

Podcast series "La grande famiglia" by Cristiano Barducci, RaiPlay Sound production
Transcript second episode

JOSEPH: I am Joseph Sciorra, I was born in New York, in Brooklyn. I am an ethnologist. I was dealing with the city of New York, how New Yorkers make the city their own place. And I was also concerned with the Italian-American community.

HOST: In 2016, Joseph, an American researcher specialising in popular culture, began to reconstruct the history of *The Big Family* from the records that WOV radio had sent as a remembrance to his parents, Anna and Enrico.

JOSEPH: My parents are from Italy, my mother Anna Anniballe from Maranola in Lazio. My father, Enrico Sciorra he was from a small town Carunchio, in Abruzzo.

HOST: Joseph's mother and father had left Italy in the early 1950s and met in New York. They had sent the ten Progresso labels at different times, to hear the voices of their respective relatives.

GERBI: *Dear Mrs Anna Anniballe Brooklyn I am in Maranola at the post office.*

And here I am with the most beautiful gift for Mr Enrico Sciorra of 370 Wadsworth Avenue in New York city!

JOSEPH: When I was a kid there were these 78 rpm records. These records were part of the record collection my parents had.

The music they heard was doo wop, the vocal harmony of the 1950s, there were three to four male voices, they were already 'oldies'. And I remember falling in love with this music...the first music I heard.

HOST: Joseph listens to records for the first time as a child. He finds them in the bookcase at home next to albums of jazz and country music.

To his eyes they are a bit mysterious: the cover is a simple paper envelope and only the surname and year are written on it. Those records, however, contain many voices from Italy, of relatives of whom Joseph knows little or nothing, who address their parents in Italian and occasionally in English.

The first recordings come from Maranola, his mother Anna's home town, and date back to 1952, when Joseph was not yet born. Giuliano Gerbi summoned several families to a public place, the post office, to record *La grande famiglia* and when it is the Anniballe's turn, Emilio, Joseph's maternal grandfather, speaks.

GERBI: *Dear Mrs. Anna Anniballe Brooklyn I'm in Maranola and here is her daddy--Papa Emilio...*

EMILIO: *Dear daughter Anna, I'm your father, Emilio Anniballe...I wanna recommend...*

HOST: Emilio Anniballe was a returning emigrant. A carpenter who had lived many years in New York before returning to his home country.

EMILIO: *Anna, I'm sufferin' for all kinds of reasons, I'm sufferin' for all the life, I wanna do the best to be in United States, not stayin' here and sufferin'.*

JOSEPH: For me it was very comical, because he had this accent...it was an accent that you would hear in the movies in the '30s, of a guy from New York...that I always said he had the voice of Popeye...of arm wrestling that was very comical, I would listen and laugh, listening to that record.

HOST: When Emilio records, his daughter Anna, Joseph's mother, has just emigrated to the United States. Through the programme Emilio wants to update her on the latest developments in her marriage, which has reached a point of no return. Since he is in a public place, he finds the stratagem of English. A kind of secret language between him and his daughter that others in the village cannot understand.

EMILIO: *Of all my troubles that I'm passing, with that stupid woman what God created in the world. She sent me over to the cops!*

JOSEPH: *That woman, that woman, she called the police. They had problems, I don't know exactly what problems, they separated, they lived in separate houses, there was no divorce in Italy....*

HOST: The woman Emilio mentions is his second wife and Anna's stepmother. Unfortunately we only have Emilio's version, if we dwell on him it is because his approach to the programme is interesting. When he records the message, Joseph's grandfather has been back in Maranola for many years and values his reputation. English makes his words private at that moment in the country. It does not matter if thousands of listeners in America can hear him on the radio.

JOSEPH: The strange thing at the end is that it was broadcast on the radio in New York for millions and millions of people to hear, these private news, these intimate messages.

HOST: Many people believed that *The Big Family* was live and that Gerbi, instead of a microphone, had a kind of portable telephone.

JOSEPH: Those who were recorded not only my family, they didn't really understand what was going on, they didn't understand if they were talking on the phone... what kind of communication...

