The Washington Post
Magazine
OCTOBER 16, 1988

FALL TRAVEL ISSUE

HOMELANDS

Surprisingly Familiar Ireland
BY JEANNE MCMANUS

An Ancestral Village in Italy
BY PHILIP CAPUTO

Echoes of a Jewish Past in Russia
BY DAVID REMNICK

ITALY

Pilgrimage to 'La Vecchia Paese'

A novelist finds renewal when he introduces his bride to 'the old country'—the tiny town in southern Italy where his grandparents grew up

By PHILIP CAPUTO

THE MEMORY HAS THE CHARM OF A sepia-tone photograph: It is the late 1940s, I am a boy of 8 or 9, handing a bundle of castoff clothes to my maternal grandmother, Enrichetta Napolitano, who boxes and wraps them in brown paper, upon which she writes an unfamiliar name and address in a strange language. When I ask her where she is sending the shirts, jeans and sneakers I have either outgrown or outworn, she replies in her broken English, "To my relatives in the old country." This answer prompts another question: Why can't her relatives buy clothes for their children? Because, my grandmother replies, the war—the one during which I'd been born—had made them very poor.

This is my earliest recollection of learning that I had cousins in the land of my grandparents' birth and that their lives were less blessed than my own. It is also my earliest remembrance of another, sharper distinction between them and me. My grandmother had said "her" rather than "our" relatives. I'll never know if her use of the singular possessive was intentional, but it did give me, at a very young age, the impression that I possessed a unique identity: Born, like my parents, in the United States, English my native tongue, I was an American, a sprig on the family tree growing separate from the foreign roots to which my grandparents were still connected.

"*La vecchia paese*"—the old country—is how they always referred to the homeland they'd left, bound for the New World on an immigrant ship. But *la vecchia paese*, in the way my grandparents used the phrase, did not mean the nation of Italy: Italians of their generation seldom thought in nationalistic terms. One's *paese*, in the most expansive sense of the term, meant one's region or province; more commonly, it meant one's village and its immediate environs.

My family's *paese* was a hilly region west of Cosenza, the capital of the province of Calabria, which forms the rugged toe of the Italian peninsular boot. They came from three villages, San Fili, Rende and Parantoro, which today lie within a 15- or 20-minute drive of one another. Caputos, Marcheses, Micelis, Napolitanos, Blasis—they emigrated between 1884 and 1912 and eventually settled in Chicago. Smoky, cold, stinking of stockyard blood, it was a place utterly alien from the vineyards and olive groves they'd left behind. Yet I never heard them speak nostalgically or even affectionately of the old country, the way some other immigrants did. On the contrary, I was made to understand that *la vecchia paese* was

On the streets of San Fili, the author's ancestral village, life is much as it has been for centuries.

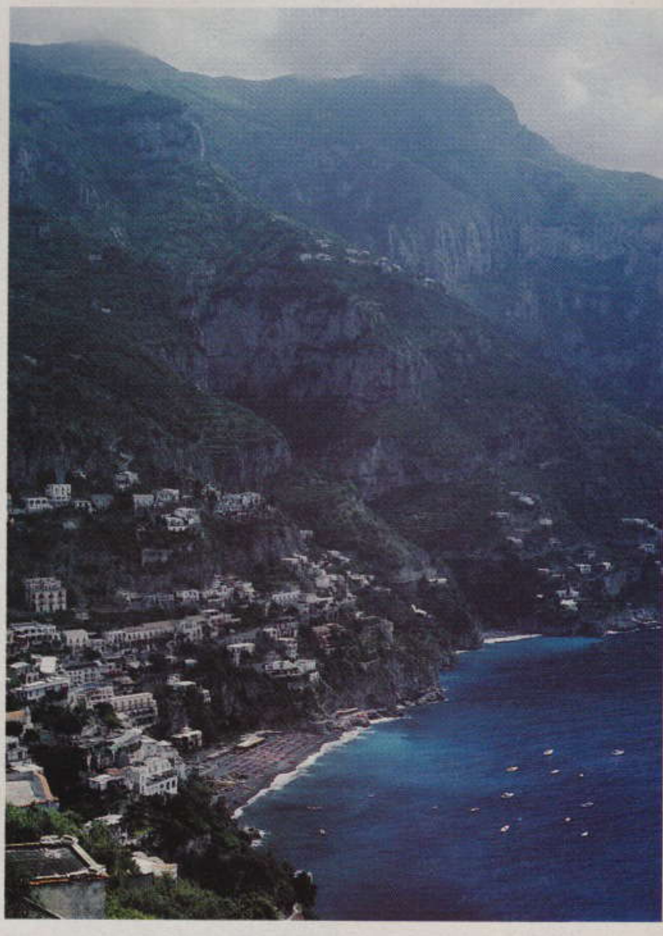
PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCO ZECCHIN / MAGNUM

39

a place of incurable poverty where you had no chance to do or be anything other than what your father had done and been, and his father before him.

The old country was the place where my old clothes were sent.

