

MY IMPRESSIONS OF BERNALDA WHILE EXPLORING MY ROOTS:
FIRST TRIP (1992)

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Monday, May 18 through Tuesday, May 19, 1992:

It was early Tuesday afternoon in Italy and I found myself driving through the heart of Basilicata. It had been about 22 hours since I awoke (on Monday morning), went to work and installed an up-date of a program on my computer, was driven to the airport, left Cleveland, Ohio and flew to Naples via Boston and Rome. If I was tired as I drove my rental car from the Naples airport onto the highway, I was immediately, and rudely, awakened by the manic pace of high-speed traffic and the chaos of Neapolitan traffic. Only my early training on the streets of New York saved me as I shifted into my "New York taxi driver mode" and competed with the local drivers for driving space. I soon learned the rules of the high-speed lane and was moving with the traffic at 120-140 km/h. Even at those speeds, I was occasionally passed by cars flashing their lights and driving with reckless abandon.

After about an hour of that madness, I was out of the Naples area and heading for Potenza on a much less crowded highway. The country around me was beautiful and I made good time down the heart of Basilicata toward my goal of Bernalda. On both sides of the road were small villages perched on top of the surrounding mountains. I wondered if Bernalda would be visible from the highway; the map indicated that it would be to my left as I traveled south. My grandfather, Luigi, had never spoken to me of Bernalda so I had no preconceived picture in my mind.

I was now getting close to my goal and when I come to the sign for Bernalda, I looked to my left and was surprised to see a castle sitting high up on a steep mountain. So this is where my ancestors lived for hundreds of years and, after 100 years, I am the first member of my particular branch of the Dell'Osso family to return. After leaving the highway, I stopped on the winding road approaching Bernalda and took a picture of my first view of the city. As I drove into the old part of Bernalda, I quickly lost my way while exploring the small, winding streets. I saw the castle and used it as a guide to determine the direction to the center of the city. I headed in that direction and found myself on what looked like the main street, Corso Umberto Primo.

Where do I begin? Are there any Dell'Osso's left in Bernalda? Is there any one old enough to remember my great-grandfather, Francesco or my great-grandmother, Caterina? I decided to park the car and get a gelati at the nearest bar. In the bar, I told the owner who I was and why I was in Bernalda. He and a patron looked surprised when they heard my name, Luigi Dell'Osso. I later found out that Bernalda's most famous mayor was Luigi Dell'Osso! They, as other residents would later do, assumed that I was directly descended from that Luigi Dell'Osso. At this point, I had no way of knowing whether I was or not. What happened next, and throughout my visit to Bernalda, is a reflection of the kind of hospitality that I have come to recognize as typically Italian. The man told me that there was an engineer, named Guido Dell'Osso, just down the street and he offered to take me to him. I never cease to be amazed at how each time I asked someone for directions, they stopped what they were doing and personally took me where I was going or took me far enough to insure that I would find what I was looking for. Sometimes this

even involved driving me somewhere. There is simply no equal for this warmth and helpfulness to a stranger in my experience except, perhaps, in Japan where a man in Tokyo actually traveled on the subway with me late one night to make sure I got back to my hotel.

We walked to Guido's home and rang the bell. When Guido appeared on the balcony and was told who I was, he invited me into his home. I thanked the helpful man and met my first Dell'Osso who lived in Italy. Guido actually lives in Bari and works in Bernalda only two days per week. This was a stroke of luck and the beginning of a series of fortuitous events that made my visit to Bernalda successful beyond my wildest dreams. Guido is an engineer, as I am, and he has a brother Pierluigi, who is a well-known magistrate in Milan, a sister Liliana, who is a psychiatrist in Pisa, a brother Guiseppe, who is a physician in Siena, a sister Adriana, who is a biologist in Bari, and a brother Ricardo, who is an architect in Milan. I had previously discovered Liliana and Guiseppe in medical papers I came across at home. I had wondered if they were related and now I found out that they all came from Bernalda. Guido's father is Bernardino and his grandfather, Luigi. Guido's mother, Antonietta, was the principal of the elementary school in Bernalda.

