

Italia 150 Essay Contest

Title: What does it mean to be Italian American?

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What does it mean to be Italian American? In 1861, after years of revolution, Italy was finally united. The Risorgimento was our great unifier, and yet, as descendants of Italy, we sometimes forget this recent history. Sadly, I was guilty of this. I was someone who needed such a reminder, a reminder that our descendants lived through a hard fought battle of survival that ultimately united Italy. This reminder came to me unexpectedly in the form of a gallery visit displaying photographs of sulfur miners in Sicily. These photos bore little resemblance to the family photos to which I was accustomed: my great-grandmother as a little girl with violin in hand, or the sepia portraits of family members who came to America through Ellis Island. Instead, these photos were a testament to the brutality and the hard work these people endured. The men in these photos wore their exhaustion on their faces. The photographs illustrated their determination to work through the 140 degree heat in the mines, where the air was sparse, malaria was prevalent, and clothing would instantaneously combust in the sulfur dust. These men worked naked to protect themselves from such incineration. These proud men were our ancestors.

Although the people in these photos had no names, they were all heroes to be celebrated and remembered. The photographs of these men told one story, but every region of Italy had its own story of sacrifice and survival. Yet it was these very same people who forged a unity in 1861, who understood what it meant to join as a country, to be Italian, and who also came to the United States to share this history and culture.

My pride of being of Italian descent was now ignited. As an Italian American, I chose to learn of Italy's rich history. I chose to learn more about the unification, whether it be by reading Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, whose 19th century theme was veiled in a 17th century setting, or

learning the hidden meaning of “Viva VERDI” as well as Verdi’s *Nabucco* chorus, paralleling the people of Italy under Austrian rule to the freeing of the Hebrew slaves of centuries past. I yearned for more history and went further back to the richness that Italy had to offer. Every generation, every century revealed its own truth and beauty about the Italian people and culture.

I worked backwards, studying the engineering genius of Brunelleschi’s dome in Florence, the Doges of Venice, and the great works of Michelangelo and Da Vinci. I celebrated Galileo’s life, where he turned away from the Church to disprove Ptolemy and embraced the heliocentric theory of our Earth’s revolution. Cristoforo Colombo and Marco Polo were more pieces of the rich tapestry we call our Italian heritage. I went back further still, back to the magnificence of Rome itself. I was proud to be of this Italian spirit and to share it with my fellow Americans.

My own journey is a personal one, one that is only beginning. In this fabric I call “Italian American”, I look to see where I fit in. I turn to the familiar, my family, for further clues. At family gatherings, I hunger for the stories of my ancestors who, as children, played on the fallen rubble ruins of ancient Rome or of my current Italian relatives who are *professori* in Florence. These family gatherings are the intimate stages for which Italy’s history and culture is set. The food, the wine, and the stories are once again part of this stage. Stories are told and ideas are passionately debated. Here is where I learn to celebrate life itself.

This is what it means to be an Italian American. It means respect for the richness of the majesties of the past, the celebration of today, and the passion for the future. My thirst for Italy continues to grow, as I look to further my studies in both the Italian language and its culture. To quote Dante’s *Inferno Canto XXVI*,

“*Considerate la vostra semenza:*

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,

ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

Roughly translated: “Consider well the seed that gave you birth: you were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of worth and knowledge.”

I hope to one day be worthy of both the seed of Italy and its knowledge. I did not chose to be Italian American, it was a path chosen for me. Yet, if I were to choose my path, I would proudly choose no other.