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YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BAMBINA!

Rose D. Scherini

WHEN I WAS A GRADUATE STUDENT at Berkeley preparing for my dissertation research on the Italian American community of San Francisco, I read a 1922 master's thesis, "A Study of the Mental Inferiority of the Italian Immigrant." This essay is, in part, a response to that thesis and its conclusion that "Italians are not educable until they are thoroughly Americanized."¹

What follows is a description of the academic careers of three women, all daughters of Italian immigrants, and all graduates of Berkeley who have earned doctorates.

Angela Capobianco Little

Angela Little, biological scientist and now emeritus professor, was born in San Francisco; her father emigrated from Italy about 1912; her mother was a German emigré. Angela attended Sherman Elementary and Galileo High Schools. A serious student, she nonetheless received the impression that the teachers considered the "Italian kids not up to snuff." At Galileo, her English teacher "treated me like dirt." After Angela had turned in her first paper, the teacher accused her of having someone else write it! When Angela convinced her accuser that this was her own work, the teacher said, "You're certainly not like your sister." Angela's older sister had been at Galileo but not in this instructor's class so it was soon discovered that the confusion was over another Capobianco, *not* a relative. Many years later, when Professor Little and her husband were attending a conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, they found themselves in conversation with another scientist and his wife; although Angela did not recognize the other woman, it developed that she was a teacher at Galileo. The teacher said that Angela would not recognize Galileo today, exclaiming "The trouble is now caused by the blacks and Chicanos," when earlier "The trouble was from the Italians." Angela had the last word when she retorted, "I was one of those Italians."

Her experiences at Galileo were not all negative, as the principal was instrumental in arranging for Angela to receive a four-year scholarship to Berkeley. In 1940, she received her bachelor's degree in biochemistry and bacteriology, intending to go to medical school; however, without funds to continue her education, she went to work as a medical lab technician. Then in 1942 she became one of the first women research chemists at Standard Oil; there were only two others.

After World War II, she married and had one child, returning to the campus in 1951 to get a master's in biochemistry. Because she had been in the Women's Army Corps she was eligible for veterans' educational benefits. At Berkeley she encountered another kind of preju-



Angela C. Little with Professor Allan Miller at first Peace and Conflict Studies Graduation, 1986. *Courtesy of Angela Little.*

dice. When the chair of biochemistry questioned her about her marital status and children, he then asked, "Why do you want to get an advanced degree? Why don't you just go home and have more babies?" Realizing then that she would not be able to work with this chairman, Angela instead gained admission to the food science and technology department. She obtained a master's in food science, remaining at the university to teach classes on nutritional science and on visual perception in architecture; she did original research on color vision and developed a mathematical system for measuring reflectants of biological materials. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in agricultural chemistry in 1969 and received a faculty appointment, eventually attaining the rank of full professor in the Department of Nutritional Science.

Throughout her career, Professor Little has worked within many academic disciplines: she was faculty sponsor for the West Coast Council for Nutrition and Anthropology; consultant on food and cancer to the National Research Council of the National Academy of Science; technical adviser to the International Commission on Illumination; she participated in the development of the curriculum for the new College of Natural Resources (which absorbed the former College of Agricultural Sciences); was a founder and first chair of a new Peace and Conflict Studies major; helped found the Re-entry Students Program; and chaired the Committee on Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities. She has authored numerous scientific and technical publications, and is co-author of *The Color of Foods*.²

Since her retirement in 1985, Professor Little has continued her participation in Berkeley's academic life as Academic Ombudsman (for faculty and students); chair of the advisory board to the Women's Resource Center; chair of the Committee on Undergraduate Scholarships and Honors; member of the advisory board and selection committee, Incentive Awards Program (for high school students); a member of the board of the Math/Science Network; and past chair of the Berkeley Emeriti Association. In San Francisco where she now lives, her activities include teaching classes in the history of medicine at the Fromm Institute / University of San Francisco; chairing the Bay Area History of Medicine Club; participating on an advisory group of San Francisco's Senior Central / Council on Aging; participating in the School Volunteers Program; and at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital, volunteering in their Healthwise Seniors Program, Physician Referral Service, and HIV CARE.

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum

Lucia Birnbaum describes herself as "a feminist multi-cultural historian." Her father emigrated from Italy in 1912; her mother was born in Kansas City, the daughter of Italian immigrants. Lucia was a good student and received a scholarship to the University of Missouri at Kansas City, which she attended in spite of earlier advice from her elementary school principal that she should plan to go to a community college because "Italians don't do well at the university."

Lucia dropped out of college in 1944 to work in a wartime industry. Two years later, she married and moved to Berkeley when her husband was admitted to the University of California for doctoral work in physics. The couple lived in Albany Village, where the rent was twenty-nine dollars per month. Lucia completed her senior year at Berkeley, received her A. B. in 1947, and her M.A. in 1950. In 1964, she received a Ph.D. in history. During this time, she also gave birth to three sons.



Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum at graduation in 1948. Courtesy of Lucia Birnbaum.

Lucia's career has focused on research and writing, and she has had faculty appointments as lecturer in American Studies at Berkeley and assistant professor of history at San Francisco State University. After four years in the latter appointment, she was not granted tenure apparently because she—along with one hundred other professors—supported the 1968 student third world strike at State. After several research trips to Italy, Lucia wrote a book on the women's liberation movement there: *Liberazione della Donna: Feminism in Italy*,³ published in the United States in 1986 and awarded an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. A second book, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy*,⁴ received a Women's Heritage award as one of ten best non-fiction books written by women in 1993-95. The third in this trilogy, *Godmothers and African Origins: le dea madre ~ le comari*,⁵ is in process.