Despite this unattractive portrait, I grew more and more curious about that far, mysterious land as I grew older. I had become conscious of the shallowness of my American roots, which at the time reached back less than a century; my ancestral roots in Calabria, on the other hand, plunged down to the very beginnings of western civilization. Emigration had allowed me to grow up in freedom and prosperity, but it had also severed me from a rich and ancient tradition. I wanted to walk where my forebears had walked and restore the broken ties to my own and my family's past.



The vision of Positano, a small fishing village nestled into the plunging cliffs of the Amalfi coast, is one of several stunning views that overcome travelers along this rocky shoreline in southern Italy.

Perhaps that is why, in 1972, I reversed the westward trend of my ancestors' immigration by moving to Italy to live and work for two years as a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. The emotional climax of that sojourn came in the spring of 1974, when I made a three-day visit to the southern Italian villages where my grandparents and great-grandparents had been born. I met some of the people whom my grandmother had called her relatives, but who were mine as well. For three days, I was fêted and made part of the family. I was introduced to other townspeople as the *cugino Americano*—American cousin—and I wore that description as proudly as a title; it confirmed the bond of blood that stretched across 5,000 miles of ocean and land, linking me to a generational chain too long to measure. The warmth and hospitality I was shown made my visit more than a reunion; it became a rite of cultural and ethnic repatriation, a fusing of my divided heritages.

When I left, I wasn't sure if I would ever see my Italian relations again, but this past summer, after an absence of 14 years, I returned to the old country.

FOURTEEN YEARS IS A LONG TIME IN A MAN'S LIFE. I WAS A young man in my early thirties when I made my first trip to Italy, middle-aged when I made the second. I had watched my two sons, the younger of whom had been born in Rome, grow into adolescence, had changed careers from journalism to fiction writing and along the way had gone through the break-up of two marriages.

Matrimony provided the occasion for my second visit—I was on a honeymoon with my third wife, Leslie. A pilgrimage to *la vecchia paese* was to be a high point on our itinerary. I wanted to see it again, and my Italian relatives. Besides that, I wanted to absorb the old country's atmosphere of permanence. America is a country that is forever demolishing and rebuilding itself, and if this constant reinvention provides novelty and excitement, it does so at a heavy price. We Americans lose, in the real as well as in the figurative sense, the fixed landmarks by which we can guide our lives. That may be among the reasons why our lives are so rootless, atomized, messy. Certainly mine had been. I desperately wanted to ensure that my third marriage would be my last, would be a new beginning rather than a false start. What better place to launch a new life than in the land from which my immigrant forebears had launched their lives and made successes of them?

Leslie and I began our journey in Rome, where northern Italy ends and southern Italy—called the *mezzogiorno*—begins. After five days of the delights and dilemmas of a summer visit to this city (see "Rome Rediscovered," Page 47), we rented a car and drove south to the Amalfi coast. Navigating the Amalfi Drive proved a difficult business, not only because it was wound as tightly as an armature's coils, but because this stretch of coast remains the most magnificent in southern Italy, if not in the entire country, and the stunning views kept pulling my eyes from the highway. Mountains enshrouded by clouds dropped precipitously into a sea whose blues and aquamarines were as deep and lovely as any I'd seen in the Florida Keys or the Caribbean. Towns nestled in ravines between the surf-fringed cliffs, or climbed the hillsides, their houses terraced so steeply they at times resembled southwestern pueblos. Built long ago, before mass man and his mass architecture, they blended pleasingly with the surrounding landscape, appeared to be a part of it.

We stayed in Positano, the most enchanting town on that enchanting coast. Villas and cottages painted peach, russet and white, mostly white, descended a hill to the sea, lemon and orange trees planted in their gardens, bougainvillea drooping like floral bunting from their balconies. Our room in the Sireneuse Hotel overlooked the tiled dome of a Byzantine church, and below the church, a beach of slaty pebbles where bright fishing boats were drawn ashore, brown nets drying in the sun.

There is a legend that the Amalfi coast was the setting for the scene in the Odyssey in which Ulysses, tempted by the sirens, commanded his men to bind him to the mast. It's a story Leslie and I readily believed on the day we rented a small motorized dory and cruised northward along the high, rocky shore. The water was blue-green and clear, the cliffs slid straight down and were marked by hidden, beckoning coves, almost deserted beaches, and cool grottoes bathed in emerald light. Thoughts of pressing on to the old country in Calabria vanished, and I began to talk to Leslie about extending our stay a few

JONATHAN BLAIR / WOODFIN CAMP

days. On our last night, I felt I could have remained in Positano the rest of my life. We went strolling along a stone path that girdled the coast north of town. Lemon and orange trees scented the air. A mile off, the path ended where an ancient tower built against Saracen raiders stood on a headland. It was silhouetted by a full moon that silvered the black Tyrrhenian Sea, upon whose calm surface a cruise ship just in from Capri rode at anchor while the crew shot off fireworks from the afterdeck. Watching the multicolored bursts in the night sky, looking at the moonlight on the water, I felt that Italy had fulfilled its image as a land of romance, allowing even a middle-aged man with two broken marriages to believe once again in everlasting love.

