

Behind Bars More Than Just A Memoir

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More Than Just A Memoir**

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Danny Russo

Behind Bars More Than Just A Memoir

The 40s and 50s were extraordinary years for immigrants arriving from Italy. Our narrator describes the land of opportunity in spirited, and often courageous terms, never retreating from facts, yet always keeping a twinkling eye out for what makes us fundamentally and absurdly human.

This book is dedicated to my brother Vincent Russo

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Prologue

I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y.

There were many aunts, uncles and cousins. These relatives lived nearby. There were always visits and parties around the holidays.

This environment existed for the first 20 years of my life. In the fifties and sixties some of the older relatives died, but it didn't seem to diminish the number of relatives we had. My father died in 1950. This came as a shock; he was so young. Then in the seventies my two older sisters died. This caused me to think how fleeting our time was, here on earth, I thought of the things a person does in his or her life, which are quickly forgotten when they die. And life goes on. Unless something is written down, and/or a picture of a loved one is saved, that loved one is forgotten, if not by their family, then by their descendants.

It was this thinking that spurred me to start collecting stories, pictures and dates about my family, so that someday when someone asks, "Where did we come from?" they can be given an answer.

This is about the following families, the Russo's, the D'Elcio's, the Sbarro's and the Saraceno's. My goal is to trace their time in America, and describe where in Europe they came from. Most of you who read this book, will know where you fit into this mosaic.

Book One

Vincenzo Russo

Sunny Italy

In the province of Potenza, Italy there is a village up in the southern mountains called Montemilone. That is where Vincenzo Russo was born and raised. He had a piece of land that had fig trees, and a vineyard which grew grapes that made a robust full bodied red wine. He worked hard like most mountain men and, as he got older, he started hearing stories of a place that was called "The New World." A place where a hard worker could make a good life. Month after month then year after year went by. He saw himself going nowhere, just plugging away to put food on the table. He had the ambition; he just needed to make a decision. After several inquiries, he decided to take a chance. He would go to the New World. The wheels were now in motion. Vincenzo Russo was going to America.

Vincenzo and his wife Raffaella were on their way to America. The year is 1896. They took all their belongings and set out for a better life. America was the place where fortunes were made. This was what Vincenzo was looking for. So along with their son Franco, Vincenzo and Raffaella, who was pregnant at the time, left Italy on a steamer headed for America. They knew some people there who would help them get started. Vincenzo and his family would stay with some paesans until he got on his own two feet.

Before long, Raffaella gave birth to their second son. They named him Antonio after Vincenzo's father. But their stay in America did not last long. Vincenzo, who was in his forties, got sick and died. Raffaella, in a strange country without a husband and with two children, could only think of one thing: She had to go back to Italy. So she made the arrangements, packed up her belongings and her children and booked passage back to Italy. It was back to Montemilone, with her sons Franco and little Antonio.

Several years later, Raffaella also in her forty's, passed away. Now the two boys, with no mother or father, would not be sent to an orphanage. They would be taken care of by families in Montemilone. The Ruggerios would take in Franco and Antonio. The D'Elcio family would also watch over them. Franco was a little stronger while Antonio was a bit frail as a young boy; sort of the runt of the litter.

Filomena Sollazzo

In 1882 Filomena Sollazzo was born to Vito Antonio Sollazzo and Maria Cardacino in Montemilone. She was from the old school, learning how to cook, sew and keep a clean house; Women were measured by how hard they worked, and on making a man happy. When Filomena was of age and a young man was interested in her, he had to get permission from her father. Eventually the two got the blessing from both parents and a wedding date was set. The man she chose was Donato D'Elicio, a respected young Montemilonese. Their first born was my mother, and named after Donato's mother Antoinetta Mancianelli; it was always men first. Eventually seven more siblings were born. Now Filomena D'Elicio was stern but fair, never had to say things twice, and taught all her children that to get ahead in life required hard work. She raised all eight of them.

Now, besides having her own eight children, the death of Raffaella Russo meant several families would help out with Franco and Antonio. Filomena didn't think twice; she immediately took in the younger Antonio; he looked like he needed help.

Filomena D'Elicio always had a special feeling for young Antonio. He was like one of her own. She was a mother to him. So that's how Antonio grew up, even though he was born in America, he was a Montemilonese. Antonio and his brother Franco would go to school, then help out with some chores. As they got into their teens, they started working. Filomena D'Elicio watched them both grow older. She was proud of them. Franco mostly stayed with the Ruggieros, and Antonio stayed with the D'Elicios, so he more or less grew up "a D'Elicio."