In recent years, Dr. Birnbaum's many activities have included an appointment as a research associate at what at that time was the Center for the Study, Education and Advancement of Women and in the history department at Berkeley. She has been a visiting scholar at the Graduate Theological Union and at the American Academy in Rome and also an affiliated scholar at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Stanford University. Other appointments have included adjunct professor at the California College of Arts and Crafts, visiting professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and an advisory board member in the Italian Research and Study Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

Lucia's deep interest in multiculturalism has been expressed both in her publications and in her activities with Italian American groups. She is past president of the western chapter of the American Italian Historical Association, and serves on the advisory boards of *Voices in Italian Americana* (a biannual literary and cultural review) and *Italian Americana* (a publication of the American Italian Historical Association). She has lectured in a colloquium series, "Frontiers in African American Studies," in the African American Studies department at Berkeley. Her research and writing on the African origins of Europeans led to her being inducted into the African American Multicultural Hall of Fame two years ago.

Rose D. Scherini

I am the daughter of Italian immigrants who settled in San Rafael in 1921. Like the two women described above, I was a serious student from the time of my early years in the small parochial school I attended. Even though my first language was the Italian dialect of my parents, I have no recollection of being directed away from college or any feeling of being treated differently by teachers. Being in a parochial school with almost half of the student body of Italian descent probably made a difference. I do remember thinking that it probably was better to be Irish or English instead of Italian, however. My parents did not speak proper English; the priests and nuns were mostly Irish; I was self-conscious about my lunches of thick crusty-bread sandwiches as the "American" kids' sandwiches were made of white bread with the crusts cut off. (I wouldn't touch that soggy bread now!)

I received my A. B. in social welfare from Berkeley in 1946. While an undergraduate, I lived in Epworth Hall on Channing Way, now the site of the Institute of Industrial Re-



Rose D. Scherini, June 1946.
Courtesy of author.

lations. There was only one other resident of Italian descent while I was there, and none that I knew of in my classes. (A group of about twenty Epworth residents from the '40s still meet for lunch annually.)

After graduation, I held various positions in Alameda County government, including juvenile court investigator and personnel analyst, and then returned to the campus in the 1960s as a resource specialist in the Student Counseling Center. Later, I organized and directed the first job placement center at Chabot College in Hayward. After my second trip to Italy (where most of my relatives live), I decided to return to school to pursue a degree in anthropology. I received a Ph.D. in educational anthropology from Berkeley in 1976, thirty years after the award of my bachelor's degree. My dissertation was on the Italian American community of San Francisco. Until retirement in 1986, I was a research analyst in the university's Office of Student Research where I administered and analyzed surveys of students and wrote reports on topics such as immigrant and refugee students, transfer students, and the status of high school education.

Since my retirement I have been an independent researcher and writer focusing on the story of the treatment of Italian Americans during World War II, a little-known story about the classification of 600,000 Italian Americans (then the largest foreign-born group in the country) as enemy aliens. Several hundred of them were interned as a consequence of an FBI "dangerous" list. Several thousand were moved from their homes in strategic areas along the coast or near military bases or war industries. This research has led to several publications and to an exhibition in San Francisco in 1994 and in the East.⁶ The publication and exhibition from my research have led to the introduction of legislation in both the United States Congress and the California Legislature to recognize these events and to include this story in the public school curriculum.

These brief accounts of the careers of three Italian American women belie the thesis of "The Mental Inferiority of the Italian Immigrant." I do not posit that our stories are typical, but I do want to underscore the fact that all three of us are offspring of those Italian immigrants who arrived without much education in the second and third decades of this century. In all three cases, it was the father who was especially supportive of the daughter's education; in two cases, we were the only siblings to earn academic degrees. The early twentieth century stereotype that Italian immigrants were anti-education and that their children were poor students has faded, but unfortunately, similar stereotypes exist today for other groups. Such generalizations typically are based on the "worst" case scenarios and do not take into consideration such things as the economic and cultural situations that afflict new immigrants.

For Angela, Lucia, and Rose, the University of California has played a central role in our lives. So has our Italian American identity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Edna L. Dessery, "A Study of the Mental Inferiority of the Italian Immigrant" (master's thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1922).
- 2 Angela C. Little and Gordon MacKinney, *The Color of Foods* (Westport, CT : Avi Publishing, 1962).
- 3 Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della Donna: Feminism in Italy* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).
- 4 Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).
- 5 One chapter has been published in *MultiAmerica: Essays in Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*, ed. Ishmael Reed (New York: Viking, 1997).
- 6 Rose D. Scherini, "Executive Order 9066 and Italian Americans: The San Francisco Story," *California History*, 70:4 (Winter 1991-1992), 366-377; "When Italian Americans Were Enemy Aliens," in *Enemies Within: Italians and Other Internees in Canada and Abroad*, Franca Iacovetta, Roberto Perin, Angelo Principe, eds. (University of Toronto Press, in press 1999); and an exhibition, "Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans Were Enemy Aliens," and catalog edited by Lawrence DiStasi, (American Italian Historical Association, 1994), Scherini, curator, and sponsored by the Western chapter of the American Italian Historical Association. The exhibition was first shown in San Francisco in 1994 and is still being shown on both coasts. My research is ongoing; obtaining documentation of these fifty-year-old events has been difficult. Many of the principals are deceased; some government documents are still classified and take years to be released. Recently I received over six hundred pages of FBI documents which I requested more than *eight* years ago.



1925 Blue and Gold.



Before the builed castle of her dreams
She stands, and sees her dearest wish come
true;
And as her hand, with eager surety
Knocks at the door, we cry, "Good luck to
you!"

Pelican Woman's Number, February 1910.