I could have remained the rest of my life, but I had phoned my relatives in San Fili and told them we would arrive the next day.

We left for Calabria in the early morning, following the coast road through Praiano and the town of Amalfi, its arcaded houses facing a small harbor, its back to dramatic gorges and spired pinnacles. Orchards and vineyards terraced the mountain slopes, the vines hanging from trellises that sometimes resembled spider webs spun of wood, at other times crude ladders climbing up to where only wild olive and chestnut grew. The Amalfi coast strongly resembles California's Big Sur, which may be among the reasons it captivated John Steinbeck. He predicted that it never would be spoiled by modern development because every square yard of available building space had already been taken up. His prediction has proved accurate, but not, sadly, for the rest of southern Italy, as Leslie and I soon discovered.

Driving the *autostrada* south from Salerno, I saw much that was familiar in the countryside—the dry, rock-strewn mountains, the olive groves in the valleys turning green then silver then green again in the wind—and much that was disturbingly unfamiliar. A vast amount of unrestrained construction apparently had gone on since my last trip into Calabria. Blocks of uniform apartment buildings encircled the graceful town centers like dreary concrete bracelets. Here and there, unfinished structures stuck up with the ruined look of wartime rubble. A side trip we took to the coast revealed even more hideous eyesores: cheap vacation "villas," shoddy budget hotels, plastic signs advertising discos and tourist-trap restaurants with fraudulent foreign names like "The Ponderosa."

I drove on, depressed to see greed defacing so beautiful a land. I was more eager than ever to get to the old country, and hoped it had escaped the horror man in his ignorance calls progress.

Late in the afternoon, we saw the signs for Rende and San Fili. We turned off the *autostrada* onto the side road I'd driven years before. It wound out of Cosenza's valley like a series of linked paper clips and climbed into the hills that peak at 2,000 feet before they fall westward into the Tyrrhenian. Soon we saw the old town of Rende, perched on a hilltop south of the road. My spirits sagged; the bulldozers and cement trucks were at work here, too. A sprawl of new buildings marched down the hill from Rende's outskirts to meet the outskirts of Cosenza in a wedding of concrete and brick. Cursing, I stepped on the gas, speeding to where the road branched right to San Fili.

I could remember vividly the moment 14 years earlier when I had first seen San Fili from a distance, at a spot where the road curved around a gorge and woods opened, offering a clear view of the landscape. Across the gorge, a church with a gothic bell tower stood on a mountaintop, surrounded by houses with clay-tile roofs and walls so sheer and gray they appeared to be smooth pinnacles rising out of the mountain itself. In the narrow byway we now drove, there weren't, thank God, any apartment blocks, only dense stands of chestnut and oak, ravines and gorges, pastures where sheep and cattle grazed. Then we rounded a sharp bend, the country opened up, and it happened once again—the village appeared on its mountain-

Over the years Francesca Gambaro, the author's Italian cousin, has kept photos of the family's Chicago branch. Here, a picture of the author in Marine Corps uniform is pasted below a picture of his Navy-bound uncle.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCO ZECCHIN / MAGNUM

top. "Like Brigadoon," Leslie said. The bell tower of Santissima Annunziata, the church where my grandmother had been baptized, the red-tile roofs of the houses, the gray walls that seemed to grow out of the mountain, the dark green hills rising behind—San Fili was as lovely as ever.

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO, IT HAD SURPRISED ME, AFTER SO many years of thinking of the old country as a remote place, to discover that it was only a six-hour drive from Rome via the *autostrada.* I had parked my car in the town piazza and, following a set of directions mailed to me by my mother, climbed a narrow lane to the stone house of Arafina DeLeo, a cousin of my maternal grandmother Enrichetta. Arafina's husband, a man then in his seventies, had looked at me blankly when he opened the thick, wooden door but embraced me with tears after I introduced myself. As he excitedly called to his wife upstairs, he gestured at a large mirror that hung in the entryway. Dozens of photographs framed the mirror. My grandmother had sent them with those bundles of clothes long ago. There were pictures of my parents as a young couple, of aunts and uncles in Chicago, of me, my sister and cousins as toddlers and teenagers. Many were copies of prints I'd seen in the family albums.

San Fili, a gentle mosaic of red-tile rooftops and gray walls against a backdrop of mountains, had changed little since the author first saw it 14 years ago.

On that visit, Arafina had been Enrichetta's only living relative in Italy, and I had been unable to find any direct relations on my father's side, either in San Fili or Rende: Death and emigration had claimed the Caputos, the Marcheses and the Micelis. But on my maternal grandfather Fiore's side, I discovered many Napolitanos, far more than I'd bargained for. A family scandal, I learned, accounted for their numbers. My great-grandfather Angelo Napolitano, having sired 8 children by his wife, then fathered 14 illegitimate children by the young mistress he'd taken after his wife's death. Angelo's procreative feat was made all the more remarkable by his age when he began his illicit affair: He was 50 years old.

