

OPINION

MY VIEW

I'm so proud to be a Sicilian-American

Lee Coppola, a fellow Sicilian-American, recently reviewed "My Two Italies" for The News. It's a book by Joseph Luzzi that tells of the disdain many northern Italians have for "southerners" (those from the south of Italy and Sicily). It led me to reflect on an experience I had in the '50s while serving with the U.S. Army in Germany.

Bill Tuffillaro, Tom Tirone and I, all soldier-sons of Sicilian immigrants, were on leave in Copenhagen, Denmark. On our first night, we visited the famed Tivoli Gardens, an open public park – sort of a combination of Delaware Park and the old Crystal Beach Amusement Park.

As we strolled the flowered paths, we noticed three striking young ladies, walking and speaking to each other in Italian. Being young soldiers starved for female



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not Italian. And "Italians" today consider Sicilian as the language of the poor and ignorant, even though it was the first Romance language, which preceded the Tuscan dialect now considered official "Italian."

Most Americans of "Italian" descent are the offspring of southern Italians and Sicilians. Buffalo, especially, has a high number of Sicilian-Americans.

I'm a Sicilian-American. I'm the son of immigrants who left a land of history and beauty, of po-

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companionship, we politely approached them and managed to convey the fact that we were the sons of "Italian" immigrants.

Things went well until one of them asked, "From which part of Italy were your parents?"

In unison, Bill, Tom and I proudly replied, "Sicilia!"

The three girls froze in their tracks, faces expressionless. Without a word, they performed an almost-military about-face and walked briskly away, leaving the three of us open-mouthed.

"Why?" you might ask.

Simple: Their northern Italian mothers had warned them, "Don't you *ever* speak to a Sicilian!"

Even today, Sicilian immigrants' children, who incorrectly believe they are visiting their roots when in Rome or Florence, are surprised that the locals not only don't understand their attempts to speak the language, but are distinctly unfriendly.

The reason is that the language we descendants of Sicilians heard at home was the Sicilian language,

ets and dreamers, volcanoes and olive trees. A land that taught the world what a modern nation could be, before most modern nations existed. A land called the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, from Naples and Abruzzo to Messina and Palermo, that was subsumed into the new "Kingdom of Italy" after the unification.

My parents left because, for all its lore and loveliness, and their fierce pride in it, Sicily was poor and demeaned, and could offer little hope for their family's future.

My heritage includes composers Bellini and Scarlatti, and writers Verga and Sciascia. I'm Joe DiMaggio, Frank Capra, Armand Assante, Sonny Bono, Iron Eyes Cody, Ben Gazzara, Cyndi Lauper, Chuck Mangione, Al Pacino, Louie Prima, Pete Rugolo, Frank Zappa and thousands of others who have made the world wonder, laugh and sing with our artistry.

I'm one of millions of one-, two- and three-star mothers who anguished while their sons fought for the American Dream in World War II. I'm one of many gold-star mothers, whose sons never returned.

I've never met a mafioso, nor wanted to, nor played at being one.

I'm a Sicilian-American, and proud to be one.