GERBI: And dear Miss Anna Anniballe, everyone has come, those from Maranola and those from Formia. And here I have her little letter in English, dlue years only that she is in America and already she writes so well. She wrote me to read it to her father and I read it to her. "Kindly read this to my father. He would be surprised at the English I learned in two years time. Tell him that we are all well and we pray that he is the same. We send all our love and affection to him." Many kisses and greetings from his daughter. And now let's hear what daddy replies from Formia.

EMILIO: "Anna, Anna. I heard your letter that you sent by the microphone". AUNT:

"I am your Aunt Margherita. I would like to speak to you but I cannot"...

JOSEPH: One thousand, one thousand people who used this service. Fifteen minutes, twice a day, for thirteen years!

OTHER AUNT: Anna and Elena, dearest... I am Aunt Patena, from Formia...

HOST: Gerbi registers Emilio several times, at a distance. If more labels were sent, Gerbi could return to the same country and The Big Family really became a service, more effective than the mail.

EMILIO: Maybe in a month or two or three, I'll sail across and I'll be there from your daughters and sons. While I'm over here suffering and I don't want to suffer anymore.

HOST: In one of the later messages, also in English, Emilio says that he is saving to return to America and join Anna in New York. What is interesting to note is how within a few years, the migrations of father and daughter are completely different. Until the 1930s, America needs foreign labour for its shipyards and factories and there is no restriction on emigration. So Emilio can go back and forth and according to Joseph's research he crosses the ocean twenty-eight times.

For his daughter Anna, however, the situation is more complicated. She was born in New York and is an American citizen, but spent the Second World War in Italy. To get her passport back, which expired in the meantime, she has to prove her American citizenship. Even though the ties between Italy and the United States have grown closer since the war, Anna has to present a mountain of papers and undergo a kind of remote facial recognition: four people recognise her in a photo and sign a testimonial. For some time Anna remained in limbo, then in 1951 she managed to leave. Emilio instead stays in Maranola. He visits his daughter many years later and

Joseph tells me of his curiosity in seeing the places where he had worked. The Brooklyn skyscrapers that, as a carpenter, he had helped to build.

EXTRACTS *FROM SOUNDS OF MY CITY*, TONY SCHWARTZ (Rai Teche)

HOST: In the same years that Joseph, as a child, was listening to the records of *The Big Family*, an American documentary filmmaker, Tony Schwartz, was touring the city, recording these sounds of New York.

Both Joseph and Tony Schwartz lived in Brooklyn. I am curious to ask Joseph what sounds have stuck with him from his neighbourhood. What sounds did a child hear in Brooklyn, almost seventy years ago.

JOSEPH: The sound I remember before I went to sleep, when I was trying to sleep there were cars going by on the *manhole cover* and there was this sound of , *cheers*...the manhole cover is called? The manhole cover. In the film you can see, in the classic New York film there is smoke coming out of this very *manhole cover*. A New York night sound.

HOST: Back to *The Big Family*. Joseph, a child, listens to the records not only of his maternal family, but also the relatives of his father Enrico, originally from Carunchio, a village in Abruzzo.

GERBI: *and here I am with the most beautiful gift for Mr Enrico Sciorra of 370 Wadsworth Avenue in New York City. I am with the microphone of the "Big Family" in Carunchio, in their country, right in Carunchio! Mariapina, she's a beautiful little girl with a... with a dummy in her mouth. We'll take it out, otherwise she can't speak. What are you sending Mariapina to say?*

Mariapina cries

HOST: When Gerbi arrives in the village in '54, Enrico has been in New York for a couple of years and his family gathers in the living room.

Rosina: I would like to see you again, all

Dear Enri, how are you? We are fine. But you never write and we're sorry about that.

Antonio Danenza: Dear Enric', I'll let you hear 'Napul' gant' ('Naples sings') when you come, eh!

Gloria: I am very happy Enrico to be able to speak here today for you to hear my voice. I am sorry to know you are so far away...

HOST: After many greetings, a woman dressed in black approaches the microphone. It is Filomena, Joseph's grandmother, who reads a letter for her son Enrico, written and never sent. The whole Sciorra family listens in respectful silence.

GERBI: and here next to me is Mamma Filomena, listen to her.

FILOMENA: At this moment I know why I am reminded of the first time I left you. You left for boarding school, remember? I cried, soffrii. I felt I was alone without you. Now that you have left for America, you can imagine how I feel, more alone. Alone in my house without anyone and perhaps without the hope of seeing you return to work near me under the Italian sky. And now I send greetings to all the relatives, hug to you, Mama.