Before I left for Italy, Thomas Dell'Osso (an American who is also trying to trace his family from Roggiano Gravina) sent me a copy of his correspondence with Guiseppe Dell'Osso, who lives in Rome. Guiseppe (a pharmacist), his brother Aldo (a surgeon) and their mother, Noemi also came from Bernalda. When I landed in Rome earlier that morning I called Aldo (Guiseppe's number had been changed from the one I had) and, with the help of two Italian-American brothers from Boston who I met on the plane, told him of my trip to Bernalda and interest in tracing my family tree. He was very interested and told me that his brother, Guiseppe would also wish to meet me. He gave me Guiseppe's new phone number and I told him that I would call in a week when I was in Sardinia. If we could arrange it, I would leave Sardinia one day early and spend it with Guiseppe in Rome. It turns out that Guido knows both Guiseppe and Aldo. In fact, Guido's mother is buried in the chapel of Guiseppe Dell'Osso's family. One further important connection between Guido's family and mine is that they are related to Cosimo Dell'Osso, a minister who went to America and who was related to my grandfather, Luigi. In fact, Cosimo performed the marriage ceremony of my aunt Vera to Charles, who was divorced and therefore, could not be married in a Catholic church. It seems that Cosimo was the brother of Guido's grandfather, Luigi (this has to be confirmed). How they are related to my grandfather, Luigi also needs clarification.

Guido took me for a ride to see a building under construction that he designed. We also drove past the excavation of Greek ruins and got a hotel room for me. Guido's assistant, Francesco, arranged for me to meet Don Mariano and Don Pepino, two local priests. I saw some old church records but they only went back to 1897. The records I needed were older and Don Mariano agreed to get them for me from Don Pepino's house. The next day was Saint Bernardino's day; he is the patron saint of Bernalda.

At dinner, I was introduced to Maestro Antonio Salfi, a man who has done much research into the families of Bernalda. He is especially interested in the Dell'Osso family. He said they came to Bernalda from the region of Puglia in the 1600's. They were all types of artisans with many names (Alfonso etc.) but not Luigi. The first Luigi was very famous as the mayor of Bernalda. He was second only to Saint Bernardino! That is why

so many of the people of Bernalda shook my hand in awe; they assumed I was a descendant of that Luigi. They were all very kind and helpful to me. Maestro Salfi was to meet me the next day at 1 pm.

After dinner I saw how Bernalda comes to life at about 9 pm. It seemed that every one is out walking up and down the main street. Most were young people. I saw how very popular Don Mariano was with all who passed by, especially the young. People of all ages were still out walking until after 11:30 pm, Don Mariano said until about 1 or 2 am! I returned to my room long before that to write some notes and at 11:30 pm (I had been awake for 35 hours) I went to sleep.

Wednesday, May 20, 1992:

I was awakened at 7 am by load explosions outside my window; the fireworks commemorating the feast of Saint Bernardino had begun. I did not get out of bed until 9 am. I had breakfast and found the cemetery after getting lost for 20 minutes in Bernalda's narrow streets. I figured that my best bet was to try to establish the date of my great-grandfather's death and then use that to try to find out his birth date and the birth dates of all of my grandfather's brothers and sisters. From these dates, I would look for the dates of their deaths. In the cemetery I met two old women who guided me to the Dell'Osso chapel (I later found out that it was the chapel of Guiseppe Dell'Osso's family). One of the women then took me to the caretaker of the cemetery. When she explained to him who I was and what I wanted, he looked incredulous. Since he had no old (1800's) records and since I did not know the date of my great-grandfather Francesco's death, he did not offer any hope. He took me on a tour of the old part of the cemetery where we found some Dell'Osso's buried in the chapels of other families, but no Francesco. He could not believe that I wished to look through all of his records dating before 1932 (the date of my great-grandmother Caterina's death in Brooklyn). He finally relented and allowed me to sit down and inspect the books he had. There were about 200 names in each year's book and I looked at each name in each book in descending chronological order.