My grandfather Fiore, I had been happy to learn, came from the legitimate line. The patriarch of this line in San Fili was Fiore's nephew and my second cousin once removed, Gisberto Napolitano—an old-fashioned patrone who owned a couple of stores in town, some choice real estate and a large, thriving grain mill, where, in the paternal manner of a feudal lord, he employed several descendants of the illegitimate side of the family. I first found Gisberto overseeing operations at the mill, set in a picturesque valley near Parantoro, a few miles north of San Fili. The moment he realized who I was, he gave me a bear hug, drawing me into his vast midsection. For the next three days, he and his wife Ada and their three children—two sons, Attilio and Angelo, and a daughter, Francesca—had adopted me as one of their own.

It was Gisberto and his family who were awaiting Leslie and me now as we drove down San Fili's main street, the Corso September 20th, named to commemorate the date Garibaldi's troops drove the French and the Papal forces from Rome. Around me I could see signs of change. A handsome brick esplanade now lined one end of the corso, and a municipal park landscaped the hillside below. The park included two clay tennis courts—an improbable sight in a village that had always been one of hardworking shopkeepers and farmers without the leisure or inclination for racquet sports. The street, tight between the buildings, went past a coffee shop. Outside, the town's old men talked and sipped espresso in the early-evening air.

We parked in the main square, the Piazza San Giovanni, where I saw other signs of a growing prosperity: automobiles and the motorbikes and motorcycles favored by Italian young people. Fourteen years ago, my Alfa Romeo sedan had been such a novelty that a number of people came out of their houses to stare at it, whispering in admiration, "*Che bella machina*!" On this second visit, our rented four-door Fiat drew no glances or comments; in Italy, once the sick man of the Common Market, ownership of a motor vehicle is now taken for granted, even in the chronically depressed *mezzogiorno.*

A cobblestone street dim in the lengthening shadows brought us to Gisberto's son Attilio Napolitano's store. Inside, it was cool and dark and smelled wonderful. Attilio was behind the counter. A young man of 25 when I'd last seen him, he was now at the gateway to middle age—somewhat heavier but with a head of hair still thick, curly and black. He did not recognize me at first because I had grown a beard since my first visit. When I introduced myself, he came out from behind the counter and wrapped me in *un abbraccio* with his muscular arms, then closed the shop and led us down the street to his father.

Gisberto was in another store, some sort of notions or novelty shop he was running to keep himself busy in retirement.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCO ZECCHIN / MAGNUM

Rome Rediscovered

ONE GOES TO ITALY TO DO THREE things: look at great art and architecture, enjoy beautiful scenery, and eat well. Leslie and I found ourselves immersed in the scenery and the architecture almost the moment we got off the plane. As a taxi took us from Ciampino Airport down the Appian Way into Rome, our voluble and patriotic driver ("*Italia e la più bella paese nel'mundo!*") began pointing out the sights: the Baths of Caracalla, the Forum, the Colosseum. This was Leslie's first trip to Italy, and her head turned this way and that, her eyes agog with jet-lagged wonder. Like most new visitors, she thought the ruins and architectural marvels would be outdoor museums, isolated from the modern city, as is the Parthenon in Athens.

In Rome, however, the tapestry of the past is woven into the fabric of the present, which is one of the charms of the place. The extraordinary is commonplace, and the commonplace, because it is set against an astonishing backdrop, becomes extraordinary. A vendor sells ice cream and soda from a cart parked in the shadow of Trajan's Column, an old woman feeds pigeons roosting on Bernini's Statue of the Four Rivers in the Piazza Navona, and two lovers neck on the steps of the Pantheon, its ancient pillars and dome seeming to elevate their banal caresses to the embraces of a grand passion.

As our taxi passed the gargantuan Victor Emmanuel monument and then circled around the Piazza Venezia, I remarked on how little Rome had changed since I'd last seen it—a truly inane observation to make about a city where changes occur over spans of decades and centuries. There were some differences, though. The nightmarish traffic problem in the historical center had been solved, more or less. (In Italy, problems are never solved with any finality; they are alleviated, rather.) The center had been closed to most private automobiles but was open to taxis, buses, commercial vehicles and cars owned by area residents. The result was a quieter Rome than the one I remembered.

After the cab let us off in front of our hotel, D'Inghilterra, I found another, less pleasant change had taken place in the past 14 years. The ride cost us about $40, or about twice what you'd pay to go into Manhattan from LaGuardia Airport. Inflation and a deep-diving dollar made for an exchange rate that varied between 1,250 and 1,320 lire to the dollar last summer, and Rome had become a very expensive city for the American tourist.

Our dim and, shall we say, cozy double room ran $210 a night, with another $20 tacked on for continental breakfast—the priciest croissants Leslie and I had ever eaten. Presumably, the high room tab was for three things: location—D'Inghilterra is near the Spanish Steps and the Via Condotti, the capital of Guccidom; charm—the hotel has elegant sitting rooms, an exceptional staff and a wood-paneled bar tended by a great martini-mixer named Mario; and finally, cachet—D'Inghilterra is very literary, having played host to Henry James, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and an obscure Polish poet who died in one of its rooms, an act that won him an immortality his work did not, for a marble plaque now hangs in his memory on the wall near the entrance.

