

Sunday Dinners at Grandma's and The Brooklyn Bridge

Daniel J. Basta

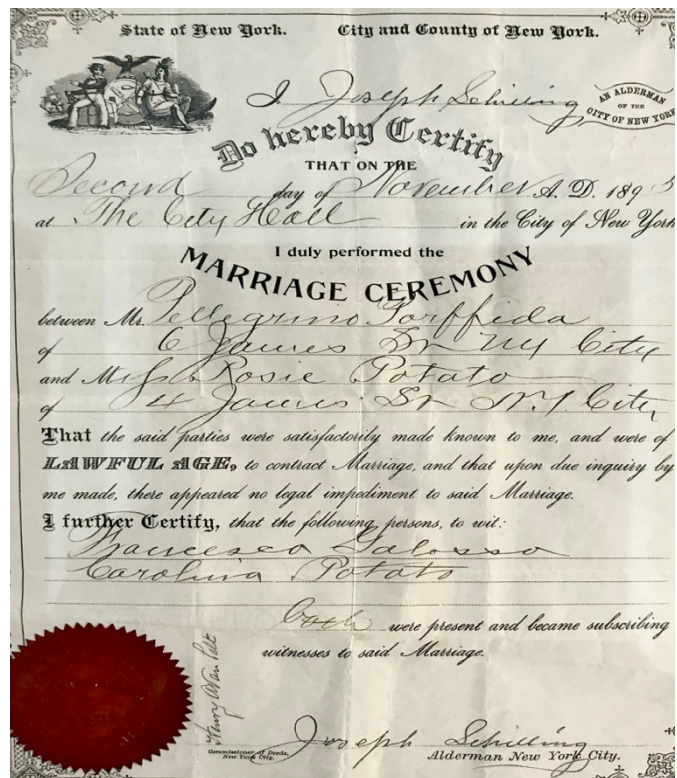
Re-discovery. A long time ago I lived in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge in a three-story “Brownstone” walk-up which was my Italian immigrant grandparents’ home. And then in the early 1950s we, like almost everyone else it seemed, moved out of Brooklyn, and made our own migration a dozen miles or so to Nassau County. It was the post-World War II era of the great migrations from American cities to the suburbs. Our family like so many others had begun to scatter. Although we brought with us some of our immigrant culture, it wasn’t the same. The Italian in us began to fade as we lived, went to school, and simply mixed with everyone else, most of whom had also migrated from neighborhoods in the “City.” They were Irish, Germans, Jews, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Hungarians, Czechoslovakians, Poles, Russians, French, other Italians, English, Welsh, Finns, and others. Families from all of these immigrant groups lived in my new little post war neighborhood in Nassau County. It was only a long stone’s throw to the Cross Island Parkway and the City, but it seemed a world away. It was the great mixing bowl experience. And so many decades later I came to realize that whatever “Italian-ness” I had retained from those early years in Brooklyn had mostly slipped away.

Loosing something of one’s heritage is certainly not unique to me nor unique to Italians/Americans. Every wave of immigrants to our great Nation has or is passing through some version of this experience. For me I guess it means my emphasis became “American” in the expression Italian American. For my grandparents the emphasis was certainly on the “Italian,” for my parents it was probably an equal emphasis on both the Italian and the American, and now for my nieces and nephews it is only “American” and maybe a distant whisper of something Italian. Overall, this distancing is probably a good thing for it allows us to all be Americans with only a

flavor of our connections to elsewhere and the past. I have always thought that this coming together with a recognition of our origins has always been a uniquely American quality of strength.

This story attempts to relive and bring to life memories in the old Brownstone by the Brooklyn Bridge. It may seem at odds with the importance I have placed on moving on. However, looking back, it was a wonderful time in its own right and thinking about it reminds me, and it should remind others, that it is the little things in life that count and always have counted in all families. It doesn't matter what a person's background may be the family journey, especially immigrating to and living in America, has always been a similar experience. Sharing our family experiences is another one of those things that helps to bind us together. I would like to think this is one of the reasons I chose to write a little of my own background story. But it is also made me smile to write about them.