Filomena was a hard working woman, and she also made sure that the children all helped out around the house. She got them to bed at night and got them up in the morning. And on one particular occasion, she showed she was not just an ordinary housewife. Antonio's parents had owned some property; vineyards. Well, it seems that the people who owned the bordering property were slowly inching their way over to the Russo property. They must have figured that with both parents dead, what did the kids know? When it got to extreme proportions and Antonio questioned them, they darn near chased the kid away.

That's when Filomena went to pay the neighboring property owners a visit. She goes face to face with the head of their family, when out from under her apron, she brandished a hatchet, waved it in the man's face and said, "If you harm this kid in anyway, I'll split your head open. This property is his, and the D'Elicio family is backing him. Capeesh?" The landowner as soon as he heard the name D'Elicio figured that was Ta-Tai D'Elicio and he wanted no part of that man; he immediately started to cop a plea, "Signora, it was all a misunderstanding. Of course it his property, and no one will touch it until he's old enough to take care of it." She replied "Em-beh, sham accorda." Translated, "I guess we understand each other." That was Filomena Sollazzo D'Elicio, the Grand Dame of Montemilone.

Donato D'Elicio

Donato D'Elicio was born in Montemilone in 1873 to Stefano D'Elicio and Antoinetta Mancianelli. It was hard in those days, times were tough, and so he learned at a young age to be tough, to be strong and to never back down from an encounter whether it was a hard job or a fight. He was blessed with great strength. His father Stefano was proud of young Donato.

Years later he saw a young Filomena and gets hit with Cupid's arrow. He was in love, and took her for a wife, case closed. Now with eight children, three girls - Antoinetta, Maria and Sabatina - and five boys - Stefano, Antonio, Giuseppe, Alfredo and Michelino - and a young Antonio Russo, who was now a part of the family. He had a crew; a work force. Things were starting to look up; the D'Elcios had property, they had grapes, olives and fig trees. Donato must now watch over all of his clan.

Years went by and Antonio, now in his teens, was quite a good looking young man, taller than his brother Frank, and also with a laid back sort of aristocratic demeanor. Donato D'Elcio (The Patriarch of the Family) noticed Antonio's interest in his oldest daughter Antoinetta, also in her teens. Antonio started secretly seeing her. Whenever they got the chance, and no one was around, they'd sneak their hugs and kisses. Antoinetta was in love. She told her father that she wanted to marry him when she got older. But for now, she would wait.

Then along came The First World War. Antonio Russo was now in the army. He told Antoinetta, "As soon as I get back, we're getting married." She agreed. She gave the news to her father. But her father said "If he comes home minus a limb, be it a pinky, a toe, an arm or a leg, you cannot marry him. . ." And when Donato D'Elcio spoke, it was final. He was the head of the family, a stern disciplinarian, a man of few words, but you got his message quickly. Antoinetta started praying every night, and prayed to La Madonna del Bosco that Antonio would come home, alive and in one piece.

Her prayers were answered. When the war was over, Antonio came back to Montemilone, married Antoinetta and soon a daughter was born. They named her after Antonio's mother, Raffaella. Later on, their second child was born, also a girl, and they named her Filomena, after Antoinetta's mother.

My grandfather Donato D'Elcio was a serious man, and was known to have a hot temper. I heard stories from some of my cousins. They told me that when he came into the room, just one look at him, made them afraid. Of course they were young, and he appeared mean and hard looking. He was. He had those steel blue eyes that seemed to look right through you, he had a red face, a white crew cut and a white moustache. If I showed you a picture of him and said his named was Shamus O'Leary from Roscommon, Ireland you'd believe it.

He always looked serious. He had this look on his face as if to say, "What do you want? Are you trying to take something from my family, my home, my property?" He was the defender, the watchdog, always on duty to protect his brood. So whenever some member of the family was told, Ta-Tai wanted to see you, (that was what he was called) he or she trembled. Everyone knew that Ta-Tai was the exalted Ruler of the Clan.

Going To America

Donato D'Elcio and his brother Stefano decided to go to America. They lived in Little Italy, on Mulberry Street. It was a difficult time for Europeans to migrate to America. They had quotas, and waiting lists and so on. Well my father Antonio had no problem with that, all he needed was money for the trip. He was a citizen haven being born in America. Eventually he came over and stayed with some paesanos. He would make trips back and forth to Montemilone, stay for a while, then back to America. On one of those trips, he got Antoinetta got pregnant. This time it was a boy, They named the boy Vincenzo, like Antonio's father.

