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1623 | 2023

Ode to Mia Mamma

Rosaria "Sarina" Barbara

by Anna O'Connor

400 STORIES PROJECT

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FOREWORD

My mother, Sarina Barbara, fondly known as “Ma,” was a woman whose love of her family outshined the brightest of days and lit up the darkest of nights. She was and continues to be a symbol of strength for the Barbara family. Although we experienced an upbringing marred by the death of our father at a young age, we were inspired by a mother devoted to us. Her sacrifices, courage, perseverance, devotion, strong work ethic, and bright mind have been instilled in us, our children, and our grandchildren. Her strong love of family carried her through a lifetime of love, losses, sacrifices, and fulfillment of the American dream. Both my mother and father fulfilled a dream to provide their children with a better life filled with opportunities and experiences that helped us become life-long learners and productive members of our community.

ABOUT COVER PHOTO

On the cover is my mother, Sarina Barbara in 1924 and in 1996.

Ode To Mia Mamma

Rosaria “Sarina” Barbara

BY ANNA O’CONNOR

Rosaria (Sarina) Abitabile was born in Marsala, an Italian town in the Province of Trapani in the westernmost part of Sicily, on June 2, 1906, to Anna and Nicolo Abitabile, a cobbler. She was the fifth child out of ten, with only five surviving beyond childhood.

Rosaria received a few years of formal schooling before apprenticing as a seamstress. She sewed and displayed her first bride’s trousseau, including wedding gown, undergarments, dresses, coats, sheets, pillowcases, and bedspread at age twelve. Rosaria became a professional seamstress at this young age, instructing and supervising apprentices herself in addition to clothing her own family.

At sixteen, Rosaria met Salvatore Barbara, the man who would become her husband. Arranged marriages were the custom at that time. Her parents informed her of the wedding plans, and everyone agreed it was a perfect match. Rosaria married Salvatore at the mother church of St. Ann in Marsala, Italy, on November 29, 1924. Salvatore’s family owned two bakeries in Trapani, and this is where the young couple made their home. After one year of marriage, Sarina and Salvatore built their own bakery in Trapani, located on Via del’Arango. (Although my mother’s name was Rosaria, her new husband nicknamed her “Sarina.”)

Two years later, the young family encountered some hardships. Their first child died at birth. It was uncommon for doctors to assist during childbirth, but because Salvatore’s family was considered well-to-do, they insisted on a doctor. Unfortunately, he was inexperienced, and the baby died due to his interventions. Shortly after this tragedy, Salvatore suffered from severe bronchitis for nine



My father’s mother, Giacomina Barbara Virgilio and my mother, in their garden in Trapani, Italy, in 1926.

months. It was recommended that he go and spend some time near the ocean for the sea air to cure him. Since Salvatore had experience in the fishing industry as a young boy, he traveled to London to sign up as a crew member on a large cargo boat destined for Philadelphia for a five-year tour of duty. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, Salvatore's plans changed drastically: he deserted the ship and immediately started planning to send for his wife instead. After five long years, he could finally make the arrangements, but there would be another setback: Sarina was torn about coming to America. She feared traveling such a long distance by herself to a foreign country where she didn't know the language. She was also hesitant to leave her mother-in-law, whom she feared would die of a broken heart with no family nearby in her old age. Salvatore's sister had passed away, his only brother was also in America, and Sarina could not bear to leave her mother-in-law alone.

These circumstances put the young couple in a quandary as Salvatore was a deserter; if he returned to Italy, he risked never being able to return to America. In the end, Sarina spent the next nineteen long years running the bakeries and having a love affair with her husband, separated by distance. The consistent letters, packages, and gifts Sarina received from Salvatore kept her deeply in love and hopeful that they would reunite.

During the years of World War II, Sarina spent her time running the bakery twenty-three hours a day with her father and an older woman. When bombing took place, they lost electricity, and they sent soldiers to help her mix and knead the dough by hand. During the night, they would hear the alarms go off and put up an iron barricade to hide the light coming from the flames in the oven to avoid being bombed. When food became rationed, she provided food to all who needed it, including bread to the soldiers. The military respected Sarina because of her position in the community, which enabled her to communicate with her husband through the American soldiers. They provided her with a military address for correspondence. Sarina continued to bake bread day and night, surrounded by dwellings leveled by the bombings.