Writing this story only came about because a cousin whom I hadn't known existed, came into my life looking for background information for a book he was writing about his family's history. It turned out his great grandmother, Barbara Petete, was my grandmother's sister! He was part of my immigrant family I knew nothing about. However, I had known that a sister of my grandmother, Carolina, had been listed as a witness on my grandparent's 1895 Marriage License issued in Manhattan. (Shown on the right, Note, my grandmother Rose and her sisters last name are shown as "Potato" rather than Petete, such were the times!) The license



also shows that my grandmother's family had lived next door to my grandfather in "Little Italy" in lower Manhattan but that was all I knew.

My newly found cousin Steve prodded me for stories about my grandparents and the old house in Brooklyn. I was surprised about how much I had remembered. Somewhere filed away in the recesses of my mind a fair number of memories existed about those long-ago days in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. As I started to write them down a canvas began to take shape. Some parts of the canvas were as bright as if painted yesterday, other parts a little dull and blurry, and still other I am not sure are even my memories. They might have been told to me. At any rate, there were enough memories to describe a little of the family time in Brooklyn before everything changed, as remembered by a young boy who had the run of the old Brownstone house. Since some of my strongest memories were around Sunday family dinners in my grandparent's basement apartment, we lived one floor above, I chose to write a story mostly around the Sunday dinner. It seemed I could provoke memories as I wrote by doing it this way, discovering other vignettes I might remember along the way, including some about the role the Brooklyn Bridge had played in our family. And so, the story intermingles something of each.

Our Brownstone. The Brownstone we lived in was quite old when I had come along. By then, my Italian grandparents had been living in it more than 30 years since their migration from "Little Italy" in lower Manhattan across the "mighty" Brooklyn Bridge to 57 Duffield Street and a home of their own in America. All of the streets in the neighborhood were cobblestone, and most were similarly named for flowers. Almost all of the three and a half-story Brownstones on the

street were just like my grandparents and built circa 1900. I suppose they could have been called tenements. *(Shown below is 57 Duffield Street in 1940, our house is in the center without a fire escape, our fire escape was in the rear. By the time of this photograph my grandparents had closed their “Italian Grocery Store” which was in the street level or basement apartment.)*



My grandparents had somehow managed to purchase the building around 1915 “on time” from a wealthy Italian woman. That meant that no bank or mortgage had been involved. According to my mother, the older well-dressed lady would come by once a month and my grandmother would pay her in cash. It took many years to pay off the \$600 the building had cost.

Our neighborhood was a smaller Brooklyn version of Little Italy in Manhattan – at least it seemed so growing up in the late 1940s and early 1950s on Duffield Street. However, unlike Manhattan, this part of Brooklyn had been and was still heavily industrialized. The industrial revolution which hit all cities in the nineteenth century had seen to that. It was no accident that both the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges terminated close to each other in Brooklyn. It was a very busy and noisy place, but Duffield Street seemed like an oasis from all the commotion that swirled around it. My grandparents raised most of their nine children in the Brownstone by the

Brooklyn Bridge, although half of my aunts and uncles had been born across the river in Manhattan. My mother was the youngest and only child to be borne (1919) in a hospital. My sister and I would be the next children living at 57 Duffield Street to be borne in a hospital. During World War II it was an especially busy neighborhood because the Brooklyn Navy Yard was only blocks away.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s most if not all of my aunts, uncles, and their children, in some cases grandchildren, lived either in Brooklyn or Queens. One or two may have already lived across the Hudson River in New Jersey. Since my mother was the youngest of the nine children, she had nieces and nephews older than her or near her age. It was a very large family and although not everyone showed up on any given Sunday, enough always arrived to fill the house and of course help with the cooking and the clean-up. According to my mother, grandma had long ago mastered the art of putting her seven daughters to work. I don't think her two sons, my uncles, had ever been asked to do many chores. My mother use to say with a crooked smile that it was an old Italian thing for the sons to get special treatment. Even the seven sons-in-laws seemed exempt from helping out, except for my father primarily because we lived in the house. (My sister would say that I had also gotten special treatment, but of course that is not true!) One example of the special treatment is that my grandmother would make special meatballs with raisins in them only for her oldest son, my uncle Joe! My mother still would mention the raisin meatballs for her older brother 50 years later. To everyone the old Brownstone at 57 Duffield Street had been their home. It always seemed a joy for them to return to the old house. They had decades of stories to tell and I listen to them all. Everything from making the pasta and sauce to chasing me and my cousins around the house on Sundays was great fun to them. I don't recall ever a cross word at those dinners.

