

# Io Leggo e Scrivo

by James L. Doti

**G**iuseppe Doti was a reader and writer. He had other jobs that paid money, but when asked what he did for a living, he would say, “Io leggo e scrivo.”

After emigrating to America, he found his ability to read and write a rare talent in the Chicago community known as Little Italy. Illiterate immigrants needed a sympathetic soul-mate to read and write letters passing to and from the old country. His letters arranged marriages, kept waiting wives and lovers content and, in general, soothed the ravaged nerves and aching anxieties of disconnected people.

In reading and writing letters, Giuseppe grew to understand the very soul of a person. His ability in conveying a person's passions and petty pretensions with dignity and spirit made him a reader and writer of the first rank. Giuseppe was conscious of his high calling and devoted following, and he dressed the part.

Upon returning home in the evening after work, Giuseppe had his dinner and then his toilet. After meticulously grooming himself and spending an inordinate amount of time trimming a Hitleresque mustache instead of the hair he no longer had, he would put on a freshly laundered white shirt and starched collar. Giuseppe always sported a maroon tie that he felt complemented his piercing blue eyes. The double-breasted tweed suit he generally wore made him appear even shorter and stouter than he actually was. And although he had

a noticeable limp from a stroke he had suffered several years earlier when he was 63, Giuseppe forsook the use of a cane, which he felt to be more suitable for a person much older than he.

Every evening he listened to the phonograph that invariably played a Puccini or Verdi opera between 7:30 and 8:00, but at 8:00 sharp, he retired to a back room of his humble flat to receive his clients.

They would come and sit expectantly in the kitchen, clutching their letters, anxiously awaiting the reading that would relieve or justify their heaviest anxieties. Upon entering the back room, they would clasp Giuseppe's hand in both of theirs and then silently present a non-monetary offering. Feigning surprise, Giuseppe would refuse acceptance of the offering until the giver's insistence reached the appropriate level of intensity. At that point, the charade would end by Giuseppe humbly tilting his head and bowing in acceptance.

The abundant quantities of homemade wines, basement-cured salami, prosciutto, and mortadella, dried pepperulo, canned giardiniera, and aged provolone cheese amassed by Giuseppe were ceremoniously doled out by his wife Irena to their children and grandchildren. Irena drew the line once when she refused to admit into their flat a recent immigrant who brought a live chicken as a token of appreciation. When word of this spread through Little Italy, it reinforced the neighbors' opinion that Irena's noble lineage made her too proud to dress a chicken.

Giuseppe already had taken care of three clients when he got up to greet Bruno Pucci, a recent

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*Giuseppe Doti*

immigrant, bearing a crumpled letter and bottle of homemade Chianti. For once, Giuseppe was greatly pleased to receive an offering. It was well known that Bruno Pucci's family made the finest wine in Little Italy.

Bruno sat and looked at the room around him. Unlike most Italian-decorated rooms that were thick with heavy furniture and religious ornamentation, this room was sparsely furnished with a card table and two chairs. The room was illuminated by a single light bulb dangling at the end of a three-foot cord. Two yellowed etchings, one of Marcus Aurelius and the other of Dante Alighieri, ornamented the heavily cracked walls.

Handing the letter to Giuseppe, Bruno said, "I'm-a worry about Italia, Signore Doti. Dey vote-a for Mussolini, and who know what dat-a jackass gonna do."

After carefully unfolding the letter and slowly putting on his wire-rimmed reading glasses, Giuseppe read the letter to himself. If there were deaths or other tragedies to report, Giuseppe wanted to be prepared. This was a practice he learned

several months earlier after reporting the death of a woman's 98-year-old aunt. Upon hearing of her aunt's untimely demise, the lady fell to the floor and began a rhythmic wailing that continued even as her relatives dragged her out of the flat.

To Giuseppe's relief, the letter from Bruno Pucci's father had no deaths to report. He poured Bruno a glass of wine and pushed a platter of freshly baked biscotti toward him. Giuseppe then read in Italian:

March 13, 1936

My dear son,

Italia is changing. We don't have to put up with King Victor Emmanuel and his national assembly. We voted for Il Duce Mussolini and his party and hope things will change for the better. He made the trains run on time, won the war in Abyssinia and now that his party controls the national assembly, we think he will make our country work. You should return to your homeland and family and be part of a new Italia.

Giuseppe recognized the work of another reader and writer, Vito Abboduto, a competent writer to be sure, but one whose maudlin style injected into the letters a more depressing mood than even the dour Italian peasants were inclined to exhibit. Giuseppe continued reading to Bruno.