Years after Vincenzo was born my father told my mother that he was bringing the whole family to America. That did not go over too well. Antoinetta and her two daughters did not like the idea. They didn't know what it was like in America, they had their fears, they would miss their family and their friends. But in those days when the head of the family made a decision, it was final; there was no debating. They were coming to America. My father got them booked on a ship called "Vulcania," The Russo's of Montemilone were on their way to America. He found them a small coal flat apartment at 348 Bristol Street, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. That was their first home in America. The year was 1938.

Antonio Russo

One year after

Antonio and Antoinetta migrated from Montemilone to America, with my sisters Raffaella (Rae) and Filomena (Phyllis or Phil) and my brother Vincenzo (Vinny), who was six years old, I was born. On June 27, 1939, in Brownsville, I was born in our apartment under the supervision of a mid-wife. In those days, many a child was born in the house. A year later my father moved the family to East Flatbush, where I was raised. Unlike so many Italian immigrants, who moved into Italian neighborhoods, my father moved us into a predominantly Jewish-Irish neighborhood. His thinking was, Jews and Irish spoke American. We would learn how to speak much sooner. My father had come to America many years before, living in Manhattan's Little Italy. He lived with my mother's father, Donato D'Elicio (whom I was named after), and his brother Luigi D'Elicio. Between the three of them, nobody worked. That had to be the big mystery; they smoked their DiNobili cigars, had an apartment, cooked their own dinners and always had some homemade wine. How was it done? I'll never know. My grandfather was the King, simply because, he was, "King." His younger brother Stefano was a Prince, always under, but always with the King. And my father, I guess we'll make him a Duke. But somehow they managed to live.

It wasn't until Uncle Tony arrived, (my mother's younger brother) was there a worker in this group. He was fifteen years old, but strong as a bull. I'm sure Ta-Tai, (my grandfather) got him a job right away. With Uncle Tony, work was like a challenge: the harder the work, the more he wanted to tackle it. He was a man proud of his strength. Once my father had a job in construction. Uncle Tony got him a job as a laborer. On his first day, the lunch whistle blew. My father was looking for a water fountain or a hose to wash his hands. He walked about half a block. He finally found one. He washed his hands, took out a handkerchief, and wiped his hands dry. Then he walked back, sat down and unwrapped his lunch. He separated the wax papers with the prosciutto, put it on fresh Italian bread with sliced tomatoes, and was about to take his first bite when the whistle blew. Here come's Uncle Tony. "Come on," he said, "You mean you didn't eat yet?" My father said he had to wash his hands first. Uncle Tony said, "Wash your hands? Just eat." Making motions with his hands, he ripped the sandwich apart. My father thought to himself, "This is not my style." He didn't last long in construction.

Then he had a job going around to several buildings early in the morning, and shoveling coal into the furnace of those big apartment houses. Coal was what they used for heat, so he would empty out the used cinders, put them in an empty barrel, and shovel in the new coal. He would go to house after house. That was how we got the chance to move to East Flatbush. My father did this work for a man named Tishberg. When an apartment became available, Mr. Tishberg told my father of the apartment, my father checked it out and saw it was ten times

better than the dingy apartment in Brownsville. He jumped at the chance, and that's how we wound up at 384 East 34th street. Antonio continued to do the coal work but not for long. My father knew that he was not cut out for that type of job. He thought of himself as a "Classy Guy." This gentleman had to figure out a way to make a living, but it had to be at his pace. After all, he was a "Duke." At times, even though unemployed, he was always "dressed to the nines." He may have looked well to do but the truth was he only had a couple of shekels in his pocket. That was my father, Pa-Paa.

Then one day it hit him. He knew that Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx had large Italian populations. Now Italians were also spreading out to Long Island and Staten Island. But he knew that the ones in Long Island and Staten Island did not have access to "The Good Stuff" that only Italian stores carried: fresh mozzarella, soppressata, imported provolone. So he borrowed some money from his cousins and bought a used panel truck, and with the help of my uncle Tony, they made shelves. With the left over money he bought some stock: fresh ricotta cheese, which he kept in a wooden cooler (about the size of an old Pepsi or Coca-Cola metal soda box) packed with crushed ice. It was located near the front of the truck right behind the passenger seat. The Ricotta cheese came in tin quart containers that were perforated and were wrapped with a cloth top held tight with rubber bands. The Ricotta and the fresh curd, to make mozzarella, were bought from Polio Dairy Products in Brooklyn, who later changed their name to Polly-O, like Polly-Wanna-Cracker. They even had a parrot as a logo. All this was due to the scare of the dreaded disease polio (the disease President Roosevelt had). Years later, a man named Dr. Jonas Salk put an end to all that fear.