Sarina endured many hardships during the war - the constant bombings, being separated from her husband, the constant fear, and witnessing many injuries. One of the war stories Sarina told includes a soldier friend running frantically to see if his wife and children were safe, not realizing he was severely injured and in shock. He had lost four fingers in an explosion, and Sarina applied a tourniquet and took him to an infirmary. The war and this lifestyle lasted four

years until November 1944, when Sarina's mother-in-law died. Nearly two years went by after her death until the war finally ended. Sarina read in the newspaper that any man in America could send for his wife on the returning ships and wrote to her husband with this news.

On August 29, 1946, she arrived in New York City on a military ship called the Marina Angela. Because this ship (out of three) was returning to America after the war, they filled it with women and their children whose husbands had already immigrated to America. She began a ten-day journey to a foreign land with fears of the unknown. After nineteen years of separation, Sarina was greeted at the dock in New York by her husband and his brother's family. From New York, they traveled to Boston by train and from Boston to Gloucester by car.



My mother Sarina and father Salvatore, reunited in America, 1946



My mom Sarina at home on Western Ave, 1946



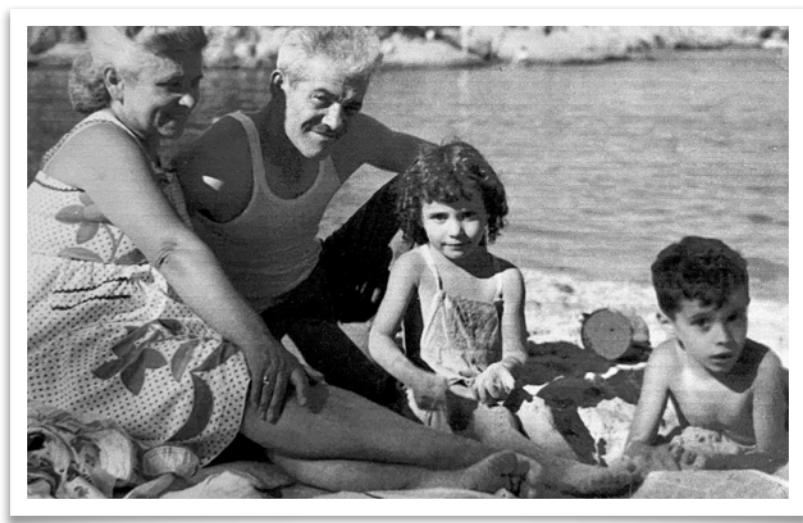
My parents at Gloucester Harbor, 1947

She made residence at the "Fort," predominantly an Italian community of Sicilian immigrants, in the heart of the fishing community that her husband was a part of.

They began their lifelong dream of starting a family. On July 26, 1948, my mother Sarina, at age forty-one, gave birth to my brother Carlo and on July 26, 1949, she gave birth to me, Anna. Yes! My brother and I were both born on the same day, one year apart.



Me, my parents, and my brother Carlo at the
Fishermen's Memorial, 1950



All of us at Half-Moon Beach, circa 1952

Fishing was a hazardous profession, with fishing trips lasting 10–14 days at sea. Fishermen were challenged by unpredictable weather conditions, especially in the winter. Some of my father's friends had moved south to Mississippi, where the weather was milder, and shrimp fishing was not only easier, requiring day trips, but in abundance. With encouragement from my father's friends, in 1953, our family moved to Pascagoula, Mississippi, where my father purchased his own shrimp boat, the *St. Alberto*. He became known as Captain Salvatore as he progressed in the fishing industry.

In 1955 our family made another move to Pensacola, Florida, where the shrimp business was even more prosperous. After only a month of fishing in Florida, my father suffered a heart attack. Unable to speak English, my mother contacted the Salvation Army, using me as an interpreter at five years old.

While my father was convalescing, my mother retrieved her belongings from Mississippi and rented an apartment in Florida. She worked cleaning a wealthy woman's home to support her family until my father insisted on returning to work. He was back fishing for one day when he went missing. On October 14, 1956, he was found deceased on his boat, most likely suffering a second and fatal heart attack.

My father's family, including his half-brother Joseph Virgilio, and our community, rallied to provide a plot of land for his burial and funds to return him to his true home in Gloucester. After a two-day wake, my mother boarded a train with my father's coffin, me and Carlo, and a young soldier assigned to accompany us as we returned to Gloucester.

