
Letters From *Italy*

- to family and friends -

August 13, 2009

In Search of Adventure



La Scala - Isello style

Isello, Sicilia

Poste d'Italia – giovedì 13 agosto 2009

On the Street

Today we entered the warren of streets that make up Isnello. We began on the main thoroughfare – big enough for one full-sized horse-drawn wagon or several Vespas passing simultaneously in different directions. The street's name is *Corso Vittorio Emanuele II*, and every Italian community has a street – usually a main thoroughfare – by this name. Ann and I lived on *Vittorio Emanuele* two summers ago in *Pescara*.



If you think I'm kidding about the wagon, look closely at the pattern of stone tiles set between the cobblestones – just wide enough for steel-covered wooden wheels. No asphalt here. This street will last a hundred years without repairs. This is a relatively new street; all the others in town are several hundred years old – or older. And all are of cobblestone.

A lot of shops are tucked into the buildings lining the main street. But we weren't looking for shops; we were shopping for people. The biggest adventure of the moment was dodging cars and scooters.

So we exited the main thoroughfare and began our journey into the ever narrowing side streets. There is no attempt at symmetry or order between and among these streets. I think the pattern reflects the shortest distance between two locations of interest that existed hundreds of years ago. The homes are packed together like sardines in a can. The word *intimate* was conceived here. Several

people, not necessarily related, could easily have slept in the same bed while remaining in different houses.

The streets change names at every intersection – and between intersections: the same street having two names, which probably settled an ancient argument about property lines. At one end, a street may be called *Via San Michele*, and at the other *Via Santa Maria*. Maps are useless. The Garmin only gives hints, because most of the time it can't even get a fix.



La chiacchierone *The chatterbox*

Today, Salvatrice was sitting at her double-door window seat as Ann and I approached. I wasn't sure we'd be able to find her again (see box below), but we did. I walked up to the window and asked "*Permesso?*" to take her picture, but she politely refused. Then Ann struck up a conversation with her that covered the local gossip and many facts about Isnello over her lifetime. I told her that she was a living history book and she laughed. Ann described her own familial relationships in the town, and Salvatrice was able to provide additional commentary. By now she was smiling, relaxed and talking a mile a second (Italians need a faster metaphor). I proposed a picture of her and Ann together and this time she acquiesced. The really amazing thing was how bright and articulate she was, and how up-to-date her knowledge of the goings-on in town were. She is not atypical of the people we meet in Isnello. And she sits in the same spot for hours every day, just watching.

I can tell you that Salvatrice blew away my expectations of the townspeople entirely. My view of elderly mountain folk had been shaped by reading Carlo Levi's *Christ stopped at Eboli*. There the peasant folk were just that. Levi's portrayal is both one of admiration – for their tenacity to survive – and disdain – for their seeming unwillingness to escape their meager existence. Even those who managed to leave often returned. Being from Rome and very cosmopolitan himself, as well as being exiled to Calabria by Mussolini's government during WWII, he found himself making the best of what were very difficult living conditions for him. So he spent much of the time studying their habits. He befriended many of them; was very popular among them – especially because of his skill as a doctor, and his accurate portrayal of them in his artwork. Because of his openness – and their disdain for Mussolini – he managed to earn their trust and thus was able to write a very insightful description of their culture. But unlike many of the region's escapees, notwithstanding a solemn promise, when *he* escaped from exile, he never did return.

When you approach Isnello, it is only by narrow, winding roads that switchback constantly up the mountains, and whose views become drier and more desolate as you ascend - exactly the description of Calabria you find in Levi's book. By the time I reach the town, I am mentally prepared to meet these same people. But this is not the



case, and it is a hard preconception to shake. I must update my reading and my expectations.

When we arrived here on Tuesday, there were no parking places in the vicinity of the *pensione*. Some people manage to park their cars within sight of their homes, but remember, their families have lived here for generations. Parking places are more valuable than the vehicles that occupy them. I was forced out of town, so to speak. We had two medium-sized suitcases, plus our carry-ons, and a backpack loaded with electronic gear. When we reached the *pensione*, Ann took leave of me to examine our room; I needed help to find a place to park. An elderly gentleman happened to be sitting peacefully on the stoop opposite the entrance to the *pensione*. *Suor Severina* – our principal hostess – barked a command and immediately pressed the old boy into service. He jumped quickly into the passenger side of the car with the same look I remembered seeing on the faces of my sixth-grade classmates when Sister Maria would tell them to get a move on – or else.

He guided me gingerly up *Vittorio Emanuele* and beyond until we came to an open area. We parked in a lot covered with crushed rock of volcanic origin, located just across the street from a building occupied by the infamous *Carabiniere* – at least the car

wouldn't be broken into in broad daylight, still, everything had to go, none of which was designed for rolling over cobblestones or down flights of concrete steps. We were a half mile and about 500 vertical feet from the *pensione*. "Fortunately" – I thought – "it was mostly downhill."