Tony The Cheeseman

He bought top of the line imported cheese; Locatelli, Parmesan, Siciliano, Pecorino Romano, and the sharp Auricchio Provolone, Homemade Sopressata, Genoa Salami. Imported Italian olive oil, like Bertolli, Filippo Berio. Hot or sweet sausage, made by my mother, and later on by me. Real Italians would kill for this.

He would start by parking his truck in what looked like an Italian neighborhood. Where ever he saw Holy Statues on someone's lawn, or Geraniums, he knew they were Italian. It was like the Italian flag, or a sign saying "We are Italian." He would then open the doors of his truck, knock on some doors, and people would start coming to see what he had. Upon inspection of his goods, ladies would send a child or a friend to "Ciame Adolina" (Go call Adeline) and one by one they would come, spotting Capicolli, Mortadella, cans of Italian tomatoes and sharp cheese. They would go home and come back with money, and buy. He, had the "Good Stuff." I sometimes wonder if he realized back then, the beauty he had just reeled in.

Italian women did not believe in stores like the A & P. That was for the Medigan, (the Americans). American women went to the "A&P." They would buy bland American cheese. Swiss cheese. Liverwurst and cooked salami. For an Italian treat, they would buy a can of Franco-American Spaghetti, or a can of Chef Boy-Ar -Dee, Ravioli. But Italian women don't do this. They bought Italian products, in Italian stores, where they knew the Italians who owned the store. There was a time I was afraid to go to stores that were not Italian. But then I thought, my friends mothers who went to those American stores, didn't come out sick, maimed, or become crippled for doing so. But Italians, they're a different breed. They wanted Italian stuff from Italian people. So in areas like Long Island and Staten Island my father was a Godsend. He would do Long Island on Fridays and Staten Island on Saturdays.

Wow, He reeled in a WHOPPER. Bankers didn't have his hours. He was off on Sundays and Mondays. Tuesdays and Wednesdays he went shopping for stock. Thursdays he'd buy, and Fridays and Saturdays sell. I found out later on, from a friend of mine, whose father worked for the Brooklyn Union Gas Company, he owned a house, had five kids and his take home was \$62.00 a week for five days. My father worked two days a week and took home \$175.00. Like "Old Blue Eyes" said, he did it "His Way."

December 1, 1943 - A Star Is Born

Annette, Annette, Annette. She was the fifth child of Antonio and Antoinetta. She was a colicky baby, kept my mother up all night, every night, but she was so cute. She really was "Daddy's little girl." She was still drinking milk from a bottle at three years old, and wouldn't go to sleep unless she had her bottle. So finally my mother broke the bottle and figured now she will have to drink out of a glass. Annette cried and cried, until my father could no longer stand it. He went to the drug store and bought a new baby bottle, and told my mother, "She will drink out of that bottle until she gets married. Do you understand?" My mother got the picture.

At four years old, Annette could sing Italian songs. My godfather, Louis, whose dad who could play the guitar or mandolin, would accompany Annette. She was like Shirley Temple; she was unbelievable. Anyone who heard or saw this child sing would say this girl is special, OMG. But later on when she started school, kindergarten, some kids must have made fun of her for speaking Italian. Kids can unknowingly be very mean. She must have felt both hurt and embarrassed; she would never speak Italian again, period. At home my mother would talk in Italian, and Annette would answer in English. She understood everything but had a mental block and could no longer talk or sing in Italian.

She was also a tough little girl. For a girl she could punch, and take a punch. She would always get me in trouble with my mother, If I got in an argument with her, she knew all she had to do was scream MAAAA, and my mother would come running like Quantrell's Raiders, and give me a slap on the ass, and then Annette would start laughing; she knew she had me, Just say MAAA, and Danny boy would get his ass whipped. Annette took after my mother in many ways. She had that same energy as my mother, she got things done, and later on, I don't know if it happened while I was in the service, but she learned how to cook. By the time she got married she just got into cooking like my mother. Whether it was for four or eight people, she could just knock out a table of good hardy food; made it look so easy. She also raised two fabulous daughters, Kristina and Jennifer, they both made her a grandmother, and she spends all of her time doing things for them, actually for everybody. That's my little Sis...Annette.

My First Job

As I grew older, about seven or eight years old, my father started taking me with him on his route, more or less to keep him company. I thought it was work. Eventually I did start working. At a young age, I was becoming an asset to my father. When he was in the back of the truck with both doors open and talking to customers, I would be in the front of the truck facing my father. Someone would ask for a certain item, instead of him walking around to get it, he would say Danny, get me a can of ricotta. I'd say O.K. Pa-Baa. So dad had himself an assistant. During the summer, when I had no school, I'd work Fridays in Long Island, which was alright, and Saturdays in Staten Island. Saturday, was a real treat. First we took the Ferry from Brooklyn

to Staten Island. I remembered the names of all the Ferries. The Hamilton, the Narrows, the Gotham. Once the ferry pulled out, my father would take a quick nap behind the wheel of his truck. I would get out of the truck and walk to the front of the ferry. At that age, I felt like I was on an ocean liner. Then I would go up the stairs and walk all around the ferry. Looking at the New York skyline. What a sight.

