling was not yet strong enough to get me off my rear end and go there. I seemed to need an excuse, some other justification for the trip. My excuse was an expedition to buy a Russian cat.

This is very odd, as I don't even like cats. but I was a man who reached middle-age unmarried and I wanted a companion, and one cannot converse with a pet turtle without feeling a fool.

Always the scholar, I had researched breeds and decided on a Russian Blue, a breed noted for being handsome, quiet, independent, and resistant to affection. Like me. I found the only confessed breeder of Russian Blues in Sicily in San Giovanni Gaetano, a suburban extension of Catania sprawling up the slopes of Etna. As San Giovanni Gaetano was reasonably close to my grandmother's hometown of Belpasso, I no longer could put off the genealogical visit. I arranged with the cat lady that I would drop by her cattery in late afternoon, and in the morning I caught a bus to Belpasso.

And here I was in Grandma's hometown. Belpasso had a population of about 9,000 when my grandmother lived there (1880s 90s); it is about double that now. My great grandfather, Gaetano Chisari left here New York City probably in 1901 with his trumpet under his arm. In New York he became a bandleader, which tells me that probably he had been a professional musician in Belpasso, either as trumpet player or more likely the bandleader. Municipal bands in Sicily towns remain delightful organizations. During any and all festivals, the band can be counted on to shuffle along in casual disarray, wearing different configurations of a military-style uniform, complete with epaulets, shirttails out, hats tilted back on their heads, instruments slung over their shoulders like shotguns, glittering under street lamps. Whatever the festival, they play Austria-Hungarian marches, transcribed Italian songs, and Broadway tunes. They give musical backdrop to events and people pay them affectionate disregard. But back before iPods, Netflix, TVs, radios, and phonographs, I can only imagine the affection that nineteenth-century Belpasso might have held for its municipal band and its bandleader. Gaetano had the confidence to go to New York with the expectation that he would succeed in music and was good enough to have, in fact, succeeded.

Typical of Sicilians, he hired other Sicilians—probably both with and without papers—including a young bass viol & tuba player from Riposto, a fishing village on the east slopes of Etna not far from Belpasso, called Domenico Antonio Scalia.

Now I was back here. Etna as usual had been raining down fine black ash. The air seemed gritty; housewives and shopkeepers swept black ash from the sidewalks. These Etna towns seem to emerge from the mountain flanks like basalt mushroom colonies and huddle close to the slope in a mood of somber sobriety. The main street ran steeply uphill, squeezing between low houses that looked like black scouring-pads aligned up and down the slope. The town may be no older than the Age of the Baroque but everything seemed out of time; the façades were made of Etna and blended into the slope, making everything seemed the Age of Etna. The Mother Church tried to present an bright, whitewashed Baroque façade, but it had black basalt columns on a black basalt foundation, facing a black basalt sidewalk,

against a street of black basalt paving stones. A black fortress-like prison (or perhaps a prison-like fortress, or a monastery) loomed over the black and white Mother Church like unrepentant sin. It seemed a mass of solidified lava, datable to the Age of Hobbits.

During our centuries of Spanish rule, people who had money built for show; but since Italian unification, money in Sicily stays quiet, out of sight. Display wealth and you attract unwelcome attention from the government, the Mafia, and envious neighbors. House interiors often are as modern as in any other technology-addicted country, but the streets remain corridors of the same brooding, pock-marked house fronts and possibly some of the same shop fronts that my grandmother knew as a girl, one-and-a-quarter centuries ago. Still, as I walked up the main street, the black mood that weighed on me gradually lifted and I could see the town was well-kept, unhurried, with trees along the streets and baskets of flowers happy with the cool mountain air, a pleasant place, if you like black.

