

At a Crossroad

In Brooklyn, an Evolving Ethnicity

The Italian immigrants who came to Brooklyn, New York, in the mid-twentieth century are gradually aging and moving away. The Federation of Italian-American Organizations in Brooklyn is hoping to cultivate their cultural identity with new Italian language programs and community centers.

DELIZIA FLACCAVENTO

The streets of Bensonhurst, a Brooklyn neighborhood in New York City, are dotted with pasticceria, paesani clubs, pizzeria, barber shops and tailors—examples of how Italian immigrants overcame homesickness by incorporating the food and habits of the old country into their new neighborhood's daily rhythms.

But, as the last wave of these immigrants from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s ages, these last bastions of their culture are disappearing. Faced with watching their heritage fade away, some Brooklyn residents are using language, athletic, and social programs as modern methods of preserving their heritage and attracting young Italian Americans back to the neighborhoods their parents left.

"First-generation Italian Americans struggled and they succeeded in order to survive. That time is gone," says Brooklyn resident G. Jack Spatola, chairman of the Federation of Italian-American Organizations in Brooklyn, which represents 44 local associations. "A new generation has been brought up, an American generation that is proud of its Italian heritage but wants more than a few tables and decks of cards to be motivated to come together and share their common roots."

The Neighborhood

Things have changed considerably since the days when 18th Avenue between 65th and 75th Streets was an Italian "enclave" where newcomers could speak Italian to shop and socialize. Today, more recent Chinese and Russian immigrants are buying the businesses and houses that once belonged to Italians.

In the early 1980s, there were more than 600,000 Italian Americans in Brooklyn, according to research by sociologist Jerome Kruse, a professor at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Less than 200,000 remain, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Rising real estate costs coupled

with the desire for better schools and a less urban lifestyle have led second-generation Italian Americans to relocate to Staten Island, New Jersey and Long Island, New York.

As has already happened on Mulberry Street in Manhattan, this part of New York City is losing much of its Italian cultural identity. Although Brooklyn still has a number of pasticceria where one can smell and taste centuries of culinary tradition, the neighborhood is changing. In the streets, the sight of elderly men wearing tailored topcoats, cuffed trousers, and coppolas—traditional Sicilian floppy berets with short visors—reinforces the awareness that a way of life is fading away.

"People in a sense, they're nostalgic," said Brooklyn resident Jim Grundy, an employee of the Federation. "They see the change and they wish it could always stay the same, but it never is that way of course."

On 18th Avenue, 86th Street and in downtown Brooklyn near the port, there are many clubs of paesani—immigrants born in the same city, town, or village—such as the Society of the Citizens of Pozzallo, and the Sciacca, Vizzini, Militello and Palermo. Membership in these clubs is dwindling.

Emanuele Tumino, a retired carpenter who has lived in Brooklyn for nearly 45 years, spends his days talking of the old days, drinking coffee and playing cards at the Società Figli di Ragusa on 18th Avenue, a social club for immigrants born in the Sicilian town of Ragusa. "In those times, there was nothing in Italy, otherwise would we ever have come to America?" he said in January, explaining both the impetus that drove him to the United States and his longing for the old country's way of life.

"The immigrants, mostly from the South and from Sicily, were poor and unskilled and had a real need for the assistance and the comfort of the paesani societies, which also helped them maintain a feeling of closeness to home," explained Bay Ridge resident Frank Susino.

But despite their once-vital role, many of these social clubs are losing membership, acknowledged Salvatore Fronterre,

director of the Patronato Ital-Uil, a Brooklyn office funded by the Italian government that helps first-generation Italian Americans with bureaucratic problems and pensions. "Many clubs are closing down and nothing can really be done to stop history from taking its course," he said.

Saint Dominic's Roman Catholic Church on 20th Avenue in Bensonhurst is one of the very few churches still offering daily masses in Italian. Although Sunday services are full, Father Ellis Tommaseo predicts that won't last much longer. "I came to the U.S. less than one year ago; people were so happy and excited to hear that a priest would be assigned here from Italy," he said in January. "I found a very warm environment, but we are already fewer than we were when I got here. In less than 15 years, there will be nobody left."

Creating a Change

Father Tommaseo strongly believes that language is the key to preserving cultural heritage and, outside the church, has joined the Federation of Italian-American Organizations of Brooklyn language program. He teaches today's Italian to adults who know only old dialects and children who want to connect with their heritage.

Similarly, Federation members are working to attract young Italian Americans now scattered across New York City back to traditionally Italian communities.

"The community is concerned because the young people are not staying," said Grundy. "They're moving out to the suburbs and things like that."

Spatola says the disappearance of Brooklyn's Italian soul can be avoided only if the Italians remaining in the area unite to invest in leisure and cultural centers. Therefore, paesani social clubs could be replaced by Italian-American community centers offering athletic and leisure facilities, language and cooking classes, libraries, art galleries and movie screening spaces.

In May, the Federation was in the final negotiations to purchase a property in Bensonhurst for the area's first such Italian-American community center. An estimated \$6 million is needed to build the center, much of which could come from the New York City government, said Grundy, the Federation's project coordinator.

The Federation plans to open a two-story structure and gradually add two more stories, creating a full-fledged community center with gymnasium, swimming pool, community meeting center and classrooms, Grundy said. Eventually, the center would house all of the disparate youth outreach, language, and soccer programs now offered by the Federation all over Brooklyn.

Such programs can also provide support to the children of Italian immigrants. Born in Brooklyn to Sicilian parents, Salvina Barresi, 23, often feels trapped between the American drive to do what is best for the individual and the Italian pressure to do what is best for the family. She still cannot answer whether she is Italian, American, or both. "During my last trip to Italy, I was Sicilian in Rome, American in Sicily and Sicilian again in New York," she said.

Salvina's mother, Giovanna, said she considers herself an Italian living in America. Many immigrants feel similarly, but in at least one borough, some are carving out a place where their children can have the best of both worlds.

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