On our first night in Rome, I took Leslie to one of my favorite restaurants, Il Buco. It is a small, snug establishment near the Piazza St. Ignacio that specializes in Tuscan cuisine. Years ago, I'd eaten the best steak florentine of my life there. This time around, one glance at the menu told me that was a pleasure I would have to forgo. By confining ourselves to green salad and one pasta course each, my wife and I were able to keep the bill within the double-digit range. We also stuck to the house wine and turned down dessert. The meal cost 51,000 lire, or about $40.

Colline Emiliane had been another of my haunts 15 years ago. Tucked away on the Via degli Avignonesi, a dark, almost sinister side street off the Piazza Barberini, it specializes in homemade Emilian pastas and is, according to Fodor's, the *terminus ad quem* for truffle hounds. Colline Emiliane claims to be a trattoria—the Italian equivalent of a neighborhood restaurant—and with its unpretentious decor, it looks like one. I ordered tortellini in cream sauce and a veal cutlet bolognese. Leslie had tagliatelle bolognese, a salad and tartufo for dessert. A liter of house wine and after-dinner espressos helped to bring the check to 63,000 lire, or $50. Not bad, but not exactly neighborhood, either.

Meals may be more expensive these days in Rome, but the rich esthetic nourishment still comes for free. The aforementioned Henry James, in his Italian travelogues, remarked that he had nothing new to say about Venice because everything had been said and all the discoveries made. (James then went on to write an entire book about the subject, but terseness never was among his virtues). His comment about Venice could be applied to Rome. There is nothing to be said about it that has not already been said a thousand times. As for new discoveries, not a brick in that city has escaped the scrutiny of archeologists, historians and travel writers during the last, oh, 1,500 years. Yet it remains an inexhaustible source of small, personal discoveries, or, if you've been there before, rediscoveries. You walk down a familiar street, turn a corner you know you've turned dozens of times and suddenly see on a palazzo wall a frieze or fountain that had somehow escaped your notice. In the quiet of late afternoon, you sip an espresso in the Piazza Navona, watch the light change against the earth-tone walls of the surrounding buildings, and admire

continued on page 73

Now 65, he looked younger than before, having lost some 40 or 50 pounds (though he was still heavyset and as bald as ever). *Un abbraccio* from Gisberto, then a mild scolding. When I'd phoned, I'd said we would arrive in the afternoon, and here it was almost dark. I apologized, and got another gentle rebuke. Fourteen years ago, I had spoken Italian beautifully, but now—Gisberto grimaced.

At Gisberto's house, a simple but handsome structure on a corner of the corso and a side street that climbs in steps toward the church, Ada served coffee and we all caught up on family news. I learned that the DeLeos had died, but Virgilia DeLuca, my grandfather's youngest sibling, was still going strong at 86. Attilio and his wife, Theresa, a young married couple 14 years ago, were now the parents of two daughters, Adelvira and Valeria. Angelo, Gisberto said, was a prosperous lawyer in Cosenza. Francesca and her husband, Francesco Gambaro, a local party official for the Christian Democrats, were also doing well. Their son Giovanni, who had been 3 on my previous visit, had grown into a strapping six-footer. Gisberto had sold the grain mill at a nice profit and still owned several income-producing buildings. Indeed, I was getting the strong impression that my Italian relations, once the recipients of my old clothes, were better off than I.

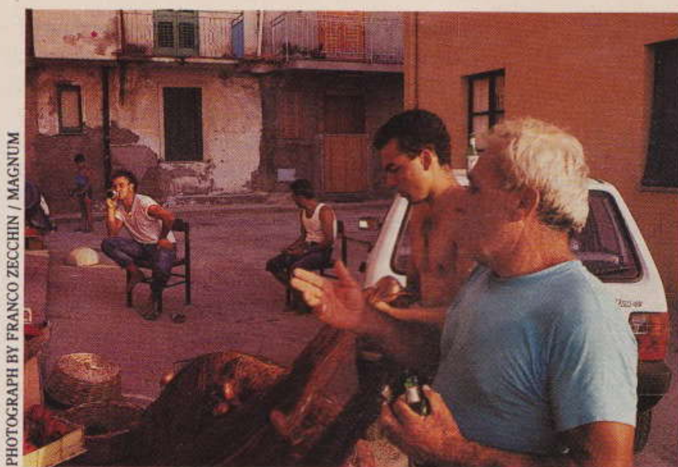
That night the family gathered in the second-floor dining room of Gisberto's house. The French doors were open onto the balcony, which overlooked the town and the fields and hills beyond, bathed in blue shadows and the light of the full moon. A cool evening breeze blew in as we ate the small feast Ada had prepared: tomatoes and cheese, followed by pasta, followed by grilled pork chops, followed by more cheese and sweets. Loaves of fresh bread and bottles of local wine accompanied the meal. Southern Italy is among the few places in the western world where eating to excess is still considered a virtue, obesity a sign of health and slenderness a pity and shame. The Napolitanos looked upon Leslie, 5-feet-9 and 127 pounds, and urged her to *mangia, mangia*—eat, eat. She bravely tried, and was relieved when the conversation turned from her figure to other subjects.

