

I'm working on a memoir that recounts the stories of two Italian immigrant families – the Cadamagnanis (my father, Emilio, his mother, Angelina, his father, Giuseppe, and his sister, Mary) and the Della Giacomas (my father's aunt Maria, her husband, Ernesto, and their seven children). The families were torn apart, but then brought together, after the 1916 murder (in Indiana) of my grandfather Giuseppe at the hands of his brother-in-law Ernesto. The book will go back and forth between events in the early 1900s and the present. Here is a present day chapter.

Vital Records

by Cathy Cadamagnani Grainger
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During one of my extended visits to Tucson after my mother died, my father and I waded through dusty boxes of old family records stored in the shed out back. I loved walking barefoot through the carport into the shed with its smooth, cool concrete floor. It smelled of machine oil and was illuminated by a single light bulb that turned on with the tug of a string. Looking through the family archives was a pleasant way for my father and me to pass the time together since it was just the two of us now.

I was looking for records that would support my application for Italian citizenship. I needed my father's birth certificate as well as the Italian birth certificates of my paternal grandparents, their marriage license, U.S. naturalization papers, and death certificates. To apply for Italian citizenship, I was required to chronicle every major life event on my father's side of the family with official records certified by the county, state, or country of origin. No exceptions. Despite his meticulous filing system, my father possessed very few of these records.

For years I wanted to become an Italian citizen. In addition to the practical benefits of having an Italian passport, such as the ability to work anywhere in the European Union and live in Italy for extended periods of time without having to get a visa, there were sentimental reasons as well. I wanted to honor my heritage. But mostly, I love Italy. It feels like home to me. And, as I've learned, the feeling is mutual. The Italian government wants to encourage descendants of the Italian diaspora to return to the homeland. Not surprising, considering that from 1900 to 1910 - the period that my grandparents left Italy - over two million Italians emigrated to "America" or through its ports.

Unlike the United States, where citizenship is conferred on an individual who is born within its borders under a system known as *jure solis*, Italian citizenship is conferred primarily by right of blood, or *jure sanguinis*. To Italy, place of birth is largely irrelevant. The Italian government recognizes as Italian citizens the first generation of children born to Italian emigrants in other countries, so long as the children are born before their parents become naturalized citizens of their new country. The law also extends Italian citizenship to the second and third generations, like me and my children.

On my path to Italian citizenship, I learned that *qualifying* was the easy part. The real challenge was tracking down and gathering the documents necessary to complete the application process. Surprisingly, my father didn't possess any record of his own birth, his parents' marriage, or his father's death. He claimed that the courthouse in Indiana that stored the records had burned down. Undeterred, I set out to find these records.

It was true. The Vermillion County courthouse had burned down. Twice, in fact. Eventually, though, I was able to acquire my father's birth certificate from the State of Indiana Department of Health and my grandparents' marriage record from a neighboring county. Finding my grandfather's death certificate, however, proved more challenging. I knew he was murdered in or around Clinton, which is in Vermillion County, and I knew the exact date of his death, February 26, 1916 – two days before my father's third birthday.

But Vermillion County had no record of his death.

"Are you sure?" I begged the courthouse clerk over the phone. "It's spelled C-A-D as in Dog, A-M as in Mary, A-G-N as in Nancy, A-N as in Nancy-I. His first name was Giuseppe, but it might be recorded as Joseph."

But the clerk found nothing. My grandfather was shot and killed on a Saturday evening in an Indiana mining camp town that doesn't even exist today. It was possible that his body was taken to a neighboring town or county coroner. I called a few nearby counties, but still nothing. One of the county clerks suggested I try the Indiana State Library.

The Indiana State Library archives official records from all 92 Indiana counties, but in order to find my grandfather's death certificate, they needed a place to start. I had his name and a date of death, but that wasn't enough. They needed the name of the county that issued the death certificate and that I didn't have. How was I going to persuade them to search county-by-county for my grandfather's death certificate? It had to be in there somewhere. But in the back of my mind I worried about sending them on a wild goose chase because of the slight chance that his death certificate was issued in Illinois since Vermillion County sits on the state border. Frustrated, the library receptionist transferred my call to the genealogy department. Genealogy? We're talking about a murder here, I wanted to say.

When my call went through to the genealogy specialist, I told her about our family tragedy. Her name was Betty Warren and, like many researchers, she relished the challenge of finding something that eluded others. Undaunted by the fact that I had no official place of death, she put me on hold and went to work. After about five minutes, Betty came back on the line.

"Found it," she said. "Knox County. Certificate of Death for one Joseph Cadamagnani. But, oh, honey, you have the wrong date. It says here that he died on July 31, 1916."

I told her there must be some mistake. I was certain my grandfather died two days before my father's February 28th birthday. There surely couldn't another Joseph Cadamagnani in Knox County,

"Wait," Betty said, "it says here he was an infant - only five months and five days old."

I knew that my grandmother was pregnant when my grandfather was killed, but only then did I learn that the baby's name was Joseph, after my grandfather, and that he was born two weeks after the murder, on March 14, 1916. The infant died just a few months later. From influenza, Betty said.

After a little more digging, Betty found my grandfather's death certificate. My elation at finding the record did not compare to the grief that hit me when I realized the tragedy we'd stumbled upon. Betty and I talked a little longer. Like mourners attending a funeral, we paid homage to the deceased and their survivors and talked about how virtuous and strong they were.

When I received the two death certificates in the mail, I examined them closely. The name that appeared on my grandfather's death certificate was "Joe Cadamagnani." Joe? It annoyed me that they didn't record his given name, Giuseppe, but instead substituted an Americanized nickname that all but stripped him of his Italian identity. The cause of my grandfather's death was recorded as "Gunshot wound - Homicide."

The death certificate of the infant revealed that he had been sick with influenza for two months before he died. His birth date was originally recorded as February 26, 1916, the day my grandfather died, but someone crossed it out in ink and written "March 14" in its place. There was something about that handwritten correction that gave me the chills. Obviously, my grandmother knew the baby wasn't born the day my grandfather died, but given her obvious grief, it's possible she simply made a mistake. But maybe the mistake was Freudian and reveals that she considered this baby an extension or even a reincarnation of my grandfather and that he would keep Giuseppe's memory alive and help her get through a difficult time in her life. Tragically, it was not to be.

There is an expression in Italian -- *Finche la vita, c'e speranza*. As long as there's life, there's hope. Angelina's sisters in Italy begged my grandmother to return, but she insisted on staying in America to raise her two children because, as she stubbornly believed, America was the land of opportunity.

With the help of a tenacious librarian, I was one step closer to Italian citizenship. But research can be tricky. When you start digging, you don't always know what you're going to find. In the records, there's life and a story.