Shoeshine

One day I found something that fascinated me. It was an old man who shined shoes, He may have been Hungarian, Slavic or a Greek; all I remember is he had an accent and he would walk around the Ferry and say "Shine, Shine, Shoeshine." Then some men would nod their heads and he would go over, set his box down, and take out the tools of his trade. Then he had this little cushion, that he would put down, kneel on it, and start the procedure, Brush the dirt and dust off, then whether it was either brown or black shoes, he would take out a bottle of what was called Wash and with a dauber do both shoes, then he would wipe off the wash with a rag. Now he gets out the can of Griffin Shoe Polish and with a cut off rag starts to apply the shoe polish. After he gets all the shoes done, he takes out a brush and starts to brush, I mean all the polish is now gone. Now he takes his best soft rag and starts to shine. I mean he makes that rag POP. He would stop for a moment, then out comes this little bottle what looked like "Wild Root Cream Oil," a white liquid. He'd smear it on with his finger, just on the tip, then go all out with his soft rag. I watched with amazement the sparkle he got on people's shoes. They would give him 25 cents. I found myself following him around the entire upper deck of the ferry, he would just say "Shine, Shine," and anyone who had some time to kill, whether they were reading a newspaper or just sitting there, would say O.K. For a quarter they had a snappy shine on their shoes. He had this box, inside he had soft buffing clothes. I thought to myself, what a way to make a living. He then noticed me watching him and smiled and said "You like this?" I said "Yes." Then the ferry would pull into the slot, and we are in S.I. I thought to myself I'll catch him next week and follow him again.

Then there was this other treat. My father would stop at this greasy spoon diner in Port Richmond and get himself a cup of coffee. He would say to me, "Get something." I'd say Pa-Baa, "Can I get a Hamburger?" He'd order it for me and say, "Anything else?" Then I'd say, "Una taze e caffè." He'd laugh, then order it. He got a kick out of me, the way I loved coffee, at home before I went to bed, he'd make a small pot of Demi-Tasse and say to me "You want a cup of coffee before you go to bed?" I'd say "Yes Pa-Baa." My mother would say (in Italian) "Andon, he's a kid, he has to go to school." My father would say, "Let him have one cup then he can go to bed." I remember one of my teachers, Mrs. Warburton, telling the class, "Do not drink coffee, it's not good for children." When I told her that I drink coffee every night she said. "Does it keep you up all night?" I said "No, I have one cup and then go to sleep." She said, "Your parents let you do that?" I said, "Yes, me and my father drink a cup every night and then I go off to bed." She looked puzzled, probably thinking Italians are strange.

Like I said before, this was a real treat. This Greek diner had something my Italian home did not have. Ketchup. My Irish friends had it, and so did my Jewish friends. I thought it was great. My mom thought it was schifosa. Real crap. So when the Greek gives me my burger, with ketchup, and coffee. As the Jews say, I was "Kvelling." So at the start of the day, my day was made. My father liked me; he loved me, naturally, but he also liked me. He thought I was exceptionally smart for my age. He also noticed that I had a sense of humor. One time my mother and father were about to have coffee. The coffee can was empty, so my father said,

“Danny, (or maybe he said, Donato, my real name), go in the front of the store and get a can of coffee.” I would go to the front of the store which was also used as my father’s warehouse (about which I will explain later). At that time there was a popular Italian brand of coffee called “Vivo,” which in Italian means “Alive.” So I yell back, “Pa-Baa, which one do you want? Vivo or Morto” (morto means dead). I heard both my mother and father laughing. I’d finally walk in with the can of Vivo in my hand. I felt like Henny Youngman after dropping a one liner. I got a standing ovation. My father picked me up and hugged me. He thought I was something special. We were one happy family.