Sunday Dinners. Preparation for the Sunday dinner would begin early in my grandmother's kitchen on the first floor. Their first-floor apartment was different than the others on the three floors above. You might call it a basement apartment since it was mostly below street level. It was the only apartment which could be entered easily from the street – down a

few stairs from the sidewalk and left through a door under the front stoop. It also had a door into the kitchen from the hall, which ran from the front door up to the street all the way to a door at the back of the building. Like all apartments in the building it was essentially one long space from front to back – a proverbial shotgun or railroad apartment. Only their apartment had a wall which separated the front of the apartment from the back where the kitchen was located. After my grandfather had retired and during the hard times of the Great Depression, my grandparents converted the front of their apartment into a little Italian grocery store and sold just about anything to make ends meet. My grandfather, old Pelligrino, use to make a clear grain alcohol to sell in the store from “under the counter!” The three floors above were where everyone slept. Later on, the top two floors were rented to close neighborhood friends, paisans in Italian – friends who were like family. I also had the run of their apartments.

The house may have originally been built without running water, or at least not throughout the building. When I was growing up in the house there were still no bathrooms in the building. My grandparents had an old, galvanized metal bathtub which was still in use. My primary recollection of the tub was cooling off in it outside in the backyard on really hot days. The tub had some rough metal edges that were always a worry. Each floor had a small water closet (toilet) located at the end of the hall at the very back of the building. I think originally there must have been an outhouse in the backyard and the toilets in the halls were likely a later day improvement. In each apartment a large “farm style sink” was in the kitchen also located in the back of the building. The sink was used for everything including bathing of a sort – the sponge bath. Also, at the back of the building in the kitchen area was a small, recessed alcove which had probably contained a small potbelly stove sometime in the past. In our apartment this used as a little side sitting room. My grandmother’s stove was a large cast iron wood and coal burning stove for cooking and I am sure for heating the basement during the winter. Coal was used for heating the building and everything else until my father changed the furnace/boiler to oil. A series of coal bunkers in the basement could still be accessed from the street. To help solve the bathing needs of the neighborhood a “Public Bathhouse” had been located across the street. You could literally hop down our stoop and go directly across the street into the Bath house. But at my age I mostly

bathed in the big farm sink in the kitchen. As a kid growing up in the house on Duffield Street it all seemed good to me

On most summer nights the stoop, sidewalk, and street were the center of our universe. Everyone would be out sitting on their stoops to avoid the heat in the old Brownstones. Summer evenings were like mini-townhall meetings held on the street. Individuals and families would walk up and down the sidewalk, stopping here and there to chat and exchange gossip with those sitting on the stoops. Sometimes friends would find a spot on a stoop to sit and stay awhile, especially if the Dodger game was on the radio. There were almost no TVs on Duffield Street. Baseball was the only professional sport on anyone's mind. New York had the Yankees, Giants, and our beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. We could tolerate Giant Fans; but with the Yankees it was "hate" at first sight. When we moved out of Brooklyn, I had to learn tolerate Yankee fans!

My grandmother was a well-known pasta maker and would always reserve the making of the dough for herself. She had what seemed like a giant table in the kitchen and would mix and knead the flour, eggs, and water on the table into a big mass of dough. She or my mother would then carry the dough into my grandparent's bedroom, which was in the front room set-off by curtains and place it carefully on a clean sheet or towel in the middle of the bed. The dough had to "rest" and could not be disturbed.