GERBI: Eh, she's a bit touched. Give him a big kiss, Mama. Just like that, on the hand.

HOST: Filomena knew what it meant to emigrate, because she too had left young for America.

(Noise of a kiss) GERBI: Here! This is a kiss from his mother. A kiss that comes from Carunchio.

I search for his name in the Ellis Island archive, a huge database containing the records of all emigrants to the United States.

JOSEPH: all Italians at the time were from Naples because the boats were from Naples. But even if they were from Puglia, they were from Basilicata everyone said: we are Neapolitans...

HOST: Among sixty-five million passengers is only one Filomena Sciorra, who embarked in Naples and arrived in New York in 1921.

In the arrival register his name is transcribed without a letter, a rather frequent occurrence. The Ellis Island archives contain thousands of incorrect or misrepresented names, due to the incommunicability between officials and new arrivals. In addition to special marks, Filomena is asked to indicate a family member in the United States and their address.

Music 'L'Americano': Husband has gone to America and doesn't write to me, maybe he's caught it, he'll send America and go there, maybe he's caught the American.

JOSEPH: In the history of Italian emigration a lot of families have been broken up. A lot of men who came to the United States left their wives their daughters and created others, another family here in the United States.

HOST: The situation described by Joseph is the theme of a popular song from Salento, entitled precisely *l'Americanu*.

One hundred and fifty liri me mannatu, mannagghia l'America ci nci va, mancu pi pi la farina ci nnagghia.

HOST: Filomena, on the other hand, joins her husband Giuseppe in New York. He is also from Carunchio and has already been in *The Big Apple* for a few years where he has opened a tailor's shop. I ask Joseph in which neighbourhoods Italians lived in the first half of the 20th century.

JOSEPH: Of the great wave of emigration they went to Manhattan. But from the 1920s they started to go, following the underground tracks they were creating, they started to go to the Bronx, Queens and even Brooklyn. They settled down, found a hard life but also great success.

HOST: Filomena and Giuseppe, renamed Joseph since he is in America, enjoy all that New York has to offer, between the cinema and Broadway theatres. They soon become parents: Enrico is born in '22 and then Gloria in '26. But the enchantment ended when his parents fell ill and they all returned to Carunchio.

JOSEPH: She didn't want to come back and instead, Joseph, my grandfather did, he wanted to come back. I found a card my father sent me that said his father Joseph was doing well in Carunchio. They had these customers from Rome for clothes made by Joseph. My grandparents would take two months off. For a month they would leave the children with relatives, go to Veneto, then come back and go to Vasto to the beach. They were doing well in the 1930s.

HOST: Shortly before the Second World War, Filomena's life takes a decisive turn. Her husband Giuseppe dies and after the war she has to face another important parting. Enrico, her son, wants to leave for America. Although he is an American citizen because he was born in New York, he too has problems getting his passport back. In Italy, in '46 and '48, they voted for the constituent assembly and then for Parliament. Enrico, a student in veterinary medicine in Naples, goes to the polls, unaware of an American law, the Nationality Act, which concerns people with dual nationality. Under this law, if a person voted in another country, they automatically lost their American citizenship.

Enrico tries to be a veterinarian in Carunchio but it does not go too well. Meanwhile in America, something is moving: those two elections of the 1940s have a very strong symbolic value Italy, because they are the first of a free country, which tries

to start again after the war. In 1951, a new law of the US Congress allowed Italian Americans who had only voted twice to regain their citizenship. Enrico could finally leave.

JOSEPH: The emigrants who left after the war had a very different relationship with politics than those who went before. Those who went before didn't think they were Italian, their memories were of misery, misery and nothing else. They were not even Sicilians, Calabrians, they were the very strong parochialism of their country, that was their identity. Instead, those who left after the war felt Italian, Italian.

HOST: Between the second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, over four million Italians left for the United States. A period that historians call the Great Migration. When they arrive in America, the Italians find strong prejudice. They are called Dego, a derogatory term that lumps Italians together with Latin peoples, such as the Spanish and Portuguese, and which may derive from they go, 'they leave' or from a mispronunciation born on merchant ships of the name Diego, common among Spanish sailors. In the 1950s there is a second wave of emigration, very different because more educated people leave. The programme is loved by both first generation emigrants and those who arrived after the war.