Mussolini's party bosses came to our town last week and told us we can increase our wine production by everyone working together. The party bosses promised us that the government will buy all the wine our town makes at top dollar if we turn over all our equipment to the state. A workers' representative will be in charge of making the wine, but each family will have one vote to re-elect him or throw him out at the end of the year.

I have been told to work on the grape-crushing unit. I will miss making our family wine, but we will make more money by working with the government.

Your mother misses you and cannot understand why you left us. She is worried you are not eating enough, and it is too cold in Chicago. You are too young at 34 years old to be away from home. The women here in Italia make bet-

ter wives and are not so independent as in America. We heard of a woman in America who left her husband because she would not shine his shoes. What kind of world is that?

Come home, my son. Our cousin, Tito Cimino, the local constable, promised me he can get you an easy job that pays well on the grape-picking unit. Your mother and father need you, my son. We are sending you a large photograph of us so you don't forget us.

Your loving father

When Giuseppe stopped reading, he looked and saw in Bruno Pucci's catatonic stare the burden of guilt that seemed to smother the lives of so many recent immigrants. Giuseppe said nothing and waited for Bruno to speak. When he did, he spoke slowly and softly with his tear-filled eyes pointed toward the floor.

"Signore Doti, I look at that-a picture they send-a me and my father looks-a me like I kill-a somebody and my mother looks-a sad like she gonna die. But I can't-a go back. Please write a letter for me."

Giuseppe picked up his Schaeffer fountain pen and began to write the words Bruno spoke in Italian.

April 23, 1936

My dear Mama and Papa,

I eat well. Uncle Rocco and Aunt Maria take good care of me. It is good to be with family here. I help Uncle Rocco make wine at night and work at his grocery store during the day.

Yesterday we threw out a batch of wine when we found dead rats that fell in the fermenting vat and drowned. I told Uncle Rocco that no one would know any difference when they taste the wine, but Uncle Rocco said our family honor is at stake.

Bruno caught Giuseppe suspiciously eyeing the bottle of wine he had brought and said, "No Signore Doti, don't-a worry, I brought-a you good-a wine. We dump-a the bad wine down da sewer."

Giuseppe raised his hands deferentially to indicate no concern on his part but at the same time decided to tell Irena to give the gift bottle of wine to his newest son-in-law, Fiore.

Bruno took out a folded money order from his

wallet and sliding it over to Giuseppe continued his letter.

Because we lost so much wine with the rats, I can only send you a little money this time. Next time I send you more.

Your loving son,  
Bruno

## Another Letter

Giuseppe had almost forgotten about wine, Mussolini, and rats when Bruno returned, letter in hand, more than half a year later. This time Bruno did not bring wine, but two tickets to the Friday night fights that he inserted in the palm of Giuseppe's hand. Giuseppe, who hated violence of any kind, including boxing, was thinking of what son-in-law to pass the tickets onto as he led Bruno to the back room.

Giuseppe silently accepted the letter that Bruno had shakily handed to him. The fact that there were no stamps on the envelope was an indication that the letter had been smuggled out of Italy. This was a common practice ever since Mussolini's secret police started routinely censoring letters mailed out of the country.

As he read the letter to himself, Giuseppe decided to prepare Bruno for the unhappy contents by sighing audibly and shaking his head several times in disbelief. Giuseppe was not being inconsiderate. He long ago had discovered that people are much happier receiving news that was not as bad as they had imagined after observing his exaggerated lamentations. He then began to read:

October 2, 1936

My dear son,

Things are terrible here. Food and coal are scarce. Thank God our cousin Tito Cimino gives us extra rations or else I don't know how we would survive.

We increased wine production this year, but the government did not pay us much for it. I don't blame them. It is terrible wine. We picked the grapes too early when they were still watery. We told the workers' representative that this would make terrible wine with no character. But we make more wine that way, and he has a production quota to fill.

Now we can't get rid of the workers' representative. We all vote for him even though he is an idiot. He controls all the jobs, wages, and favors. So what can we do? Nobody can travel anywhere even to find work in other cities without his approval. We can't even make our own wine anymore since we gave our press, grinder, and fermentation vats to the government. So nothing is ours any more. That is why we bow and scrape to all the party officials so our meager existence does not become even worse than it already is.

Poor Italia is going to the dogs. And we keep voting to give that jackass Il Duce more and more power. To get anything nowadays, you have to know people in the government, and then when they do you a favor, you belong to them and they have your vote.

Since the secret police censor all the letters now, I had to wait for a friend who was returning to America to bring this letter to you. The government also owns all the newspapers now. That is how they control everything that is written. The big crowds that cheer "Duce" are there because the party bosses force the owners to let their workers attend the rallies. But things keep getting worse and worse.