Gaetano Chisari and his dance band in New York were doing well enough, it seems, at least well enough for him not to hurry back to Sicily. But Great-grandfather had left a sizeable family behind. Back in Belpasso, Maria Spampinato Chisari and her five children waited and waited for him. We do not know if Gaetano was writing home, sending money, or what. Gaetano reported to Ellis Island officials in 1912 that he had previously entered the US in 1901 (his first visit) and 1906. If it is true that Gaetano returned to Sicily and re-embarked for New York in 1906, then perhaps it had been all agreed that Maria Spampinato Chisari would follow a year or two later to visit. If there was no such agreement, then perhaps, after his second departure, Maria Spampinato Chisari decided he could not be trusted and a year or two later went to fetch him. In either case, proper women did not travel alone, so she took her eldest daughter, Maria Guardia Chisari with her. There was nothing easy, safe, or pleasant about trans-Atlantic steamship travel in steerage accommodations at the turn of the twentieth century, and both Maria Chisaris certainly were tough and determined women.

As I wandered about Belpasso, the family legacy of getting out of there was growing on me. I still had no sense that this town was mine and did not want to force my imagination to conjure ghosts. I had seen the town of my ancestry and now was ready to leave; I had a Russian cat to buy after all.

In the bar across from the Mother Church, they said surely the bus to San Giovanni Galermo was due at any moment. I must wait under the sign three streets that way and two more up the hill. And so I went there and sat on a narrow step looking up a narrow street that rose to the upper town. Time crept and no bus came.

All was quiet now, early afternoon in southern Italy the time for *pausa* (siesta), which involves eating a massive lunch at home in the raucous embrace of family, then sleeping it off. Only pitiful unfortunates without family, clueless tourists, and hungry cats are about on the streets. The cats are not clueless, for they are on the prowl for leftover pasta from lunch put out for them by older women with no bambini still at home to feed. I, on the other hand, had no prospects for lunch.

The afternoon lazed on. Once a city truck stopped; two men placed a barrier on the cross street where I waited, then drove off. Sleepy, I wondered idly, dully, why should they block off the street if a bus was due at any moment? After another hour, in growing doubt of rescue, I wandered toward the small traffic circle at town center, and immediately a bus came around the corner from where I had been sitting. I sprinted after it. The driver stopped long enough to say that I didn't want him, but just wait at this other stop and surely the bus to S. Giovanni Galermo would come at any moment. He pointed up a different street, swerved around the barrier and roared off.

So I sat there, as the *pausa* passed. I thought about Grandma. Confirming the year Maria Spampinato Chisari and her eldest daughter, Maria Guardia Chisari (Grandma) sailed has proven impossible. At the Ellis Island museum, in 2003, I found three different entries for Maria Chisari, none of which work. Also of little help is a 1915 NYC census. Grandma gave the census taker her correct age but also reports herself as having been in the US for fifteen

years. Since that would mean that she arrived at age twelve, this is obviously a lie; perhaps for tactical reasons. I do not know if these census figures were arrived at by documentation presented to an immigration official, or if some census volunteer simply wrote down what they told him. Perhaps someone in the Sicilian community doctored the books. My best guess, lacking any documentary evidence, is that she and her mother came over around 1907-08.

I knew only the bare bones of that story as I sat there that day in 2001, now at a different stop awaiting a different bus. I noted with disquiet that there was a barrier on cross street here as well. Some forty minutes went by and there was the sound of hooves. I looked up and a young man with a shaved head was leading a horse, a long-legged graceful bay. They skittered, slipping on the black basalt pavement, then clopped down the street. Another city truck arrived and two fellows moved the barrier the other way, opening the street where I had just been told the bus was not coming and blocking the street where my now updated information assured me the bus would surely come. Occasional cars came along, easing (of course) onto the sidewalk to get around the barrier. I waited, the dim thought growing that there would be no bus. But lacking any better ideas, I just sat.

