

THOMAS SPACCARELLI

INTERNATIONALISM

I grew up in Chicago in a working-class neighborhood of apartment buildings, bungalows and two-flats. We lived in a two-flat, a house that has two apartments, one on top of the other. My Italian grandparents lived on the first floor, and we lived on the second—upstairs, downstairs, if you will. Upstairs we were the typical American working-class family. My mother and father both worked. We had an abundance of food, good clothing, and a summer vacation every year that included a wide variety of sights: Miami Beach, Washington, D.C., the Badlands and Mt. Rushmore, etc. We were in many ways the American Dream family. My grandparents downstairs had minimal educations in Europe; both my parents had graduated from high school, and I was on my way to a college education and more. Upstairs we ate "American," watched the *Mickey Mouse Club* and *American Bandstand*, went to Friday-night activity night and sock hop at our high school, and tried every new fad that came along: Velveeta, Diet-rite Cola, and what have you. Downstairs, my grandparents spoke Italian and my grandmother fixed meals that were out of this world. We didn't really have a name for that kind of cooking back then, but when I think of it now, I know exactly what it was: gourmet!

My grandfather had come over to the U.S. when he was twelve years old. He moved around from job to job and state to state, but finally ended up in Chicago where he landed a permanent job distributing bread and pies to grocery stores. At first he used a wagon and a team of mules, and later progressed to a van. As seems appropriate, he was a life-long teamster—the real thing, you might say. My grandmother was born in Chicago, but her family moved back to Italy almost immediately after her birth. When her father died, my great-grandmother took her family to the south of France, so my grandmother grew up in Provence, speaking French in school. Although the family moved back to the U.S. when she was sixteen, grandmother Bambina (born on Christmas Day so appropriately named for the Christ

child) thought of herself as French. The basic situation of my childhood years then, was a typical American family upstairs, with my immigrant grandparents downstairs. I grew up hearing daily conversation in Italian and listening to my grandmother sing in French as she fussed and cooked in the kitchen.

It might be hard for some people to believe today, but back in the 1950's, America's public schools were top-notch. I attended the same school my father had attended, and indeed, I had the same first-grade teacher he had. When I got to fifth-grade the school began to offer Spanish classes, and I immediately found the subject I most enjoyed! Perhaps it was because I was always listening to other languages in my home, or perhaps it was the beauty of Miss Lucente, the young fifth-grade teacher I had a crush on. Either way, I took to Spanish immediately, and came to love every lesson, every dialogue, every verb form. Spanish classes continued throughout grammar school and then in high school also, where I dutifully came to have a crush on Miss Stotland, my favorite Spanish teacher ever. I became her assistant and even got to grade the quizzes of the other students. I also began my study of Latin since I thought that every educated person had to have some Latin. My family had no experience of college, so as the time approached to decide on where to go to school, I chose the local branch of the University of Illinois, largely a commuter college. I was chosen to participate in an honors program, and for that we had to choose either French or German. I chose German, and studied it on and off during the whole of my undergraduate years. I had so many courses in German that it was my minor field. Spanish, of course, was my major. Also during those undergraduate years, I was able to squeeze in one year of French, enough to start conversing with my grandmother in the language she most loved.

Back in the 1960's there were not very many American year-abroad programs, so I took a leave of absence from my college and registered for the Program in Hispanic Studies at the University of Granada in the south of Spain. This was the academic year of 1967-68. Franco was alive and well, and Spain was in the midst of the economic boom it had been hoping for since the end of its civil war in the 1930's. The year in Spain changed me forever. I immediately took to Spain's food and its customs, such as taking a break from one to four in the afternoon in order to have the main meal of the day and spend quality time with one's family. Despite the dictatorship, I liked the freedom I perceived in Spaniards, who were willing to talk about any topic, and usually had a very strong opinion about everything. It was in