After my father's death, my mother became the symbol of the family's strength. She dominated decisions concerning daily life, the fate of the family, and family honor. She was the heart of the family, choosing to stay in a country where she could not speak the language to raise her children with the hope of a better life and greater opportunities - a vision she had shared with her husband.

Raising two young children as a single parent was a challenging and often frightful task. My mother instilled a strong work ethic in us by working as a seamstress, often into the wee hours of the night. She accepted house cleaning jobs anytime they were made available and took

meticulous care of us and our home. My mother's cooking was an art, and she would stretch a meal to anyone in need. But foremost, she instilled a strong love of family, always keeping the memory of our father alive in our hearts.



My mother attending citizenship class at Central Grammar School in Gloucester.
She's front row, second from the right, 1958.

In 1967, my brother Carlo and I graduated from Gloucester High School and went on to college. My mother was bursting with pride when we became the first generation in both families to obtain a college degree. I graduated from Salem State College with a B.S. in Early Childhood Education. Carlo graduated from Lowell Technological Institute with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering. In 1974, after teaching for three years at Gloucester High School, Carlo invested in his first local business, Tony's Sub Shop, later named Captain Hook's. He purchased the Long Beach Dairy Maid in 1976, and the Italian Villa, later named Valentino's Pizzeria, in 1980.

My mother's expertise and knowledge of business, along with her recipes, mentorship skills, work ethic, kindness, and love of people, supported the success of these establishments in our

community for nearly fifty years. Her mentorship roles and ability to create from within, without direction, encouraged close to a dozen employees of Carlo's to invest in their own businesses. Inspired by my mother, I served the city and children of Gloucester for thirty-five years as an educator and administrator in the Gloucester Public Schools.

The sacrifices, strong work ethic, and bright mind of my mother were also instilled in her grandchildren: Jason, Shelagh, Angelique, Shevaun, and Sarina. They have all gone on to become successful professionals and strong supporters of their community. Jason became a builder and contractor; Shelagh, an educator and administrator; Angelique, a doctor of chiropractic medicine; Shevaun, a registered nurse; and Sarina, a doctor of veterinary medicine. My mother's indestructible and loving character also lives on in her great-grandchildren (Chiara and Jace O'Connor, Connor and Kiley St. Laurent, Ryan, Isla and Jack Parady) and her beloved Gloucester community.



My mother's 90th birthday celebration in 1996. She's front and center and from left to right is Stephen, me, Shelagh, Jason, Angelique, Doreen, Carlo, and Sarina.



My mother's grandchildren: Shelagh, Sarina, Jason, Angelique, and Shevaun, 2007



My family traveling to Italy in 2022.
This is us outside of my parents' bakery in Trapani.

Ode to “Mia Mamma”

BY ANNA O’CONNOR

A life begun so long ago
In days when simplicity of life began to show
A woman with the strength to survive
a war that separated both man and wife.
The courage to feed the poor
While knowing the soldiers would break down your door.
If only they knew the secrets you kept
To keep men alive and with great respect.
Courage, perseverance, devotion, and love
Kept you strong while the bombs were thrown from above.
After the war to a strange land were you bound
Where you never heard a familiar sound.
Foreign the land, foreign the tongue,
Courage, perseverance, devotion, and love
Gave you the strength that you needed and knew
You must have to begin life anew.
Eight short years did you live with your spouse
Until you were faced with a blackened house.
Two small children to nurture and guide
How many times did you feel you should run and hide?
Courage, perseverance, devotion, and love
Kept you in control, gave you determination and drive,
to raise two children, while sewing day and night
To make sure they grew up with the sense and the sight
to have courage, perseverance, devotion, and love.
And that you did with the strength of God above.

In loving memory of my mother, Rosaria (Sarina) Barbara, 6/6/1906–5/21/2003.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna O'Connor is a retired educator and administrator, serving the Gloucester Public Schools for 35 years. She presently serves as President of the Board of Directors of the Gloucester Education Foundation. Anna is a native of Gloucester and lives with her husband of 50 years, Stephen. She has two children, Jason and Shelagh (St. Laurent) and is the very proud grandmother of Chiara, Connor, Jace and Kiley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Gloucester400+ Stories Project workshop instructor Tomra Vecere for her assistance with the development of this story and thank you to Larry Maver for photo restoration.

COVER BACKGROUND PHOTO CREDIT

Gloucester Harbor, 1950s. Adapted from photo by Glenn from West Virginia, USA, Wikimedia Commons.