In New York City, a century ago—which around here is yesterday—as Maria Spampinato and Gaetano were negotiating the terms of his return to Sicily, their eldest daughter, Maria Guardia, met Domenico Scalia, her father's tuba and string bass player. As scripted in a sentimental Italian film, Maria Guardia Chisari and Domenico Antonio Scalia fell in love. Knowing her, she probably also fell in love with New York and freedom. Her mother may well have disapproved of her daughter marrying a musician (as she herself had, at some cost), since we know the young couple eloped. (Then again, no one had any money so it may have been a financial decision.) The Chisari parents, Maria Spampinato and Gaetano, returned to Sicily and their other four children, but their eldest daughter and her new husband stayed behind. Domenico and Maria were married at St. Patrick's Church near the Bowery, on the 4th of July, 1909. They rented an apartment in a tenement at 7 Rivington Street. It is still

there, though much renovated, one of the few original tenement buildings remaining.

I was jostled from my thoughts by the appearance, from the cross street, of two men in dark suits who might have been taken for Mafiosi in New York, but here the Mafia dresses down. They were followed by a tiny fellow in bright blue and white livery and cap, stirrup in hand, followed by skipping boys. The odd procession turned the corner toward town center and vanished. Another twenty minutes, then a clapping of hooves and up the street came a fellow leading a grey horse with white stockings, the horse in high spirits, prancing side steps left and right. They disappeared into an alley and again all was quiet.

Hopes of getting home that evening at all, much less with a cat, declined with the declining afternoon. Getting to S. Giovanni Galermo increasingly seemed unlikely. To get to Siracusa, I would have to change busses in Catania, catching the late bus to Siracusa. But previous experience (which cannot be trusted here) had taught me that there was no late bus from Catania to Siracusa. I knew that one knows many things in Sicily which are not true, but assuming the worst is always wise here, and I had spent many a night in unplanned dark places due to sketchy Sicilian public transportation. Roused from my listlessness by the thought that I would spend the night sleeping on a black bench in a black park, I returned to the central square.

The town began to wake from *pausa*. A travel agency was just reopening and I spoke with a kindly woman, whose hyperactive little daughter plucked endlessly at my clothes. I explained that I had to go to S. Giovanni Galermo to get a Russian cat. From my mangled Italian she understood *S. Giovanni Galermo* and *cat*. She did not see the connection between these two things. She did explain, if I understood her correctly, that there was a “corso di cavallo” (horse race) today, so the streets were blocked off, bus services were cancelled, and besides, the buses were not running in any case because Sicily was shut down for lack of petrol.

I pressed her, and she threw up her hands at the hopelessness of my case, repeating that no buses meant no buses. Just then, a bus roared past. I sprinted up the street, but would



have needed a horse to catch it. I tried a new strategy; instead of waiting in the upper town, I waited in the lower town. After another hour or so, I realized that I had no ticket. Figuring that I can't ride a non-existent bus with a non-existent ticket, I went into the local tobacconist, where bus tickets are sold. The instant I asked about a ticket, the gods delivered and a bus roared past. I chased it hopelessly for two blocks. I returned to the tobacconist to buy the ticket; sorry, he said, out of tickets. I imagined much guffawing on Mt. Olympus.

I sat on a stoop at the main lower town crossroads. Maybe, I thought, I should hijack a horse. My great-grandfather escaped this place for New York; I was beginning to understand why, but I could not figure out how. He must have borrowed or stolen a horse to get to the port, or he'd still be on this very stoop, waiting, playing mournful tunes on his trumpet, with a very long beard. A languor settled on me, time had slowed, then stopped. I was in the grip of Sicily Time. I would have thrown away my watch, except that Sicily Time and I already were old friends, and I given up wearing a watch long before. At some point, as I was measuring the length of my beard, a bus pulled up in front of me and opened its doors. Ticketless, I boarded, and not wanting to look this gift horse in the mouth, I did not ask where it was going. Maybe that was what happened to great-grandfather: hoping to get to San Giovanni Galermo, tired of waiting, he caught the wrong horse and ended up in Manhattan. Manhattan would have been fine with me.