It was a saggy old bed which I hated when I had to sleep on it, everything just sagged into the middle. It always looked to me like the dough would be swallowed by the bed. I could never understand how my grandparents slept on it. While the dough was resting, I was banished from the front room. And if my cousins came over while the dough was still resting, we were ordered to play in the backyard or on the front stoop and sidewalk and told not to get into trouble. (Well, after all it was Brooklyn and mischievous was our middle name!) I remember one time I ran into the front room while the dough was resting, grandpa Pelligrino was sitting on a chair against the wall. As I ran past him, he stuck out his cane, which he always had in those days, and tripped me – down I went. My mother came in from the kitchen and gave him hell, but he just laughed and

said something in Italian. You had to watch out for his cane. I guess he had been standing guard protecting the dough. Those old Italians took their pasta seriously.

Besides the pasta dish, this part of the meal always had meat balls and stuffed braciola in a light tomato sauce served with the pasta. Both my grandparents were from the Naples region and their sauce was totally different from my father's family who were from Calabria much further south. Their sauce was much thicker and spicier, which was always a point of contention between my parents.

Then depending on the situation after a short rest, for example on a holiday or birthday or something special, a separate meat dish of either, chicken, roast beef, ham, or rabbit came to the table. If the meat dish was rabbit, it might have come from the backyard where my grandfather grew his tomatoes and vegetables and raised rabbits. Like so many immigrants, my grandfather brought his old ways to America and his little plot of land (our backyard) in the heart of Brooklyn became his garden, including animals. It's now become family legend that my grandfather was considered sort of a "conniver or skinflint." He wouldn't offer up a rabbit unless my uncles paid for it. Two of my uncles were policemen and as the story goes, after they paid my grandfather for one of his prized rabbit's they would sometimes take out a pistol and shoot the head off in the backyard. It's a good story, but there are much easier ways to kill a rabbit. If they actually did this, they probably had been making a show for the family and the rabbit monger – my grandfather.

My grandfather also had a way of tricking his sons-in-law into making wine. His two sons probably knew better. I think that much of the "ginnie red" wine at Sunday dinners was homemade. He would often ask a son-in-law if he "lika da" wine or "making da wine" then regardless of the answer crates of grapes would show-up at the house. I remember coming home from school one day and going directly downstairs to my grandparents to get sugar covered toast and the entire downstairs hall running from the back of the house to the front was crammed with crates of grapes. My father had been tricked into "making da wine." I recall he hadn't been too

happy, because not only did he have to pay for the grapes, but it was a lot of work and grandpa just supervised. When the wine had been bottled grandpa would take the crushed pulp and make his “special” brandy. My father always contended that the special brandy had been grandpa’s aim all along. I recall once peeking into the old coal bunkers when they were making wine and beating a hasty retreat to find my friend Nicky and disappear down the block. I was sure my grandfather would have asked me to do something, like he did every time he saw me!! I was the only gopher in the house by then.

The interim period during dinner was like half time at a game, when the athletes take a short rest and gird themselves for the second half. Some of my aunts and uncles would get up, leave the table, and briefly walk into the backyard or out of the front of the house onto the sidewalk. I think they mostly would walk a little and light up a cigarette. Everyone smoked in those days. Sometimes they would strike up a conversation with people they knew in the neighborhood, and they seemed to still know everyone. My cousins and I were allowed to leave the table and pick-up our shenanigans where we had left off before sitting down to the pasta meal. When everyone had completed their walk and cigarettes, it was back to your places around the table for round two. Salads were simple and came after the meal. We kids always avoided them to save room for dessert – usually an Italian sweet. And then there was still one more round, eating nuts and fruit and playing cards late into the afternoon or early evening. Sitting in relaxed poses all around the table it was like a team coming together to talk it over after a game. Throughout the day there was always a large jug “ginnie red wine.” The jug was usually placed on the floor when there was food on the table. I don’t recall anyone ever drinking to excess.