1947

We lived on East 34th street. One day, my father found an empty store at 1620 Nostrand Avenue, about four blocks away from where we lived. It used to be owned by Fat Jack LaVista. It was a dirty, grungy store that sold Fruit and Produce. Well, one day Fat Jack slipped and fell in his bath tub. At close to 300 pounds he broke his leg, and he decided to retire and sell his business. My father made him an offer and he said O.K. I remember the phone number, BUckminister –7-9526. In those days, they did not use all digits. For example, you just dialed the first two letters and a digit, followed by the last four digits like BU4-2564. As for the store itself, it needed a complete overhaul; it had to be painted, counters were built, shelves were made, those old yellowish lights were torn out and something new called Florescent Lights were installed, making it much brighter. Then the shelves were completely stocked. Provolones were hanging from the ceiling, along with Dried Sausage, Copicolli, and Prosciutto. It was a combination of a retail store and storage. My father could store all his goods for his route, and my mother could sell to the public, things like Fresh Mozzarella, Ricotta, Prosciutto, Mortadella, and warm crisp Italian bread from Abbadessa Bakery, imported olives, you know, “The good stuff.” My father had a sign made for his business. It was called

FABRICA di LATTACINI FRESCHI

And soon we opened up for business, I would go there every day to help out, along with my sister and my brother-in-law, Frank. The Irish were not going to spend money on Gorgonzola, Prosciutto or Provolone, they went with the usual Liverwurst, Baloney and Ham and either Swiss or American cheese, so whatever my mother did was a plus, because Pa-Baa’s business carried the load. As for the Jews, some of them would come in to sample our fresh Olives, try our sharp cheeses, and we sort of developed a small clientele of Jews who were into authentic Italian food. I helped my mother make Mozzarella. We had two tubs, one with a cheese cloth sack of salt and the other with just clear water. As we made the mozzarella, we’d put half in the salt water and the other half in the clear water. My mother also showed me how to make sausage: first I’d bone out the pork callies, with a sharp knife I’d remove the bone, then take the pork meat and cut it in small cubes. My mother had a meat grinding machine. I would stuff the pork cubes into the machine, then transfer the ground pork into a long cylinder. Then there was another thing called “casing.” This to me looked like a scum-bag, (condom). They were packed in salt, we would have to take them out of the case, gingerly, so they would not break, then go to the sink, open one of them up, put it under faucet and let water run through it. When a water bubble appeared, we’d make the water funnel through the whole casing. Next we’d put the rubber-like casing on the nozzle, and start to crank out sausage. I made hot sausage and sweet sausage. Some we put in the fridge, and some we hung from the ceiling to dry out. What a business. We had fresh Ricotta, fresh Mozzarella.

My mother also made Smoked Mozzarella in the backyard. She'd start a fire in a barrel, get a rope with two Mozzarellas tied on, put them in the barrel and cover them with a burlap sack and let them smoke. The Italians we had for customers just loved our product. So did some Jews and Irish folk.

Pete And Pat Hamill

One day, two little Irish kids came in and were looking around to see what this new store was like. They were the Hamill brothers, Pete and Pat. After showing them around the store, I asked my mother if I could go out and play with these two kids, she said O.K. so we went out to play. That was the beginning of our long friendship. The Hamill's lived at 1618 Nostrand Avenue over a store, they were a family of 10 children that belonged to John and Bridget Hamill, Bridget was from Dublin, Ireland. They were a hard working Irish family. I would eat over their house, and go home and tell my mother, "Ma, why don't you cook like Mrs. Hamill, she makes potatoes that are so different, "my mother would say, "How?" I'd say, "I don't know, but their different." Then she would say in Italian "Don't bother me." Mrs. Hamill would try to get me to eat some meat, but man, I loved what they called "Murphy's", mashed potatoes. The oldest born to the Hamill's was Jimmy, then came Mae, she was a beauty, then Johnny, Margie, Mike, Anna, Pete, and Pat, Jean and Eddie. After the husband died, Mrs. Hamill, who worked all of her life, sometimes two jobs, raised the family. They just don't make them like that anymore. That woman, I am absolutely sure, had an *EZ- pass*, straight to Heaven.

But the whole family chipped in, Jimmy, when he got out of the Navy, went to work in some Airfield out in Long Island, and kicked in. Mae, might have had a few jobs and also kicked in some money. Johnny worked for Park Row Lamp Co, Margie, worked in Ebingers Bakery. And Mike had a job, delivering orders for either a grocery store or sometimes a meat market. All kicked in. Great family, Me Pete and Pat were inseparable, Pete was like a young Jimmy Cagney, fight at the drop of a hat. So when this guy Albie Basta who kicked my ass went away for a week, it was me Pete and Pat that lured Albie's brother Johnny into an alley way, making believe we were playing cops and robbers, when we get to the alley, we beat the shit out of Johnny. He was crying, "wait till my brother Albie comes home." We said "Fuck you and Albie." Well, a week later Albie came home and went on a hunt for us, he caught up with us on Nostrand Ave near Beverly Rd, It was Albie, Johnny and another one of their brother's Jimmy, they wanted to kick our ass, but just then Mike Hamill who was walking across the street comes over and said, "What's the trouble." Them Basta's did not want no part of big Mike Hamill. So we were even, they kicked my ass, and we kicked Johnny's ass. Over.

