

## **TRIP TO ITALY, 2001**

### **MARIA J. FALCO**

From January 25 to March 4 of this year I traveled to Italy with several goals in mind: I wanted to do some genealogical research on the Barbieri Family (see how far back in Paternopoli's municipal records I could go in tracing our grandparents and their siblings); I also wanted to see if I could find my grandfather Falco's home village near Foggia and perhaps track down some of his relatives; third, I wanted to visit places in Italy I had never seen before or had visited so long ago that either I didn't remember them very well or new excavations, museums, etc., had been opened since my last visit; fourth, I wanted to visit Machiavelli's house in St. Andrea in Percussina outside Florence as a tie-in to the book I am editing on him for Penn State Press; fifth, I wanted to see the two principal carnival celebrations in Italy, at Viareggio and Venice, to see how close or how different from the Mardi Gras in New Orleans they might be. So I scheduled my trip to coincide with the latter celebrations, going south in the beginning of the trip and gradually heading north to avoid the worse of the winter weather. I traded four weeks of my time-share in Key West for resorts in Italy, thereby saving money for hotels, etc. I also planned to spend some time with our relatives in Paternopoli to visit with those whom I hadn't seen since 1955 (little Paolo, 6 years old then, 50 years old now with two teen-aged children of his own; and Rena who was 12 in those pictures I reproduced in the Family History and now has five children of her own; Fausto now lives in Modena and I regret I did not get to see him at all).

The first resort was high on a mountain not too far from Paternopoli, with steep winding roads which iced over when it snowed. It had ski lifts and a weekend market where you could buy home-made pecorino and dried ricotta so fresh and good you shivered when you tasted them. It took two hours or more to get to the coast from there (Laceno) but I wanted to re-visit Paestum and see new excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum; I also took the opportunity to drive the treacherous Amalfi Drive—but at a time when I knew there would be few tourists attempting it. Naples and Sorrento were stops on the way.

I spent two days in Paternopoli, staying with Zia Elena and her family once again, and met the Clerk of Records at the Municipal Hall where I discovered that their records only went back to the unification of Italy in 1860; the parish church had kept all the records before that date and these were lost in the earthquake of 1980. I nevertheless got copies of the birth certificates of both our grandparents, their son Generoso (Joseph) and the brothers and sisters of Benvenuto. I left for a few days to visit Foggia and spent the day searching for two brothers named Giuseppe and Giovanni Falco in the town of Castelluccio Valmaggiore (the closest I could come to my memory of the name given me by my grandfather Joseph Falco). I found them and was astounded by the close family resemblance to my grandfather and his brother Tony. However, they did not recall the facts I related to them about my family at all. So, while they were delighted to see me and were very hospitable, they could not verify the relationship.

I then drove past the notorious battlefield at Cannae (where Hannibal's army killed 50,000 Romans in a single day—the highest death toll for one day until the Atomic Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945!) to Bisceglia to visit a church built by Falco di Giovanni in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; it was closed for repairs but the town was lovely. I also stopped to see Frederick II's Castel del Monte built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with a magnificent view of the countryside. I spent the night in Bari and visited the very dangerous “Ancient City” and seaport and saw the church of St. Nicholas built during the crusades to hold the tomb of Santa Claus! The next day I visited the fabulous town of Alberobello to see the famous conical houses called “Trulli” which are of such ancient design that no one remembers when the inhabitants first built them or why. The nearby town of Locorotondo is almost as famous because of its circular streets and white-washed buildings gleaming in the ever-present sunlight. The countryside facing the Adriatic is one large plain (except for the hillside villages mentioned above) filled with ancient grape vines and olive trees, some of which date their lineage back to the ancient Greeks. (As I mentioned in the Family History, Paternopoli's grapes and olives also claim such lineage, and indeed the wine, Greco di Tufo, is so certified.)

I then returned to Paternopoli and finished up my research into the Barbieri family. I even found Grandmom's house again, this time completely rebuilt and renovated since the earthquake. We all (Raffaele, Rosalia, Paolo and Elisa) went out to dinner at a fabulous pizza restaurant in a nearby town, and one evening Paolo, Elisa and I visited Paolo Jr. and his family in Avellino. He is an oral surgeon, his wife works for the city, and they have a marvelous town house with four floors decorated with Murano chandeliers, (including one in the kitchen!) and marble everywhere, gray, white, black etc. Gorgeous! And his children are beautiful!