With police car escort through the twisting lanes of upper town to allow us through the barriers set for the horse race, we worked our way up and out of Belpasso. No one asked me for the ticket I did not have. We circled along Etna's south slope and began the long downhill road toward Catania. This was not the right bus, but it got me out of Belpasso. Traffic began to thicken and shops and signs pressed against the street as we entered the town of Gravina di Catania. The driver pointed toward the road to S. Giovanni Galermo and I got off. I walked through the residential streets as twilight set in, then out of town to where the road again picked its way gingerly through the volcanic rubble. A bus grumbled up from behind. Waving it down, I climbed aboard. Oops, a man in blue jacket asked for

the ticket. After stalling for the bus to get fully underway, fumbling through my pockets, I pulled out some coins and feigned ignorance. Can I buy a ticket on the bus? I asked, though I knew better. With that kind of resigned courtesy to clueless tourists that is a grace of this country, he shrugged and we drove on. Feeling guilty, I got off at the earliest opportunity and kept walking. The sky darkened, as the day slid into the gloomy gloaming.

When I had called that morning, the cat woman said that her husband would meet me at the “Etna Bar” in San Giovanni Galermo, no other address, as if everyone in eastern Sicily would know this one bar in this obscure town beyond the northern tatters of Catania. No problem. After descending the length of shop-worn, ugly S. Giovanni, I suddenly found myself standing in front of this sprawling bar / video game palace on a raucous interchange. I was to wait for some fellow in a blue Macintosh (as I thought she described him). And he was coming to look for a fellow in a red business suit (so I apparently had described myself, having mistaken the Italian word for “sweater”). Thirty minutes later a guy in a grey tracksuit walked in, and for several minutes we stared past each other before connecting. In his car, we circled the roundabout, went down one block, (yes, one block) and parked in front of their home.

I had failed to remember that Etna was the home of the Cyclops, but I beginning to understand the troubles Odysseus had with local hospitality. The husband and I entered a small grey door on a small grey street, into a cavernous kitchen filled with a large pink-faced woman with one-eye in the middle of her forehead, pointed teeth, and red hair. She rolled a huge boulder in front of the door, blocking all escape, and pointed me to a broken chair next to a cracked Formica table. I sat obediently, at the edge of the chair. She bellowed questions. What was my name? “Signor Nobody”, I should have said. Out of the corner of my eye, I became aware of fleeting dark shadows moving under the tables and china cabinet. Soon she was trundling after them on her knees, grabbing at them, knocking over a chair. She grabbed two little ones and swallowed them whole. Then she pulled out two adults,

lithe, eagle-faced, silver-sheen Blues, buried them into her bosom with one arm, and spread the table with pages of pedigree.

The whole negotiation almost collapsed over the concept of “neutered” which evoked such vigorous gestures of snipping and chopping I thought she was describing cat stew. Miscomprehensions crowded upon each other, as neurotic cats raced about like shadows in candlelight. I rose to make my escape, convinced that no animal could survive this place with sanity intact. Suddenly, she rushed to the back and returned with a box and five balls of grey-blue fluff. OK, I’ll take that one there, I said, that little female, I pointed, when it is weaned; just don’t eat it first. And I fled.

The husband drove me up and down streets in the dark as I tried to explain which bus I needed. But my Italian was now so tangled I gave up, and just thanked him, and got out. Now I was standing on a honking, exhaust-choked street, a chaos of crowded headlights—waiting again for a bus I did not think existed. I left the bus stop and began to walk the twenty kilometers back to Catania, and would have done so, but perhaps Maria Guardia took pity on me. I looked once over my shoulder, and there silhouetted above the line of blinding car headlights was the faint outline of a bus. I sprinted back up the street to the bus stop, waving like mad, and jumped aboard, again ticketless and clueless as to where it was going. I bailed out in mid Catania and walked to the bus station along the sea front. At that moment, across the lot, an AST bus reading “Siracusa” was pulling out. So I chased it down and hammered on the door. And yes, you can buy tickets on board. Odysseus had slept when the Phaeacians carried him at last home to Ithaca, and I know why. I slept the hour it took the bus to get me home.