I mentioned that life in Calabria seemed much more prosperous than in the recent past. It was, said Francesca, but only superficially. Calabria remained a land of emigrants. The only difference between now and yesteryear was that they moved north, to Milan and Turin, instead of to America and Australia.

"The young still cannot stay here," added Giovanni, trying out his English. "I am interested in physics and astronomy, but I will have to leave the south for schooling and work."

His father, Francesco, mentioned that a wealthy Italian American was considering building a hotel in San Fili; if he went through with his plans, there would be jobs for the younger people. With its cool mountain climate and beautiful scenery, the town would make an ideal summer resort. I didn't like the idea of my ancestral village turned into a tourist haven, although I had no right to such feelings. I argued that a hotel wasn't the answer to the town's economic woes. My relatives didn't agree. Maybe tourism wasn't the best solution, but it was better than no solution at all.

PARANTORO IS HARDLY A VILLAGE, A HAMLET RATHER, ITS old stone and stucco houses clustered in the foothills of the coastal mountain range in an area the 20th century seems to have bypassed. The road leading to it, hardly wide enough for a car, is potholed and winds through a beige and green landscape Cezanne might have painted a century ago. The bronzed farmer Leslie and I saw riding a donkey along the roadside as we headed that way the next afternoon, on a mission to visit Virgilia

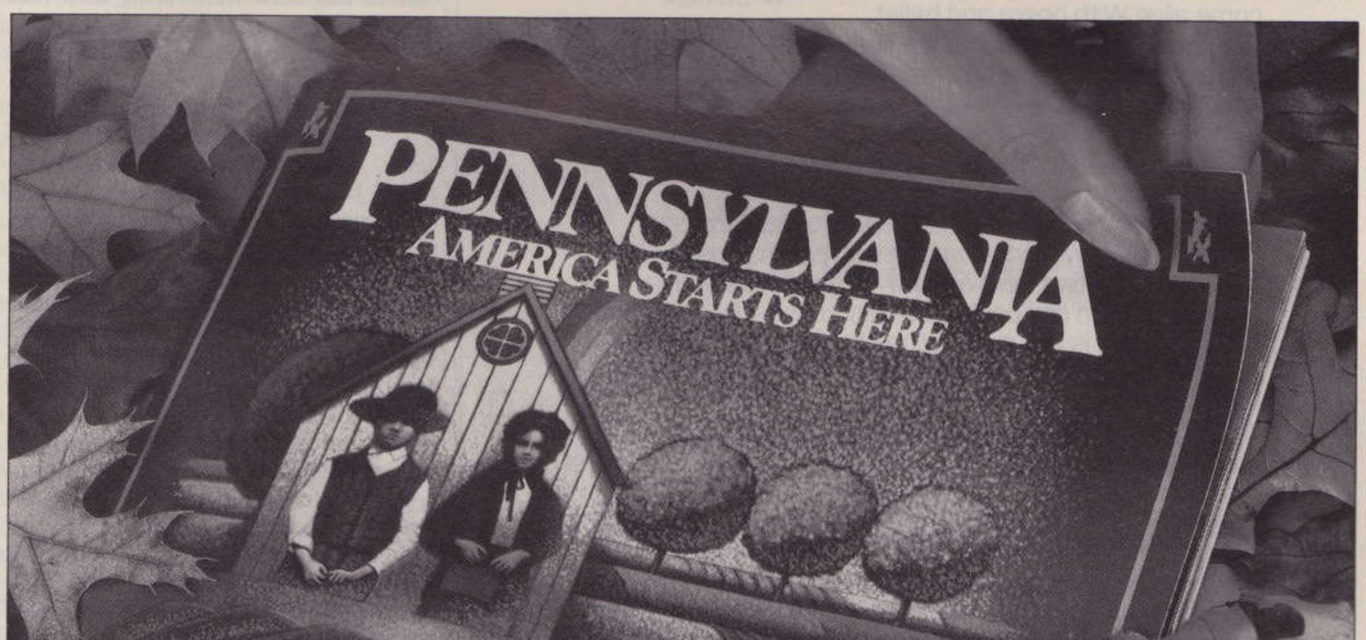

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCO ZECCHIN / MAGNUM

In Scilla, a fishing captain and his crew relax and roll up their nets after a few days at sea. Nearby is the rock where, according to legend, a tentacled monster reached out to grab Ulysses' boat.

DeLuca, did not look like an anachronism. With three of my grandparents dead and my grandmother approaching her mid-nineties, I was aware of how swiftly time was severing the bonds to my immigrant past and to the old country. Virgilia, who had lived in Parantoro all her life, was the last living member of that time and world. We found her in a modest house just off the town's tiny piazza, where the sense of the past was almost palpable.