The third week I spent at a golf resort outside of Rome. First I visited the Domus Aurea (Golden House) of Nero off the Roman Forum with areas recently excavated and opened to the public. (The Flavian Emperors built the Colosseum on the site of Nero's man-made lake where sea-battles used to be staged for public entertainment.) I also visited the Roman Senate House (Curia) which had always been closed on my earlier trips, and generally spent the day lounging around the Forum and the Palatine Hill. Another day I went for the second time to the ancient port city of Ostia Antica on the Tiber River, now several miles from the Mediterranean. It used to be the major port of Rome until silt forced them to build another port 15 miles further down. This time I got to see the museum there as well as the ruins. Excavations are still on-going and always worth another visit. Where else can you expect to see two-thousand-year-old five-storey tenement buildings made of unreinforced concrete and brick, and warehouses with mosaic floors? I also stopped at Tivoli, not to re-visit the Villa D'Este or Hadrian's Villa but to see what I could find at their ceramics shops. In addition to a tea service I found a ferocious mask of Cyclops, the one-eyed son of Vulcan (who's now causing Mt. Etna to explode!), as well as a mask of Bacchus and a reproduction of the Bocca della Verita` (the “Mouth of Truth” for those of you old enough to remember Audrey

Hepburn in “Roman Holiday”). On another day I took a side trip to Spoleto, the Italian site of the “Festival of Two Worlds” founded by Gian Carlo Menotti about two decades ago. (The American site is at Charlottesville, South Carolina.) It is a beautiful city with a Roman Theatre as well as a Medieval Castle. Some of the side streets are named after famous Roman generals who used to live there when it was a frontier posting for early Rome. In case you’re wondering, I did not visit the Vatican this time, or any of Rome’s famous museums—I’d done that a number of times before.

On the way to Florence I stopped at Orvieto to take a closer look (it’s usually jammed) at Signorelli’s famous fresco of “The Last Judgement” whose only rival in ferocity and stylistic depiction of nudes in hell is Michelangelo’s in the Sistine Chapel. It was incredible! In Florence I stayed at another resort on one of the smallest streets leading to the Church of Santa Croce, the nearest thing Florence has to a Pantheon. It is where all the famous Florentines except Dante are buried (he was exiled for his political views and lies buried in a tomb in Ravenna not too far from Venice: he was a monarchist, at a time when Florence was fighting to maintain its independent status as a republican city-state): Galileo, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Alfieri, Ghiberti, Rossini and many others, plus monuments to Dante and to Leonardo Da Vinci (who died in France), as well as some moderns like Enrico Fermi, the Father of the Atomic Bomb (he built the first chain reaction in a laboratory under a football stadium at the University of Chicago during World War II). I revisited Michelangelo’s house to see the sculptures he made as a teen-ager, and toured the Palazzo della Signoria to take a picture of Machiavelli’s portrait. I also took a trip to the Pitti Palace to see if I could locate a portrait of Machiavelli’s most devious female political protagonist, Madonna Caterina Sforza, the Countess of Forlì. He was so intrigued by her cleverness at diplomatic intrigue that he mentioned her exploits in four of his writings. The very term “virago”, or “man-like” woman (a compliment in those days) was invented to describe her. Some of the museum attendants were so intrigued by my quest that they found it (lost because it had been attributed to the wrong artist) and made a Xeroxed copy of it for me. I also took a side trip to Machiavelli’s country home in St. Andrea in Percussina, about six miles outside of Florence. There I not only visited the little café at which he used to play cards with the local villagers across from his home (you can still get a very good meal there), but his home itself, (where, believe it or not, I was allowed to use the tiny bathroom) complete with a huge wine cellar filled with enormous vats of ageing chianti. There is also a spectacular view of the grape vineyards from which the wine is made right outside his house.

On that same day I visited San Gimignano, a medieval town with many towers and a fabulous museum of medieval works of art. The last time I had visited it had rained so hard the streets had flooded and I wanted to go back to see what I’d missed. This time I saw some “flag throwers” who perform such spectacular shows at Italian festivals. I also visited Arezzo, another Tuscan city that I hadn’t seen in over forty years. It was as lovely as I remembered, complete with a fantastic medieval cathedral with a crooked column on its back portico! And I visited

Viareggio for the Carnival parade on the weekend before the final celebration. I had heard that it was the nearest thing to the New Orleans Mardi Gras, and it was—except that it was much smaller (just a few short blocks long) and focused almost exclusively on parodying modern Italian politics (making Berlusconi, the new Prime Minister into a bit of a joke!). No Greek and Roman gods or goddesses, no enormous block-long floats with mythological animals, be-feathered heros, debutants, kings and their royal courts, etc. (I guess Americans always do things to excess.)

