

SICILY

Chasing documents to prove my bloodline



Like many tourists, the author reenacts a scene from “The Godfather Part III” on the steps of the Palermo opera house. *Jennifer Sontag*

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After seeing my friend Jennifer Sontag go through the process a few years ago, I was motivated. Not only did she gain citizenship, but she moved to Terrasini, her great-grandparent’s hometown in Sicily. There, she started advising others on the process.

“Other people were asking questions that I could answer from my research and experience,” she says. “That started conversations and I started helping them. Over the next 10 months, I helped 12 other people be successfully recognized as Italian. During the time of helping those dozen people, I realized how much time, skill and knowledge goes into this. That spawned the idea that this could be a business.”

The Italian Citizenship Concierge was born. I became a beneficiary of Sontag’s knowledge.

Sontag is a serial entrepreneur. When she lived in Cleveland from 2013 to 2018, she operated the women’s clothing boutique Makers by Marks in Tremont. (At the time, she was Jennifer Marks.)

If she could do it, so could I. Or could I? As the keeper of stories and genealogy for my mother’s Sicilian-American family, I was interested in the cultures and people who came before me. I wanted to excavate more about the past. I had the dates and places to work with, but I didn’t speak or write Italian.

To dig deeper, I needed official copies of birth and marriage records from my great-grandparents’ birthplace. Getting them would give me an opportunity to learn more about my own place in history.

But how would I travel to Sicily? Where would I get records? How would I communicate my interest to Italian-speaking town officials? How much would it cost? What would I do with it? I was nearly paralyzed by the unknowns.

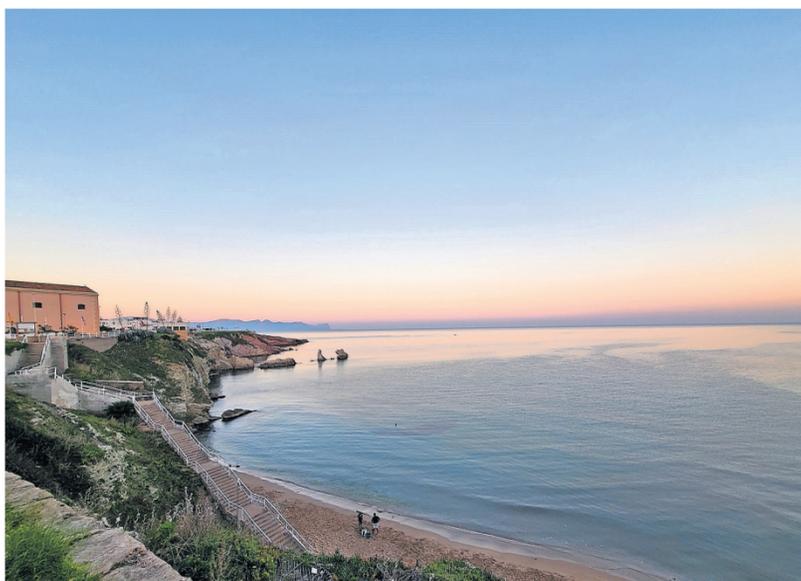
Sontag offered help and encouraged me to visit. In a moment of post-pandemic restlessness, I abandoned my fears and leaned into that citizenship quest. After all, you only live once.

I bought a round-trip Lufthansa ticket between Cleveland and Palermo. My plan was to spend a few days collecting documents, but the flight cost \$1,100 whether I stayed four days or two weeks. So, I extended my trip. I’m grateful I did, as I learned much about my family’s culture. For one thing, being Sicilian feels different from being mainland Italian. (But that’s another story.)

In October 2022, we drove Sontag’s little white Fiat through the northern Sicilian countryside to Grotte in the Sicilian province of Agrigento. Grotte is about 9 miles from the province capital, also named Agrigento. The capital was founded by the Greeks in 531 B.C. and is known for the remnants of ancient temples found there. Despite proximity to a city with ancient roots (and to my disap-



A house in Grotte, Sicily, Italy from the author’s great grandparents’ neighborhood. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*



The Tyrrhenian Sea is just a few blocks from Jennifer Sontag’s Terrasini apartment. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*



San Francesco Church in Grotte, Sicily, Italy, is closed. The town has fewer than half the residents it did in the early 1900s. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*

pointment), Grotte is unremarkable and not part of any tourist trail.

We arrived at 11:30 a.m., just before the Sicilians break for riposo. The office would close at 1 p.m. and not reopen until 5 p.m. (Riposo is the Italian version of a siesta. Businesses and shops close. Workers go home for a long lunch and/or rest.)

“I suoi bisnonni sono nati qui, a Grotte,” Sontag told city officials. Basically, that meant my great-grandparents were from Grotte. Using documents that I’d brought from home (downloaded from Ancestry.com), she communicated that I wanted certified originals of birth and marriage certificates. After a lot of smiles and nods, we were told to return the next day.

When we returned, the administrators provided the documents. Then they took a large, 150-year-old leather-bound record book from the shelf and pointed to handwritten names on aged paper where census information was written about my great-grandparents. We identified their neighborhood – near San Francesco Chiesa (St. Francis Church). And so, I walked their streets wondering which of the crumbling two-story stone structures had held the young Ciranni family in the late 19th century.

The sad state of the neighborhood was discouraging. Like many people, I envisioned being part of something bigger, somehow grander. It may have been more interesting to be chased by a woman with an artichoke a la the Di Grassos of “The White Lotus.”

Now that I’ve gathered the toughest documents, it’s time to collect those from rural Pennsylvania where my family settled after arriving in the United States. I’m not sure if or what I’ll learn about myself and my family, but I’m on a mission.