I had met Virgilia briefly 14 years ago. She was never a tall woman to begin with, and age had now bent her to less than five feet; but she was vigorous and mentally alert and recognized me immediately. Rising from her chair, she gave me a warm embrace and, after her daughter had served the obligatory coffee, agreed to guide us to the house where she and my grandfather had been born.

It was a large two-story place with thick stone walls at the far end of town. Gisberto had renovated the upper floor into a commodious apartment, but the lower floor had not been touched, and except for the absence of furniture, the rooms probably looked as they had when Fiore Napolitano first set eyes on them in 1888. As I walked through them with Virgilia, peering into the kitchen where my great-grandmother had prepared meals over a hearth, I sensed yesterday filtering into today. I gazed out the unglassed window toward the orchards and olive groves that had once been part of my great-grandfather Angelo's farm, a farm large enough to have a name, and what a haunting name, La Donna Rosanna. As a boy, Fiore had ridden across its fields almost every day, acquiring such skill as a horseman that he swiftly rose to sergeant after he was drafted into the Italian cavalry. I tried to imagine what it had been like in my grandfather's youth, before automobiles, television and telephones. The world, turning under skies uncrossed by jet airplanes and satellites, must have seemed a vast place then. It took daring or a great deal of desperation for a young man from a tiny Calabrian village to leave for a strange, new country where he couldn't speak the language and didn't know a soul. Why did my grandfather leave? He'd never told me, for he was a taciturn man and, as befitted a sergeant of cavalry, a man of action. When I was very young I had asked him what they did in the cavalry. "First the cannons fire," he answered in his heavily accented English, "and then the infantry attacks, and then"—he broke into a grim smile—"we take our sabers and ride into the enemy and cut 'em to pieces." A man like that is not given to



THE FIRST LEAVES TO TURN.

The glorious colors of fall in Pennsylvania will be matched this year by the color and excitement of our festivals, cultural and sporting events, and much, much more. Order your free Fall Starter Kit today. You'll get a map with scenic driving routes and a complete list of fall activities. With so much going on, the first leaves to turn are these. So get started! Fill out the coupon, or call 1-800-VISIT-PA. (For updated foliage reports, call 1-800-FALL IN PA.)

PENNSYLVANIA. AMERICA STARTS HERE.℠

Robert P. Casey, Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

MAIL TO: Fall Starter Kit, Bureau of Travel Marketing, Pennsylvania Department of Commerce, 230 S. Broad St., 5th Fl., Philadelphia, PA 19102-3816.

☐ I want this fall to be my best ever! Send my 1988 Fall Starter Kit.

Name (please print)________

Address________

City________

State________ ZIP________

WP

examining his motives or to explaining them to others.

And so, when we returned to her daughter's house, I asked Virgilia why her brother had left for America. After all, he had not been born into a family of starving peasants. The Napolitanos had been rich for their day, landholders whose olive oil, grain and wool had been sold throughout Europe. Virgilia did not know the answer. She'd been only 6 when my grandfather went into the army and only 9 when he left for America.

When it came time to leave, Virgilia, *molta simpatica,* rose and embraced me, kissing me repeatedly on both cheeks. "*Sono contento,*" she said to her daughter. "*Ancora ho visto il mio nipote Americano*"—"I am content. I have again seen my American nephew."

We made our goodbyes and drove off. Virgilia stood in the door, waving, an elderly Italian woman in dark shoes and a plain dark dress.

THE NEXT MORNING, FRANCESCO GAMbaro, something of an expert on local history and lore, took us to visit the church. It had been designed and decorated by local artists in the late baroque period, but was built on the foundations of a 10th-century basilica, beneath which, legend had it, the ruins of a small Roman temple had been found. So it was possible my ancestors had been worshipping atop that mountain since the days when togaed priests prayed over pagan altars.

Leaving the church, we climbed down a stepped street to the Gambaros' house, where my cousin Francesca served us lunch. She called it "fast food, Italian style," but any American woman would have considered it a major production: pasta in garlic and oil sauce, a main course of veal, then a variety of cheeses, followed by ice cream and watermelon for desert. Francesca, a schoolteacher, had whipped this together in half an hour, after a morning at summer school!

We took a turn in the garden to aid our digestion. It was a charming spot, planted with grape arbors and fruit trees. Francesco then took us on a tour of the house, old but impeccably maintained. And also filled with contemporary symbols of financial success: a dishwasher, a TV, a VCR, a personal computer and a baby-grand piano in the downstairs parlor. Once again, I was getting the impression that my Italian cousins were in some ways living the better life. In fact, as Leslie and I learned later on, modern Italians have a saying for those who have made it economically: "You have discovered America." Like El Dorado, America has become an idea, a kind of metaphor for striking it rich, but the actual place, in the minds of the Italians we met, has ceased to exist as the

land of opportunity. And among my relatives, I was no longer the privileged American cousin. For all their justified complaints about the lack of jobs and education in the south, they had no desire to emigrate. They had "discovered America."

Or had they? Drinking espresso after lunch, Francesca suggested to me that discovering America was more than a matter of acquiring the wealth to buy VCRs and new automobiles. Southern Italians who move to the north are cursed by their accents and their place of birth and become victims of discrimination. The northerners refer to them as "Africans."

