Mary Fray: Immigrant Stories

Transcription

My grandmother, Mary Fray or “Be-Ma” as we called her, spent the last sixty years of her life in a small western suburb of Chicago. She was far away from where she was born in Italy as Anna Maria DiMillo. “Maree,” as she was called by most of her family, was born on July 23, 1925 in Roccamarice, in the Pescara province of Italy. She was the first-born of five children. Her parents, Rosalia and Giovanni, adored her and she had a wonderful young childhood in her small town. Her father was a musician, barber, and tailor, while her mother stayed at home to care for the family.

My grandmother’s family decided to leave Italy when the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini took control of the country. A part of the family had their ski resort taken over by government agents and life was difficult for people in small towns like Roccamarice. This was a scary time for many families in Italy. A better life was to be found in the United States for both economic and social reasons.

When my grandma was six, she, her mother, and little sister were admitted to the United States via Ellis Island. A year earlier, they were denied entry because of an eye problem my grandmother had, but after a year of treatment and healing back in Italy, they were finally admitted to the U.S. and settled in Portland, Maine.

Growing up as an Italian immigrant in the 1930s and 40s had its challenges. Learning English, being Catholic, and getting good jobs was not easy for everyone. Being young though, my grandmother picked up English quickly and did very well in school. After she graduated from Portland High School in 1942, she decided to leave her family and move to Chicago. She was admitted to the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied fabric and design. She also worked at the USO as a hostess during World War II. She loved her free and exciting new life with her new friends. Her traditional Italian family back in Portland did not always know what to think!

In Chicago, my grandmother met William Fray whose mother was a Swedish immigrant. They were married in the early 1950s, and different cultures and religions came together. Anne Maria DiMillo was now Mary Fray of Geneva, Illinois, but her Italian roots were always in her. She loved opera, Italy, and, most of all, her family. She had two brothers serve in the U.S. Army during World War II. Her children lived good lives, and she always wanted her grandchildren to bring her back to Roma, the Eternal City. Her spirit and love are forever in both countries.