It was an all-day affair of eating and enjoying each other around the table. Much of what was happening in everyone’s life flowed like swirling currents around the table. It was the type of day that kept the family bond together and gave continuity to the past and optimism for the future. I don’t think anyone gave much thought to how it would all change when we moved from the house in Brooklyn. In those days we were still in the cocoon of the immigrant family

experience, proud to be Italians in Brooklyn and especially proud to be living by the Brooklyn Bridge. “Sunday Dinner at Grandmas” was living in the moment – a very good moment!

The Mighty Brooklyn Bridge. No story of those times would be complete without mention of the Brooklyn Bridge and the imprint it had had on us – both real and in our imaginations. The Brooklyn Bridge (1883) had been central to the lives of my grandparents, my aunts, and uncles. Whenever asked where we lived, the answer was always at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge in Brooklyn. And it was always Brooklyn first and then New York. It was said like a badge of honor. Who else in New York City, or on earth in the minds of my family, could say that. Although the house eventually would be closer to the roadway to the “Johnny Come Lately” Manhattan Bridge when it was built (1909) twenty years after my grandparents had come to New York. However, the Manhattan Bridge was hardly ever mentioned.

I walked across the roadway to the Manhattan bridge every day to school at the Basilica of the Cathedral of Saint James Catholic school, and almost as often to the nearby playground, both still closer to the Brooklyn Bridge. The roadway was always referred to as Fulton Avenue or the Fulton Avenue Extension. Never a word of the Manhattan Bridge. Maybe the



Manhattan Bridge wasn't mentioned just because the name “Manhattan” had nothing to do with Brooklyn. Brooklynites in those days may have considered that bridge belonged to Manhattan across the river, while the Brooklyn Bridge belonged to us in Brooklyn. *(Shown above is the Brooklyn bridge walkway in 1899 facing Manhattan as it was the many times my grandparents walked crossed.)*

My grandfather Pelligrino, immigrated to NYC in 1889, only 6 years after the Brooklyn Bridge had been opened. My grandmother had immigrated in November of 1883 as a 6-year-old with her mother, her brother and two of her three sisters when the Bridge was probably near completion or had just opened. The Bridge was a dominate feature in their lives, it towered above everything in the city and was indeed a world wonder to behold. It probably conveyed a wonderment to them that symbolized the power and stature of the American ideal there was nothing like in the world. They had always lived very close to it, always within easy viewing and walking distance. First in the tenements in and around the “Little Italy” neighborhood in lower Manhattan. They probably saw the Bridge every day. And for most of his life my grandfather had worked at the foot of the Bridge, at the Manhattan end, even after they had moved across to the other end in Brooklyn. And when they bought the house on Duffield Street it was only a few blocks from the Bridge. Always the bridge was a part of their lives, as it would become for my aunts and uncles.

A City of Horses. When Pelligrino arrived in New York he was already a professional “groom,” which meant many things in the final stages of the “age of horsepower.” The New York City my grandparents lived in, were married (1895) in, and raised most of their family in, was a city of horses. Everything: people, goods, building materials, wood, coal, raw materials, moved by wagons, carts, buggies, and trolleys all drawn by horses. Fire engines continued to be drawn by horses in Brooklyn until 1922. Even as kid in the late 1940s and early 1950s vegetable wagons drawn by horses still routinely roamed our neighborhood.

Pelligrino worked in the large commercial stables at the foot of the Bridge in Manhattan until he retired, sometime in the late 1920s. I guess you could say he was in the transportation business! Family stories tell how he loved his horses, especially the teams of magnificent work horses for which he would go to great lengths to care for and keep safe. There is one story about a team of his horses stranded in upper Manhattan in a fierce snowstorm. Somehow, he had got