"Life here is socially and intellectually stifling," Francesca continued. "You have been a correspondent for a big newspaper, and now you are a novelist. You would not have been if your grandfather had stayed in Italy."

To lighten the mood, Giovanni sat at the piano and began playing a few modern rock songs. I asked if he knew an old Neapolitan ballad, one I'd heard my grandfather play on his RCA Victrola years ago. It was a fisherman's love song, "Vicino Mare." Giovanni said he didn't know it, shrugging and grimacing to tell me he didn't care for such sentimental folk tunes; but his mother found sheet music to the song and told him to give it a try. He did, then Francesca began to sing in her soprano, "*Vicino mare, faccia'more, a cuore a cuore . . .*"

She sang it all the way through, her voice filling the room, and I'll never forget how sweet it sounded. Leslie and I would spend another two weeks in Italy. We would visit the Grand Sila range east of San Fili, wild mountains where wolves still stalk shepherds' flocks; we would cross the Straits of Messina, its treacherous currents the whirling Charybdis that claimed Ulysses' ships; we would journey through Sicily to Agrigento, with its golden Greek temples and fly north to the magic city of Venice. But for me, one of the finest moments of the trip was that afternoon in Francesca's living room, its shutters closed against the midday heat, the aroma of coffee in the air, and her singing that ballad in a forgotten dialect.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING WAS OUR last in San Fili. The Gambaros and Attilio joined Leslie and me for a picnic in a beautiful glade outside the village. Attilio, with typical Calabrian hospitality, supplied the fixings: prosciutto, mortadella, provolone, fresh bread and a couple of bottles of red wine. We reached the glade by way of an old road that winds past a small park where a huge, 600-year-old chestnut tree stands. Beside it is a plaque inscribed with

continued on page 73

continued from page 51

a nostalgic poem by a San Fili emigrant who left for the factories of the north. The road then drops down through the woods to the Emoli, a small, clear stream spanned by the "Romans' Bridge," a stone and earth arch that Francesco said dated back to before the eighth century. Its top so overgrown that you could hardly tell what had been made by man and what by nature, the bridge struck my imagination. It had survived over 12 centuries of natural and manmade calamities, rather like Italy itself. I walked out on it and stood, looking down at the stream and out toward the tree-covered hills, oaks and chestnuts moving in the wind, turning light then dark in the warm winds, rippling as if the wind were blowing beneath as well over them. There were no tourists or tour buses, no seaside vacation villas or noisy hotels, only the stream, the woods, the wind and an ancient bridge some forgotten ancestor might have crossed on sandaled feet. Below, Leslie and the others were setting out our lunch, people tied to me, I to them, by bonds of blood and marriage. The wind touched me, the past touched me. I knew that whatever I had made of my life so far, or would make of the rest of it, it would be just one more life in a long succession of lives sprung from the same sad yet enduring and beautiful Italian earth. ■

Prize-winning novelist Philip Caputo's most recent work is Indian Country. *He is at work on a new novel.*

At a family reunion in San Fili: (Back row, left to right) Gisberto Napolitano, Philip Caputo, Leslie Ware, Francesco Gambaro. (Middle row, left to right) Attilio Napolitano, Giovanni Gambaro, Ada Napolitano. (Front row, left to right) Valeria Napolitano, Adelvira Napolitano, Francesca Gambaro.

Rome Rediscovered

continued from page 47

Bernini's Four Rivers, symmetrical without rigidity, harmonious without dullness, its beauty reminding you once again of Aquinas' axiom that the greatest art is static rather than kinetic, that it doesn't stir the emotions or do anything, it just *is*.

In the bustling open-air market in the Campo di Fiore, you drink in the smells of sausages, fresh tomatoes, greens and a dozen kinds of cheese. The market is in a working-class neighborhood still dominated by the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, and you smile at the memory of the day, years ago, when you watched an obviously bourgeois housewife scolding an obviously proletarian stallkeeper for selling her cheese that had turned and the stallkeeper shouting back, "What can you tell me about cheese, signora? What do you know about cheese? You know nothing about cheese!" Class warfare over a wedge of bad provolone.

One afternoon, you visit the Forum, walk down the Via Sacra on paving stones laid down 2,000 years ago and find that the Arch of Titus, standing atop a hill and framing the Colosseum in the distance, is a sight that still moves you. So is the hazy rose color the Aurelian Wall takes on at sunset, or the panorama of the city from the Palatine, the buildings red and ocher, their terracotta roofs overlooked by Renaissance domes and Gothic bell towers, by cypress trees slim and tall against a sky like no other on earth. Rome is an endless delight to the eye and through the eye appeals to the heart. You could spend years exploring her streets, uncovering her secrets, and always find something new to see; and if a million people before you have seen the same sight, what difference does that make? It is there for you the moment you see it, and you feel as much pleasure as you would if you were the first ever to behold it. □

—P.C.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCO ZECCHIN / MAGNUM