My guide then led me back to the *pensione* by a different route that defied the laws of physiography by including some sizable climbs. I could only manage one suitcase and a miscellaneous bag at a time – quick calculation: *three round trips*. He was in his 80's or 90's (maybe more) and made no offer to assist. I didn't blame him (but cursed him quietly under what little breath I could spare). Down and up we went as the way became steeper and narrower. I never looked back. Mistake. Always look back. You may want to remember the route. Three things stuck in my mind: the path getting fairly narrow, my walking up a set of concrete steps, and an elderly woman sitting and looking out of the upper frame of a double door. Nice picture; interesting woman; I thought, as she glared at me when I passed by for the third time. I was bound and determined to find her again on a day when I could hopefully get a picture.

We continued on. The side streets became narrower, so much so that archways were common connectors from one side of the street to the other. It didn't matter which way we went. Every street and house was different and yet they were all the same. We were truly in a maze of human dwellings.

I think the doors are the most distinguishing characteristic of a household. Almost without exception, each door is made of wood, with the handiwork in bas relief. Take a look at Salvatrice's door – freshly varnished, double, with shutters located in the top half of each – and each with a sill wide enough to comfortably rest an elbow. Without a front yard, or noticeable difference in size of the dwellings, the door is the way one establishes status in one's neighborhood. This is a household of means.

Isnello is either all up or all down. If you miss your mark on the way down, you have to struggle back up to reach your destination. Because of the downward-sloping valley between two mountains into which Isnello is built, there are no flat spots. The roads pitch or yaw. A sailor would be very comfortable on the deck of this town.

We headed down because we had started at the top. When is the last time you walked in a strange part of a town without fear? And yet we really had none (well, Ann



didn't want to get lost). With neither a reliable map, nor an eTrex or Nüvi to guide us, we rambled on. If lost means that you cannot describe how to get to your destination from your current position, then the beauty of not having a destination is that it is impossible to get lost!

Il calzolaio The shoemaker

Along this random path we met our next inhabitant. His doorway was ajar, so we had no hint of his status by the sight of it, but from the gentle tapping, and the smell of leather and glue, we knew he was a tradesman. The interior was dark and he worked by the beam of natural light streaming through the doorway. And he was literally surrounded by his work, which was heaped in meaningful piles around his workspace.

Unlike Salvatrice, "*Permesso?*" was granted immediately, and after posing quietly with his handiwork, and approving of the resulting digital image that I showed him, he rose from his chair to greet us.



His name is *Antonino*. It turns out that Antonino (83) is a world traveler – a native Isnellian returned home – having spent 15 of his early years in Venezuela. A woman passing by during our conversation was greeted by Antonino with a *Buenos Dias* instead of the usual *Buongiorno*.

Antonino has established an eponymous relationship with New York City by having had a street named after his family – apparently a family of no small influence. He spoke of erstwhile mayor Giuliani with great fondness. Like the other folks we are meeting he portrayed an intelligence which again belied my preconceptions. I was being gently humbled and made over with each new acquaintance. He related with great glee the success of his shoe-repair business in Isnello, especially helped by the fashionable high-heeled shoes of Italy – which are not exactly suited to cobblestone streets.

As you can see, after we spoke with Antonino our unguided tour of Isnello went downhill fast. Time to rethink the direction of our lives. Yes, we wanted to meet people and be happy: but was that enough? Did we require sustenance of another sort? What would satisfy this unnatural hunger?

Antipasto rustico. Maccheroni Siciliani. Pane con olio d'oliva. Arrosto d'agnello. Insalata mista. Tiramisù.

Yes, we hungered, but thirsted too.

Here our needs were simpler; a bottle or two of *Nero d'Avola* would do.

The image of these satisfactions came easily to mind because it was on the previous evening reality had changed a beatific vision into a sensory experience and



filled us to overflowing at *La Brace*. The Sisters who were keeping us would have been proud of the religious zeal with which we sought to worship again at that table.

But first we had to find our way out of this maze. And as I mentioned earlier, you can't go wrong by going both up and down simultaneously. Imagine a v-shaped gutter tilted at a fairly good angle. As long as we went down the sides and up the center channel we would be headed in the right direction. With that we had a pretty good model for directing our path – buildings notwithstanding. This is one case where we didn't want to go with the flow. We would be heading out to sea soon enough.

Along the way Ann pointed out a typical domestic scene: a woman sitting just outside the door of her home – occupied by sewing or reading or simply chatting with passers by.

And...

*we noticed the flowers
everywhere we went
even in the darkest recesses of the city
flowers of every color and description
perched on every conceivable surface
balanced precariously overhead
or resting comfortably at one's feet.*

We made our way back to *Piazza Mazzini* at the intersection of the two main streets into and out of Isnello – *Via Roma* and *Corso Vittorio Emanuele II*.



Garrett (dad) with Anna Marie (mom)