Before leaving Florence I stopped at the first free library (called The Laurentian Library because it stands next to the Church of San Lorenzo) built in modern times by Cosimo dei Medici (the grandfather of Lorenzo the Magnificent) to look once again at the fantastic staircase designed by Michelangelo, as well as the reading room with all its hand-drawn manuscripts and benches for readers to sit at while studying. This was about 100 years before the printed book became the engine of change for the Renaissance and the modern era. I did not re-visit the Uffizzi, the Convent of San Marco, the Church of San Miniato, the Museum of the Duomo, etc., etc., because I had seen them all before, many times, and had to leave my time-share. I did buy a ceramic platter of traditional Florentine design, however, and visited the market outside San Lorenzo to buy souvenirs (leather purses, small tapestries, Pinocchio puppets, etc.)

I spent one night at Vicenza, midway between Milan and Venice, because I wanted to visit the Palazzo Rotondo and the Olympic Theatre built by Palladio which I had not seen before. Needless to say, they were truly inspiring, and I can see why Thomas Jefferson made his Monticello a tribute to Palladio. Then I went to Venice in the midst of the most incredible celebration I had ever witnessed—the very formal, and not in the least rambunctious, Carnival of Venice. The piazzas and streets between the canals were packed with what we call “Maskers” in New Orleans, but these were mostly in 18<sup>th</sup> century costumes, with wigs, tri-cornered hats, stockings, high heels (men too), domino capes in brocade, lace, silk and every material imaginable. Everyone paraded around slowly so all the visitors could take their pictures, if you could see past the mobs to do so. Most happily posed with the picture takers, in grand fashion as though in a mime show or charade. (No pushing or shoving to grab souvenirs or beads, here! Everything was too staid and formal.) The Rialto Bridge and markets were so jammed with people one could scarcely move (something like the New York subway at rush hour), and every language under the sun came at you from all directions. I think there were almost as many Japanese as Europeans and Americans present. On Carnival Day (Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday), there were a few pageants staged in the Piazza San Marco with comic historical references, but they went on interminably, were difficult to see and hear because of the crowds, and there were no balconies from which to view the events. Instead there was a huge screen showing what was going on for those who were unable to see. I found myself taking pictures of the picture.

After Carnival day, it snowed, and I not only walked in a flooded Venice but I actually took pictures of gondolas covered in snow! I bought more souvenirs and then took a side trip to the Lago di Garda about two hours away. I had never been there before either and the trip was worth it. There was a beautiful medieval (Lombard) castle in a fabulous lakeside village, complete with a moat surrounding the old town. And if you can believe it, there were palm trees along the streets facing the water. This far north!! I was used to seeing them in Rome, but not this close to Milan or Venice. When I returned to Venice I visited the Palladian Church of San Giorgio Maggiore on San Giorgio Island, and the Sansovino library (really baroque) next to the Museo Correr on Piazza San Marco. And once again, I did not visit the old museums, churches, etc., that I had seen on previous trips—not even Murano. I bought some small glass souvenirs and carnival masks in the city and a Fendi lambskin coat I couldn't resist, and that was it.

And now for the bad news: Whenever I'd visited Italy in the past, I had always taken two small bags, in this case a large purse and a camera bag to go under the seat, plus a wheeled carry-on bag to go in the overhead compartment of the plane, while checking two larger suitcases. I never had a problem before, not even on the way over on this trip. Now the desk clerk at the Venice airport insisted I also check the carry-on because my purse and camera bag counted as two pieces of luggage. I was charged an extra hundred dollars, and then the airline promptly lost it! Inside were all the non-ceramic souvenirs I had purchased, plus 47 rolls of film: the entire record of my five-week trip! Fortunately, I had shipped the ceramics separately and had placed the Barbieri birth certificates in another bag. But all the valuables, including my jewelry roll, which I had placed in the carry-on only because I believed it would never leave my sight, were gone. After a month of searching, the airline (Northwest) paid me \$640 for what had cost me over \$3,500. Fortunately, my homeowner's insurance covered another \$2,300, but many of the items were irreplaceable, including the film. As a result, I plan to return next spring to re-take some of those pictures, including those from the Carnival in Venice, and those of our relatives in Paternopoli. Because I will be 70 next year, I must go before I hit that critical birthday. After that birthday a non-resident is not allowed to rent a car in Italy. Maybe if I go back as a resident scholar in 2003 (I've recently applied for a Fulbright to do research in Florence for six months), I may be allowed to do so, but since I don't know if my application will be successful (there are ten applicants for every position and only two positions for all of Italy), I intend to return next spring. After that, someone else will have to rent the car!

I hope this tale is of interest to some of you, and that you will let me know what you think. (Vincent, if it's too long, edit it as you see fit. I'll probably re-print it when I get to write the next chapter of *The Barbieri Family*.)

Best Wishes to all.

Maria Falco

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