As time went by and I continued my search, he seemed to want to direct me elsewhere; also the cemetery closed at noon and did not reopen until 4 pm. He agreed to leave all the books as I left them on his desk and allow me to return at 4 pm to finish my task. I was down to 1917, having completed 1931 through 1918. I found many Dell'Osso's but no Francesco; things did not look good but I was determined to finish looking. A friend of the caretakers then took me several places where he hoped I might get help; again a resident of Bernalda showed me extraordinary hospitality. We went to the society that the famous Luigi Dell'Osso founded, to some municipal offices and to a card shop to find a city map. The woman who owned the card shop, Geltrude Del Costello, was very helpful. She was working on a book of Bernalda's history and had a large plan of the city, with street names, that she had drafted. She agreed to have a photocopy made for me. The three of us went to the lithographers who agreed to make the large photocopy. They also gave me a copy of the phone book of Bernalda. I was to pick up the photocopy at the card shop at 5 pm. I was then dropped off at the restaurant to wait for Maestro Salfi. He found me there and took me to his home where he had a large file on the Dell'Osso family. From the sparse notes I gave him the night before, he had used his previous research on the Dell'Osso family to come up with three hypotheses!

Each was possible depending on which Francesco Dell'Osso in his files was my great-grandfather. I told him of my research at the cemetery and he offered to come with me at 4 pm to go through the remaining books. He was surprised that I had already gone through so many. We began in the 1917 book and again found many Dell'Ossos but no Francesco. He explained which branch of the family each name was from. He also found some of his relatives and others he was researching. As we neared the final few books (the last was 1911), he remarked that this method was not a good way to approach the problem and would not likely yield much. He needed the older records in the city hall. Book 1912 and finally a Francesco! My spirits soared since this was about the time I had calculated for my great-grandfather's death. My spirits were soon dashed when Maestro Salfi identified that Francesco as coming from one of the very rich Dell'Ossos. That did not sound like my lineage. The rest of the book yielded no other Francescos; there was only one book left with a very low probability that it would contain anything. We found a few other Dell'Ossos but no Francesco.

While he was writing another person's statistics down for his records, I continued to look at the next page. There I saw "Francesco fu Alfonso" and I knew immediately that he was my great-grandfather. When Maestro Salfi finished writing, I turned the page and, without waiting for proof, said, "questo e mio bisnonno." He looked - he agreed! We wrote all the information down, including the exact place of burial - "fossa di Padre Carlo." Neither the caretaker (who was amazed at what we had done) nor Maestro Salfi knew just where that was. They explained to me that it was a room below one of the existing chapels. There were other names with the same burial site listed; they might be helpful in locating the place. My spirits were flying. I had found the beginnings of my roots and Maestro Salfi would help me to expand and connect them to others in the Dell'Osso lineage. Exactly one day after my 100-year time-trip back to Bernalda, my quest was about to end.

While at the cemetery, I began to tell Maestro Salfi of other Dell'Ossos in the USA. He was very interested and began copying my computer printouts. I told him I would send him new ones with corrected and up-dated information but he did not wish to wait. We had to stop in the middle of this when I realized that I was a half hour late for picking up the photocopy of the city plan. We went to the card shop and I got the plan. We then drove through the ancient part of Bernalda and onto via Archita (via di Dell'Osso as it is called in Bernalda). This was the street built by the Dell'Ossos when they came to Bernalda. We saw "Castello Dell'Osso" and Maestro Salfi told me that all of the Dell'Ossos lived on this street, rich and poor. Here was probably where my great-grandfather Francesco was born and grew up. Perhaps even my grandfather Luigi lived here. Maestro Salfi originally lived on this street. We drove to the new developments on the outskirts of new Bernalda and saw "Cantina Dell'Osso" where the Dell'Ossos had their country home with animals and servants. After leaving Maestro Salfi, I went in search of one pair of glasses that I had misplaced. After checking the restaurant, I found them at the card shop where Geltrude was saving them for me.

Early that evening was another procession for Saint Bernardino. I had seen the first in the morning from the old church through the town. First there were fireworks and then the procession back through the ancient part of Bernalda back to the old church. Don Mariano asked me to join him in the procession. This was unusual for me, an agnostic and former Catholic, to be marching in a religious procession, not with the townspeople