Puppy Love

It all started in Miss Voight's class. I was drawing a something and I was into it, it started to take shape. It was a picture of our school, the court yard, the handball courts, the stickball courts, when all of a sudden Miss Voight comes in the room and said:

"Class, I have some very sad news, President Roosevelt is dead."

I didn't show any interest, I kept drawing. Then the prettiest girl in the class, Toni Dalton comes over to me and said, "How can you still be drawing, Our President is dead." I looked up and she had tears streaming down her cheeks, I said, "Were you related?" The only time I ever saw anyone cry is if they were related. She said "Danny Russo, you're impossible. Don't you

care about our President?" I said "I tell you the truth, I didn't know the guy, and I don't know why I should cry, apparently you feel different."

But it was at that very moment I discovered I was in love; that I'd fallen for her. She was pretty and was the best dressed girl in the whole school. I thought I wanted us to get married when we both got older. She was my girl, even though she didn't know it. She was my girl. I loved Toni Dalton.

The following years Mrs. Skole our new teacher assigned Toni and I to make up a song for Brotherhood Week. We sat at a table in the back and kicked around a couple of ideas. We finally agreed on a song that was popular at that time. It was called "A Bushel and a Peck." We fooled around with words, back and forth. Finally I said "I don't care, if your black or white." We stopped for a while. Then she said. "If your black or white everybody has a right." Then I come up with "Everybody has a right, doesn't matter what his creed." And she comes back with, "Doesn't matter what his creed, everybody does their deed." Then we both sang

"It is true, It is true.
Cause I don't care, if you're black or white,
It doesn't really matter to me,
Doesn't really matter,
Doesn't really matter,
Doesn't really matter to me."

Mrs. Skole went crazy. She loved it, she loved us.

Another Betty Comden & Adolph Green
Another Learner & Lowe
Oye-Vea
And they are from my class...

Toni and I performed our song in front of the entire assembly.

But as we got older, we both wound up in different classes. She hung out with other girls. Later on, she found a boyfriend. I did not like him. I thought he treated her rough, and I even heard he hit her. I got my boys together to back me up. I waited till I saw her alone. I said, "Toni, is he hitting you? 'Cause if he is, I'll kick his ass." She said "Danny, don't worry, I'm O.K." "Are you sure? 'Cause that fuck is history, If he hurts you in any way he won't ever walk." "Danny, I'm alright, I'm a big girl, I can handle myself." "Alright, if you need me let me know."

Toni was my first love. She was so pretty, that girl from 218 Linden Blvd. My first love.

The Hamill brothers taught me how to hitch Trolley cars, how to hitch trucks, how to pitch pennies and how to shoot pool. We'd go to the Flatbush Boys Club on Bedford Avenue. They'd asked me to join, which I did. We could go swimming in their indoor pool, they also had a pool table on the second floor, a T.V. room and a gym. There we could practice punching the heavy bag, or get in the ring and spar, they had real boxing gloves. The Boys Club was good. So it was Pete and Pat who more or less taught me everything. We were like brothers, we drank Pepsi Cola together, shared Devil-Dogs, Egg Creams, and a cylindrical shaped ice cream called "Mel-o-Roll" together. We broke windows together at the Hot House owned by the two old spinsters, the "Melis sisters." We even pissed together. Pete was a pissing champion. He could piss higher and further than anyone. Guys use to have pissing contest, to see who could piss the highest behind the Billboards, Pete would always win. He really was "a pisser." Maybe that's

where the phrase was coined. They also got me to go Ice Skating on Sunday. It was kind of weird, we go skating on ice, I thought. We use to play in the "Ice House." It was located where Macy's now stands, on the corner of Tilden and Flatbush. It had been abandon for quite some time now that refrigerators are in. We would slide down the old shoots, run back up to the second floor and do it again. In the old days, trucks would back in, and wait for them guys up stairs to send down blocks of ice, I mean huge blocks of ice, then the men with ice picks would start chopping away, splitting the block in two.

Then they'd load up their ice trucks and go on to their routes, selling either quarter blocks of ice or half blocks of ice, one of my friends father had an Ice Truck. He was one of the first to have a mechanical ice chopper. He could put a small block of ice into it and it would come out crushed, for stores like Fish markets, Bars, or meat markets. It was a business that went under when refrigerators came on the scene.

