

A FINDING AT REMO'S



Kerry Sherck/For The Advocate

Tony Mattera, right, recognized family members in a 1936 photograph that hangs on the wall at Remo's restaurant on Bedford Street in Stamford. Among those pictured in the photo is his brother, Philip, left.

Photograph is one family's history

By Donna Porstner
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — Every time Tony Mattera went to Remo's, an Italian restaurant and pizzeria on Bedford Street, an old black and white photo of a family gathered around the dinner table, glasses held high in a toast, caught his eye.

The young woman on the end reminded him of his cousin, Sylvia.

But Mattera would learn that it wasn't just his cousin who was frozen in time in the photo, shot in New York seven decades ago and now part of the decor of the downtown Stamford eatery. His father, mother and brother, Philip, are in it, too.

Another cousin, Gilda Mattera of Brooklyn, N.Y., helped him make the connection. The cousin — the younger sister of the woman Mattera recognized in the photo — said it could be their relatives because their grandmother's visit to America when she was 81 was covered widely by the New York press in 1936.

More curious than ever, Mattera looked back at a digital photo his daughter snapped when they were having dinner at Remo's last year. Blown up on his computer, it all came into focus.

"I said, 'Oh my God,'" said Mattera, who lives in the Westover section of Stamford.

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Philip Mattera, at age 9, is in the center in the family photograph taken in New York in 1936. At left is his great-grandmother, Anna DiMassa, and at right is his second cousin, Danny Agnese.

History

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The photo was taken in the back room of his uncle Salvatore Agnese's grocery store at 504 Court St. in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn on the day his father, mother, brother and grandmother arrived from Italy. At first Mattera did not recognize Philip, who is 9 in the photo, because his head was shaved for the journey overseas.

The New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, New York Evening Journal, Brooklyn Daily Eagle and an Italian newspaper covered Anna Agnese's visit to America because it was so unusual at that time for someone that age to make the voyage.

The Herald Tribune said two dozen relatives were waiting for the "doughty octogenarian" they called Nonna with a bouquet of roses, carnations and marigolds. Many of the 30 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren had never met her.

"They stared at her, a stocky, stalwart figure dressed in a brown frock that reaches to the ground, her grizzled locks covered with a brown, silk bandana, her ears ornamented with circular gold rings. They kissed her with a certain solemn reverence and ushered her into the store. Mrs. Agnese was quiet, too, and almost awed as her eyes fell on the arrays of sausages, cheeses and forms of macaroni that stocked the shelves," the Tribune wrote in an article that appeared underneath the family photo.

Tony Mattera, 70, a retired

telecommunications engineer, quickly shared his discovery with relatives all over the country, sending them e-mails of the photograph.

Because his grandmother's visit was before he was born, he learned most of the story from newspaper clippings he found this week at the New York Public Library.

Yesterday, Tony Mattera brought a group of relatives who were in town for a family party to Remo's to see the photo, which the previous restaurant owners found on the Internet.

For Philip Mattera, 80, of New Hyde Park, N.Y., the photo brought back memories of his voyage overseas on the Italian ocean liner Rex.

"My grandmother brought a plant from Italy. She hid it under her dress to get it here," Philip Mattera recalled.

They took her to see the Empire State Building before she returned home about six months later, he said.

There was some sort of family dispute over who would care for Agnese in America so she went home, Philip Mattera said.

Younger relatives hovered around the photograph in the pizzeria yesterday with curiosity, trying to figure out which of their ancestors they resemble.

Cathy Liebl, Philip's daughter, found the family resemblance uncanny and wondered why it took her Uncle Tony a year to figure it out. She turned to him and said, "I'm looking at the photo and I'm thinking,



Kerry Sherck/For The Advocate

Philip Mattera, left, spots a 1936 photo of himself and his family hanging on the wall yesterday at Remo's restaurant in Stamford. At his right is his daughter, Diane Miller.

how do you not recognize these people?"

Looking back, Mattera said he's frustrated he didn't make the connection earlier, saying he must have seen the photo a half-dozen times over the past year.

"For a year, I was staring at that thing," he said. "I grew up in that back room. That's where I learned to tie my shoes, learned to tell time, learned to become a Yankees fan."

As far as the Matteredas know, only four of the 16 people in the picture are still alive — Philip, their cousin Sylvia Clenzi and two cousins in Long Island.

Reached by telephone yesterday, Clenzi said she remembers family members chipping in to pay for La Nonna's visit, and her mother doing all the cooking.

They feasted on chicken, rabbit and more than a dozen

kinds of macaroni, according to newspaper accounts.

"I remember it was a lot of confusion, a lot of people," said Clenzi, 87, a second cousin living in Deerfield Beach, Fla. "I was 16."

She said La Nonna, who was six years younger in the photo than Clenzi is today, looked so old because she spent time a lot of time in the sun on the island of Ischia off the coast of Naples.

The New York Times described her face as "lined and weather-beaten."

But it was her own appearance Clenzi was most concerned about when she learned her teenage years were on display in a Stamford restaurant.

"I thought I was fatter than that," she said. "Then, when I looked at it I thought, 'It's not that bad.'"