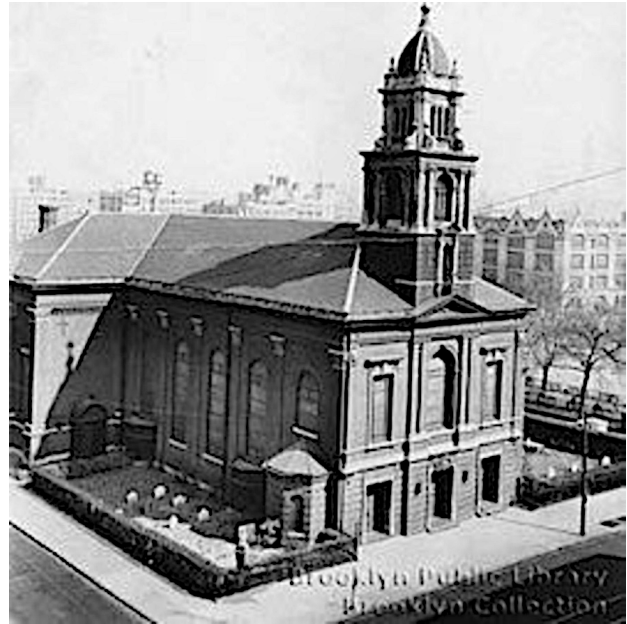
word of it, gotten out of bed, trudged through the snow to rescue his horses. He brought them back to safety to the stables at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

I only vaguely knew about my grandfather's connection to horses. I remember he would often cough a lot and pound on his chest. When I asked why he did that, my mother would say he always did that, and it was because of the horses. By the time I came along my grandfather was nearing 80 and retiring into the background. Around the table at Sunday dinners, I don't remember my grandfather Pelligrino engaging in very much. He always seemed to be sitting quietly like a distinguished statesman from a bygone era. He also wasn't speaking much English by that time.

After my grandparents had moved across the Bridge to Brooklyn, my grandfather commuted every day by trolley or walked across the bridge to work at the stables. I can only imagine what he witnessed daily, looking out from the Bridge across the city as it was changing. My grandmother would also routinely take the trolley back and forth across the bridge to shop and see friends. I think it might have been because she was more familiar and comfortable with the markets and friends she knew on that side of the Bridge.

One day my grandmother had taken the trolley across the Bridge to shop for the traditional Italian "seven fishes" dinner for Christmas eve. Apparently, my grandfather really looked forward to this meal once a year and was especially fond of the eels which were part of the dinner. In those days the trolleys ran a circular route back and forth across the bridge. When my grandmother returned from shopping and unloaded her bags in their basement apartment on Duffield Street, the eels were missing. They were live eels and had escaped on the way home! As the story goes, grandma put on her coat and hat and went back out to the trolley stop and took the next trolley back across the Bridge to Manhattan. There must have been a trolley yard on the other end because she found the trolley car, she had taken home from the market, searched it and found the eels crawling around the car. She gathered them up and took the next trolley back across the Bridge. It was a great seven fishes' dinner on Christmas eve that year.

Exploring the Old Neighborhood. A few years ago, my wife and I were in Manhattan for a wedding. I wanted to show her the old Brownstone at 57 Duffield Street, if it was still standing, and walk around the old neighborhood a little. We took the subway downtown to the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge and walked across into Brooklyn. My grandparents and family must have taken that walk a thousand times. I was



struck by how large and formidable the Bridge felt even now. It surely was a wonderment to my grandparents. We walked a couple of blocks from the Bridge to the Basilica Cathedral of Saint James and to my catholic grammar school across the street from it. My school building was still there and looked roughly the same. It was still owned by the Catholic Diocese, but it is no longer a grammar school. It now houses part of the Brooklyn College of Science. Walking around the Cathedral Basilica of Saint James made me realize what a special and historic part of Brooklyn we had lived in. Saint James was the first Catholic Church built on Long Island (1822), and George Washington had retreated nearby across the East River from Brooklyn during the American Revolution – quite possibly along what later would become Duffield Street. *(Shown is the Cathedral Basilica of St. James. In the upper right is a multi-storied white building. This building was at the end of our street and across on Tillary Street. The trees to the right of the Cathedral mark our small asphalt playground, which is still a playground today).*

I think our family associated with the Basilica of the Cathedral of Saint James in the same way they associated with and felt about the Brooklyn Bridge. Whenever I had said “Saint James” or the “Church” I was always corrected to say Saint James “Pro” Cathedral. (The term “Pro Cathedral was introduced in 1903.) I never knew why that was so important. But like the Brooklyn Bridge, it too was a first in New York City and predated all the more famous Cathedrals in the City

and it was ours in Brooklyn. It was a small neighborhood we lived in, but it connected the dots on many things that were quintessentially “old Brooklyn.” Even in her 90s my mother would correct me if I said just “Saint James” or the “Church.”