Anyway, getting back to Ice skating, we would hitch the Nostrand Ave Trolley to Atlantic Avenue, walk about two blocks to the Ice Palace, and for fifty cents go skating, Pete lent me a pair of his brother's skates. They were too big, so Pete told me to stuff the toes with cotton. It worked. He also said I could keep the skates. We were the three Musketeers of Flatbush.

The only time we differed, Pete and Pat were Dodger fans, and I was a Yankee fan. People use to say, "How could you be a Yankee fan when you live a mere 18 blocks away from Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers?" The truth is, little children are impressionable. The first name I heard that sounded Italian was DiMaggio. I asked one of the older guys, "Is Joe DiMaggio good?" They would say, "Good? He's great." Then I'd say, "What team is he on?" They said, "The Yankees." I was a Yankee for life. The truth is, I never got to Yankee Stadium until I was 20 years old. Maybe if the first name I heard was, say Carl Furillo or Sal (The Barber) Maglie or Ralph Branca or Cookie Lavagetto, I might have been a Dodger fan. A couple of friends of mine, Willy and Charlie Dow would say "Danny, borrow 50 cents off your old man, I'll lend you 10 cents, they got a new guy named Jackie Robinson, c'mon." I'd say "Naa, I'm a Yankee fan, fuck them Dodgers." What a schmuck, I could have seen the great Jackie Robinson for 60 cents. O M G. But the Yankees always were winners, and those Dodger fans would all be saying "Wait till next year." All I heard was, "Wait till next year," again and again.

Then in 1955, " Next Year " finally came. Those Brooklyn Bums were winners for the first time in their history. They won the World Series. Beating those great Yankees. They were Champeens. The borough of Brooklyn went bananas, crazy and nuts all together, from Bath Beach to East New York, Park Slope, Bensonhurst, Bushwick, Canarsie, Bay Ridge, South Brooklyn, Red Hook, Eastern Parkway, Coney Island, Sheepshead Bay, Williamsburg, Pig Town, etc. etc. It was like the end of World War II, it was like a Mardi Gras, a Block Party. Coming down Flatbush Avenue, sitting on top of convertibles cars were Gil Hodges and his wife, next car, Roy Campanella and his wife, then Pitching hero Johnny Podres, Walter Alston the manager, Jackie Robinson, PeeWee Reese, Duke Snider, like Mick Jagger's Dancing in the streets, it was one memorable occasion, pure pandemonium, one that I will never forget. And Pete and Pat Hamill were saying, "I told you Danny, the Dodgers will be Champeens." (That's Brooklyn-eez for Champions).

12th Street

Papa was a quiet low profile man, a private sort of person. To him, his family always came first. That was his way of measuring himself as a success. Taking good care of your family meant he was a man. He had some friends that he'd past the time with and also enjoy playing cards, games like Sette-Mezza (Seven & ½) it's like 21 or Black Jack, and the other game was called Scoppa (Sweep) .He liked to play cards with Cumpare Narduce Spada or Frank Morabito who was called Pa-Cheech. Or if we had company he would play cards with the Paesans and relatives. Whenever Italian men got together, after the meal and coffee and pastries the men always like to play cards while the women talked women talk. My father never bragged about how much money he had or made, or as they say in card game lingo, "He never tipped his mitt." People just seemed to respect him, Italians, Jews and even those hot headed Irishmen on Nostrand Ave. They'd say things like "That Tony, he's alright, minds his business and keeps his mouth shut."

One hot summer day, I must have been nine years old, I was just hanging around doing nothing, Pete and Pat had to go with their mother to visit their aunt Josephine who wasn't feeling well.

My father comes over to me and said (in Italian), "What are you doing?" I said "Nothing." He said, "Wanna take a ride?" I said, "O.K." I got in his black shiny Pontiac and we were off to 12th street in Manhattan. He had some business to do. We get to 12th street, the store front was located in the middle of the block between 1st & 2nd Aveunes, and he finds a parking spot right in front of the store where he conducted his business. We get out of the car, walk to the door and enter. I had been there two or three times before, I remembered that gruffly looking Italian man that owned the place. His name was Manozza, always chomping on a DiNoble cigar. Anyway we walk in, hardly close the door when all of a sudden, this guy Manozza with his silver crew cut reaches down under the counter and pulls out a Thompson Machine gun and with two burst, shoots these two guys who were in the middle of the store, maybe 12 rounds, the two guys go down, there's blood all over the place, the noise alone scared the shit out of me. My father yells out to Manozza in a voice I never heard before "Mio Figlio, Mio Figlio Sta Qua (in English, "My Baby is here, My Baby is here"). Then with one swoop, picks me up, runs out to the car, opens the door, puts me in and said, "Stay here, don't move, I'll be right out."