GERBI: Dear Mrs. Anna Annibella, 251 Troy Avenue in Brooklyn and Mr. Enrico Sciorra, 370 Wadsworth Avenue in New York City, I am in the home of your relatives. First the voice of Antonio Danenza.

ANTONIO: Car' Enri...

HOST: Giuliano Gerbi returned to Carunchio a second time in '55, a year after the first recordings.

ANTONIO: ...and we are always eager to hear from you

HOST: Filomena another letter ready for her son and daughter-in-law, with a slightly different tone.

GERBI: And here is mother Filomena...

FILOMENA: Why this silence, why don't you write to me? Perhaps you bear me a grudge because I did not consent to your wish to come to America? Believe me, my children, it was not my ill will, it was just that I could not. Eighteen years ago when my late Joseph...

JOSEPH: There was still a pain from many years of my father, because he asked his mother to visit in NY, because I was born. But she couldn't come because she had this responsibility of these grandchildren in Carunchio. So many years later my father was still annoyed about this, he was not angry, there was something still not right for him, after so many years.

HOST: Filomena eventually goes to New York in '61 and spends six months at the Sciorra house. She always wears black to remember her late husband and accompanies Joseph to school every morning.

JOSEPH: Normally I used to go alone, it was a novelty but also a bit strange for me, because I used to go alone and this person I didn't know very well came along!

HOST: Joseph sees Filomena again as a boy, when he takes a few months to stay in Italy, in Bologna.

JOSEPH: I came to Italy in '77 for a year because I didn't know what I wanted to study, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, I was washing dishes in an Italian restaurant

HOST: It is 1977, the year in which Carosello ends and colour broadcasting begins on TV, but also a fiery year, marked by protests by workers and students.

JOSEPH: There was a fantastic energy, there was something that was changing, a way of thinking, a way of living, a way of being that was felt on the streets, there was a powerful vibration that has stayed with me until now, there was a common force, a spirit of change to create something new that was very fascinating to me.

I lived between Bologna and Milan, I went to Formia and went to Abruzzo. I miss the old Italian train, with open windows that were slow, warm, stopped every town, those who sold sandwiches at the station...I remember many times emigrant families who were going to Milan or Turin or even Germany or Switzerland. Many times with a family of four or five they would offer me wine, salami, the ham they had brought for the journey they were making.

HOST: Joseph in those months knows the voices he heard as a child. In particular, he visits relatives in Carunchio several times.

JOSEPH: There 'were from my family, from my grandmother, Aunt Gloria, Uncle Olindo, how can I say, *to complete acceptance*, of me, as my father's son. You are part of the family.

OLINDO: We are well, so we wish you all well too...

GLORIA: I am very happy Enrico to be able to speak here today to let you hear my voice...

HOST: Joseph decided to study anthropology after that trip to Italy. *The big family* for him today is a private memory but it was also a way to analyse, as an academic, Italian emigration from an unusual aspect. Through online articles, Joseph sought out other families and invited them to share their stories.

JOSEPH: Each of these records is part of your history, but put together they are part of a much broader history, of many things, of Italian immigration, of technology, of the consumerism of the post-war years, of audio, of voices, of the *soundscape*, of a history that was almost lost but we have now found.

HOST: Thanks to Joseph, I met other people who have records of *The Big Family*. My research at the beginning, will follow a traced path, and then become something different. It is a journey and like any journey there will be detours, surprises and unforeseen events.

In the next episode we will hear the story of three sisters, between California and the island of Ischia.

GERBI: More voices in a minute. First microphone in New York for the commercial. Then I'll pick up from Italy. Stay tuned. Go ahead New York!

CREDITS: La grande famiglia is an Original Rai Play Sound podcast conceived and written by myself, Cristiano Barducci. Art direction is by Andrea Borgnino, editing by Alexandra Genzini, sound design Massimo Verolini, editors Luca Franco and Paola Manduca, archive research Arianna Biagi, production manager Giulia Giannuli.

A huge thank you to Joseph Sciorra for sharing his story and helping me tell many others, and thanks to the folk group Le tre sorelle, composed of Alessia Cravero, Giulia Provenzano and Valeria Quarta, for the song *I'Americanu*.