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A Resurrection

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

A year ago this Easter, I traveled to Italy and met the Great Mystery of My Family. It came not a moment too soon.

The mystery's name is Aneillo, and he is my uncle ? my mother's brother who I had never met, and who she had only seen once in her life, in a trip to Italy she made more than twenty years ago. He was the brother who had been left behind.

No one was ever clear on the details, not my mother or my aunts and uncles here in America. But while the nine other children in the family grew up in New York City, he stayed behind in a mountain town high above Naples.

To me and to my mother, it was a dream life -- we grew up in the less-charming streets of the Bronx, and the upper deck of Yankee Stadium was about as high above sea level as I ever got as a kid. My aunts and uncles grew up in orphanages after their mother died when my Mom was only four. They worked hard in rough jobs, as printers and bakers and construction workers. In Italy, Aniello was a doctor -- he was spoken of as a magical figure who had somehow escaped the dark fate that had enveloped the family in the New World.

He was 86 years old by the time I had a chance to meet him; his face and his smile were as familiar as my own, and it gave me a chill when he first greeted me. His two daughters, their husbands, and five grandchildren were all there with him: the daughters were doctors and teachers, the family was stunning and prosperous. Yes, it seemed to me, he had escaped.

But no -- as hard as life was in America, he told me, his was hard, too. He was torn from the family as a toddler -- they had returned to Italy for a time, before heading back to America again. There were four

children then (my mother had not yet been born) including Aneilo, who was two and had been born in Italy and this last trip back. The father had already gone ahead to New York to look for work.

But this was the 1920s, and Mussolini had come to power. He passed a law forbidding all native-born males from leaving the country -- to stem a drain of man-power that the fascist state so desperately needed. Aneillo was Italian-born; no one else was. So his mother was given a choice. You all stay, or he stays.

The mother had a married brother, who could not have children. To them, the boy was a gift -- but my uncle still vividly remembered the day 84 years ago when he was pulled from the arms of his mother and siblings. He spoke of it as if no time had passed.

The war came soon after; southern Italy was especially hard hit -- somehow, everyone survived, but those years made an orphanage in the Bronx and foster homes throughout New York seem like an ideal way to live a life.

It was a remarkable visit for me, but more remarkable was what happened soon after. When I got back home with my stories of this incredible family, my 83-year old mother, her 90 year old brother and 91-year-old sister all decided to pack their bags and head to Italy themselves -- their first journey in decades.

They spent three weeks, and walked with my uncle through all the markers of his life in the mountain villages above Naples, good and bad. Over the days and weeks, siblings split apart for more than eighty years were woven back together. It changed our family story, of course -- no longer was Aneillo the lucky one. They were all lucky, really, all blessed to have gone through what they did and come out all right on the other end.

"I'm so glad we went," my mother said. "Who knows when we would see each other again?"

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Who knows.

The word came Monday night that Aneillo died suddenly. He'd felt a bit sick and one week ago went to the hospital to check things out. They found a tumor on his lung. Seven days later, he was gone.

He leaves behind a family mended, a family together. We keep in touch through e-mail and Facebook, swap photos and videos. A cousin is staying with us here in Los Angeles, doing an internship for his master's degree at the company where I work.

This Easter, nearly a year to the day since I traveled to meet him, my uncle leaves behind a family resurrected.

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