but in the midst of the priests (Don Mariano, Don Pepino and another, Don Mimi). Don Mimi told me that his grandmother's maiden name was Michelina Dell'Osso! We were in front of the statue of Saint Bernardino, which was carried by 6-8 youths. As we went through the narrow, ancient streets, I became ever more aware of the significance of what I was doing. For centuries Dell'Ossos had marched in this very procession; my great-grandparents had done so and, more recently (about 100 years ago) my grandfather Luigi had not only marched but, as a seminary student, done so in vestments with the parish priests - just as I was now doing! The emotions within me became very intense and despite all the power I could summon within me, I could not suppress them. They had the same effect on me as a beautiful operatic aria, which always brings tears to my eyes. This was divorced from my, or even my grandfather's, religious beliefs. This was somehow extremely significant to me. It felt as though I had done this before! Just writing of this brings back those feelings. We reached the old church and followed the statue inside. Here was where my great-grandparents and the Dell'Ossos that preceded them were baptized and married where my grandfather and his siblings were baptized and where my grandfather studied for the priesthood. I had now been on the street where they lived, and in the church where they worshiped - where all of the important events of their lives took place.

Don Mariano offered to drive me back but I chose to walk alone once more through the ancient streets of my past. I did so and, after dinner I walked among the townspeople on the main street as they celebrated the feast. At 11:30 pm I saw Don Mariano sitting with several young men. He motioned for me to join them. What followed was 1.5 hours of questions for this stranger from the USA with Don Mariano acting as an interpreter and, as the group changed over the course of this time, some of the questions were asked several times. My profession, interests, sports and America in general were all fair game. Then, more personal still—was I married? Was I Catholic? This last I tried to handle as diplomatically as possible, explaining how, as I entered my teens, my intense belief in Catholicism was questioned by my increasing embracing of scientific inquiry. My eventual change to agnosticism seemed to me the only consistent position vis-à-vis the structure of evidence and logical deduction. I succeeded in limiting this vein of questioning since I felt it was not my desire to alter in any way what I perceived to be a wonderful interrelationship between the young men and Don Mariano. All evening, as had happened the previous evening, many young people (either while walking by or after having stopped) greeted Don Mariano very warmly. I continued to marvel at their cheerfulness and innocence, quite different from today's American youth, who are neither. Somehow Bernalda has survived with a tranquil atmosphere untouched by all that makes such a scene all but impossible in many other places in the world. One in the group, a reporter, asked if he could interview me for a newspaper in Bari and possibly a TV show. After making it quite clear that I was not famous, in case he got the wrong impression from the discussion of my research, I agreed. At 1 am we all went home; the next day I was to meet Maestro Salfi and search through the municipal records.

Thursday, May 21, 1992:

I met Maestro Salfi at 9 am in the basement of the Commune building amidst all of the birth, death and marriage records dating back about 200 years. We worked for about five hours until it closed and recorded many births and marriages of Dell'Ossos,

including the siblings of my grandfather Luigi. To my surprise, there were 11 children in his family! We planned to research the death records on Friday to document the dates of their early (according to what I had been told by my family) deaths. We found no marriage record of my great-grandparents, Francesco and Caterina; we presume that the marriage took place in her hometown since her family name, "Mammoli" or "Mammola" (the records show it spelled both ways but my grandfather, who was quite literate in Italian, used the former) was not a Bernaldese name. Perhaps, if I can get a copy of her death certificate from Brooklyn, New York, we may be able to find more information about her birthplace or date. We guess it to be about 1851. We uncovered many ancestors predating Francesco and they include upper middle-class people in many trades. Francesco was a carpenter (cabinet maker) as were his direct ancestors and progeny (e.g., Luigi, my grandfather). We had lunch at Maestro Salfi's house and his daughter, Sylvia, took me to see the two ancestral homes we identified from the records. Later that evening, I met with Don Mariano and the reporter who had set up two interviews (one local and one national) for Saturday morning. Again, I would meet Maestro Salfi the next morning to review more records.

Friday, May 22, 1992:

I again spent about 5 hours with Maestro Salfi reading the archives of deaths and births and we found more children in the family of Francesco and Caterina; there were a total of 13 and 11 died in infancy (between 7 days and 2 years old). One son, Alfonso, lived to 22 and died in 1896 of malaria, contracted in the army; the other, my grandfather Luigi, lived to the age of 78 years. Clearly there was some kind of genetic defect carried by Caterina (none of the other Dell'Osso families exhibited such a high rate of infant mortality). In addition, we found an archpriest, Giambernardino Dell'Osso, who lived from the late 1700's into the early 1800's!