Cousin Tito can still use his pull to get you a job if you want to come back. Your mother does the wash for the local party official, so we can also get favors from him. Mother worries about you being away from us. But as bad as things are here, maybe it is better that you stay in America.

Our love to your Zio Rocco and Zia Maria. I don't know what your mother would do if she didn't know you were being taken care of by family.

Your loving father

When Giuseppe had finished reading the letter, he stepped out of the room to leave Bruno with his private thoughts. He returned with a bowl of chestnuts that Irena had just roasted.

After grabbing several chestnuts, Bruno said, "Our families make-a da best-a wine in Italia. Now whadda dey gonna do?"

Realizing that Bruno did not want his questions answered, Giuseppe asked if he wanted to send a letter.

"Si, Signore Doti. But please you write-a da letter. Tell-a dem dat you have opportunity in Amerega. Tell-a dem that I love Amerega and cannot-a go back."

He gave Giuseppe a money order to enclose with the letter, and then he left the flat after placing a handful of chestnuts in his pocket.

Giuseppe would be able to write the letter for Bruno. For like Bruno, he had left his own parents to make a new home in America. He knew the pain and guilt one felt in leaving one's parents and homeland. He knew the fear and isolation one felt in arriving in a new land where an unknown language was spoken and an unknown people lived. And he knew both the exhilaration and intimidation one felt in experiencing a new-found freedom that made it possible to succeed or fail on a grand scale. So he knew what Bruno was feeling and he wrote.

December 2, 1936

My dear Mama and Papa,

I cry when I hear of your struggle. Sometimes I dream how good it would be if you were here to share our lives together in my new country, America. I dream you are here to taste the freedom I have tasted and see the opportunities I have seen.

America is a nation of justice. Like Italia, there are crooked politicians and government bureaucrats with their palms out asking for favors. But we have rights that protect us from their injustice.

America is a nation of hope. Like Italia, there are people who look down on others because of their family background and education. But we have opportunities that make it possible to improve ourselves so we can live better lives.

Life is not easy here. I have a job, go to school, help Uncle Rocco make wine, and take extra work when I can get it. But for the first time in my life I don't feel the system holding me back. So while you say Tito Cimino can get me a job, he cannot give me the hope and dreams I have for a better life. A job in Italia is a way to put food on the table, but a job in America is a way to get a better job.

When Mussolini came to power, you had dreams for a better Italia, an Italia where the government would help the people lead better

lives. I too remember the rising expectations of people every time we had a new national assembly under King Victor Emmanuel. But I grew frustrated when each government took more from the people than it gave.

In America, we rely on ourselves, not a government, to improve ourselves. We are in control of our destiny. And while this freedom places additional responsibility on us for what we do with our lives, it is better than placing false hopes in others.

Many people say America is great because everyone has the right to vote. But I remember we voted in Italia and things always got worse instead of better. What makes America great is not our right to vote but the rights we have that protect us from those for whom we vote.

I hope and pray you will understand why I

will not return to our beloved homeland. Please always know that my love and thoughts are with you.

Your loving son,  
Bruno

Giuseppe lit his pipe and began reading the letter to himself. As he read, distant memories of his parents and homeland were reawakened. Giuseppe found it strange that though his parents had died long ago, he still felt a heavy burden of guilt for having left them.

It was late. The rest of the flat was dark and quiet. Giuseppe wearily got up and turned down the space heater before joining Irena in bed. As he fell asleep, his last waking thoughts were his hope that Vito Abboduto would read the letter to Bruno's mother and father with the same intensity and emotion with which it was written. □

# Freedom and Democracy Are Different

by John T. Wenders

**T**he earthshaking events of the past few months in Eastern Europe have generated surprise, shock, hope, and applause throughout the world. The most important consequence of these events, however, is not the demise of authoritarian socialist governments, but the impetus given to an examination of the relationship between the private and public sectors in all nations.

Contrary to the media hoopla that equates democracy with freedom, the mere replacement of a Communist socialist government with a democratic socialist one, while an improvement, does

not alone advance the cause of freedom very much.

Freedom and democracy are different. Democracy addresses how affairs in the public sector will be conducted. Democracy is greater when individuals vote on those matters assigned to the public sector. On the other hand, freedom is concerned with the relationships among people in the private sector. Freedom means individuals may choose how to interact on a voluntary basis outside the purview of the state.

In short, democracy means you get to vote in the public sector; freedom means you get to determine the terms of your interactions with others in the private sector.

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