My Great-Great-Grandfather: The Man Who Took a Risk

My grandfather is proud of our family's history. He takes pride in the journey that took us from Sicily to the United States. I remember him unrolling the massive Sparacello family tree on his dining room table, dozens of names handwritten on the document. Near the top was the ancestor who started it all—my great-great-grandfather, Sebastiano Sparacello. I was curious about why Sebastiano would have left behind everything he had ever known, including his nine siblings and his parents, to start his new life here in New Orleans. I searched the Internet and found that Sebastiano's Sicily was a desperate place, with farmers like his family in poverty and in debt to the high taxes forced on them by their landlords. I learned that the life expectancy in Sicily then was only 35 years. My great-great-grandfather took the risk, and in 1890, he left his home in search of the last sliver of hope: America.

I learned a lot of information about Sebastiano from asking my grandfather, and I filled in the gaps by searching genealogy websites, such as Family Search. There, I found a manifest for the ship that took my ancestor from Palermo to New Orleans—the S.S. Entella. I learned that he was 21 years old, traveled alone, carried a single bag, and slept in steerage. I discovered that the Entella carried 841 Italians and that the trip took four weeks. I counted the handwritten notes in each page's margins, which tallied how many of those passengers were men, women, and children. I was surprised that so many travelers on the boat—more than 500—were adult men traveling alone, just like Sebastiano. A 30-year-old man named Salvatore Fardella died of a "pulmonary affection" eight days before the ship landed, and he was buried at sea. His death must have been devastating for the passengers. From a *Times-Picayune* newspaper article about the boat's landing that I found on Newspapers.com, I learned another fact—that a boy was born

during the voyage. I believe this birth served as a sign of the new beginnings that so many immigrants on the ship were searching for in their journey to America.

Just like I researched to find out what life was like to make my ancestor leave Sicily, I researched what greeted him in the new world. I was shocked at what I found. I had always heard that there was prejudice against Italians coming into America at this time, but I read a historian named Jessica Barbata Jackson, who disputed this notion. She surveyed New Orleans newspapers and found that while newspapers from the East Coast showed that citizens were prejudiced against Italians, residents of the Crescent City were mainly welcoming. Well, at least the city had been a welcoming place when my ancestor left for its shores, but something happened halfway during his voyage that changed everything: the then-New Orleans Police Chief, David Hennessy, was shot to death in the street, allegedly by Italians. By the time Sebastiano arrived at the Mississippi River Quarantine Station on October 29, 1890, the city's once-welcoming attitude had turned completely hostile.

According to historian Jackson, after Hennessy's murder, the rhetoric in New Orleans newspapers "began to more noticeably associate Italians with criminal activity." This hostile environment was the world my ancestor entered—a city where Sicilians like him were widely presumed to be criminals. Despite these dangers, Sebastiano settled in the French Quarter, in a neighborhood so heavily populated with Sicilian immigrants that it was nicknamed Little Palermo—a slice of home in a place that probably felt worlds away.

In researching Sebastiano's life, I also learned about an event that happened less than five months after he arrived in the city. New Orleans became the site of one of the worst acts of mob violence in American history. On March 14, 1891, thousands of New Orleanians stormed the parish prison and lynched eleven Italian Americans who were accused of Hennessy's

murder—many of whom had just been acquitted. Shockingly, the men who were responsible for the lynching were some of the most influential and powerful members of society, such as lawyers and doctors. Both Louisiana's governor and the New Orleans mayor turned a blind eye, enabling the bloodshed.

It must have been a terrifying time to be an Italian in New Orleans. But Sebastiano stayed. Without even knowing English and relying only on a Sicilian dialect as his guide, he navigated life in a city that did not accept him. He knew that he could make a home, that he was more than the city's opinion of him. So, he found people who did accept him. He married the love of his life—a New Orleans-born woman—and had four children. He built a strong family.

In 1903, my great-grandfather was born, the youngest of Sebastiano's children. He fulfilled his father's dream of achieving success in America and became a talented, sought-after baker at Maison Blanche, the most prestigious department store in New Orleans at the time. In the next generation, my grandfather built on the dream as the first in our family to graduate from college and achieve success as a petroleum engineer. Carrying the dream forward, my father became the first in the family to earn a graduate degree and went on to lead as a finance director. I hope I will be able to make Sebastiano proud of my future.

What did I learn from Sebastiano's story? I learned not to be afraid. I learned to always have hope, and I learned not to give up even when it looks like everything is stacked against you. Now, I work to overcome my own fears; I work hard in school so that I will have a better life, and I work to make Sebastiano proud. I sometimes wonder what he would think of me, four generations later, living a life so different from the one he lived back in Sicily, a life that is only possible because he swallowed his fears and sailed across the ocean all by himself. I think he would be proud, and I think he would be glad that he got on that boat.

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