Saturday, May 23, 1992:

After checking a few books in the Commune building, we looked at three old church books that Don Mariano got for us; they dated from 1771. We found a priest, Don Francisco Antonio Dell'Osso (about 30-60 years old in 1781) and a cantor, Domenico Dell'Osso (envelope dated 1871). I then went with Don Mariano and a woman from Texas (who is marrying a man from Bernalda) to do the interview at the middle school. On the way, we saw a big wedding taking place at the old church. There were people from all over the world since a man from Bernalda, now living in London, was marrying a woman from Singapore. After the TV interview, Don Mariano took me to Metaponto to see the ruins and to the museum there. Later that evening I met Don Mariano and many of the wedding guests and we all talked until 2 am.

Sunday, May 24 - Wednesday, June 10, 1992:

At 9:15 am I sadly left Bernalda and set out for Pompeii. I arrived at the highway exit at 11:15 am; it took one more hour to travel the remaining 3 km due to the mass of cars trying to travel on the same street! I had left more than Bernalda, I had left a wonderfully relaxed way of life and returned to the stress that is part of all big cities. I would spend the night in Naples and then fly to Alghero via Rome. My three weeks in Sardinia included presenting papers at scientific meetings, doing a little work with my

friend Sebastiano Traccis and enjoying the sights of this beautiful island. We did contact Giuseppe Dell'Osso in Rome and arranged for me to fly there one day early and meet with him and his family.

Thursday, June 11, 1992:

Sebastiano drove me to the airport and saw me off on the last leg of my search. In Rome, Annarosa Dell'Osso, Giuseppe's daughter and Anna Maria Dell'Osso, his wife, met me. They drove me to their home, a beautiful house in the outskirts of Rome. There I met Giuseppe and his other daughter, Noemi. We all talked about what I had found out in Bernalda and I showed them the charts I had made in the USA as well as the notes from Maestro Salfi. Giuseppe had a history book of Bernalda which he offered to copy for me. He also copied some of the material I got from Bernalda. Our two branches of the Dell'Osso family probably are connected back several generations; this needs some research to work out. Giuseppe's family have a home in Bernalda and both Noemi and Annarosa know Don Mariano. After lunch, which included a special Bernaldese dish of fava beans and chicory, Giuseppe and Annarosa took me all around Rome by car. We visited the many hills of the city and places that I had not seen on my previous trips there. We also traveled down the Apian Way and saw all of the Roman ruins along both sides of this early Roman road. Giuseppe gave me a running commentary on the history of what I was seeing; he is very knowledgeable in this area. We stopped at the hospital where Aldo (Giuseppe's brother) and his wife, Daniela work. Aldo showed us around the hospital grounds, which are over more Roman ruins, including the home of Marcus Aurelius. It was fascinating to see how the builders had to carefully construct the supports of the hospital in a way that did not disturb the ruins below. When we returned to the house, we had a very nice dinner and continued discussing the Dell'Osso family. Noemi had already copied some of the history book and gave those pages to me; she will send me the rest when she finishes copying it. Giuseppe gave me some of his skin care products to bring home for Charlene. At about midnight, Giuseppe drove me to the hotel where he had reserved a room for me. It had been a long day and I slept well.

Friday, June 12, 1992:

At about 8 am, Noemi picked me up and drove me to the Rome airport. Giuseppe had to leave for Bari early since he had postponed his trip just so we could meet. I told Noemi that I would see if the computer program was available in Italian; since she can speak English, she will be able to use the English version if there is no Italian version. At the airport, I thanked her and asked her to thank her father and mother for all of their kind hospitality.

Postscript:

This trip had been filled with many new discoveries about my family, about Bernalda, about relatives in Bari, Rome, Milan, Pisa, Siena and about the people of Bernalda. There were many friendly people whose names I never wrote down in addition to those mentioned in this narrative. Finally, there were Don Mariano and Maestro Salfi, two new friends that made my search the success that it turned out to be and who made my stay in Bernalda an experience that I will always carry with me. I will try to bring my father, Francesco (Frank) and his brother, Alfonso (Alphonse) to Bernalda so they can

experience this place where they came from and the people who shared it with their ancestors.