We walked two blocks further to Duffield Street and number 57 was still there, as were several of the other old Brownstones in the row. I went up the stairs to top of the stoop and knocked on the door, but no one was home. Nevertheless, standing on the old stoop I could crane my neck and look into my grandparent’s apartment. it was being renovated, probably for the tenth time since we had moved away, and I could see clearly through the old shotgun apartment to the backyard.



New appliances were being installed and it looked like a new stove was going into place where my grandmother’s old wood and coal burning stove had sat. You could renovate and upgrade the interiors of these old Brownstones, but from the outside they always look as they had and still remain the solid backbone and the character of Duffield Street. The stoop and sidewalk we had spent summer evenings on was still the same. Of course, I thought old number 57 stood out among the other Brownstones. *(Show on the right is 57 Duffield Street, the lighter building without a fire escape, as it looks today.)*

Much had changed in the neighborhood by the Brooklyn Bridge. Although many buildings on Duffield Street remained, one block over all the buildings that had backed up to our house were gone. I guess they really had been tenements. But this allowed us to walk around the corner and look directly into our old backyard and the back of the house. The backyard was now a well-appointed garden with stone benches artfully placed in the garden.

And then, there it was, separating the entire backyard in half – the walkway my grandfather had laid more than 100 years before to separate his vegetable gardens. The concrete walkway ran from the back of the house straight to the back of the yard to his shed, which of course was gone. I bet no one had raised rabbits in that backyard since old Pelligrino. If you accidentally stepped off the walkway and into his gardens out would come his “cane.” Playing in the backyard I had learned to keep an eye out for my grandfather and his cane. As we stood there looking into the old backyard on Duffield Street, I was time traveling back to those Sunday family dinners at grandma’s and watching my aunts and uncles stroll on the walkway between the vegetables sharing a “smoke” between courses of the Sunday dinners. I was seeing the backyard from a perspective I had never seen it, looking from the outside in and from the back to the front! In the summertime the old metal bathtub had often been placed at the front of the walkway. It had been a great day to reminisce!

Clearly, things were looking up in the old neighborhood and when we returned home, I did a little digging. What I found was a sign of the times and a little shocking. The old Brownstone at 57 Duffield Street which my grandmother had purchased from the wealthy older Italian women with a handshake and cash payments for 600 dollars more than 100 years ago was now valued at 3.5 million dollars! The name of the neighborhood had even changed to “Rambo,” adjacent a few blocks away to what is now called “Dumbo.” If these neighborhoods had those names in the 1940s and 1950s, I had never heard them. We had always simply lived at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge in downtown Brooklyn. But such is the nature of change. Although I don’t think the immigrant

experience is still playing out in the old Brownstones on Duffield Street as it did for my family, it is still playing out similarly in many places, even in Brooklyn as the America experience continues.



ASK ME TODAY WHERE AM I FROM?

“WHY FROM BROOKLYN OF COURSE, AT THE FOOT OF THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Daniel J. Basta was the Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), within the U.S. Department of Commerce from 1999 to 2016 when he retired after 37 years of government service as an engineer, scientist, and administrator. He was a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES) for more than two decades and had an extraordinary career both inside and outside of government. He is well known as an explorer, adventurer and master diver who has traveled the world. He has dived more than 160 shipwrecks. Since retirement he has become an accomplished writer and

author, writing short stories and tales of his adventures, sometimes to the wildest of places, and of the colorful people in them.