

the disappearance of the earrings

by Giovanni Corrao

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I have never believed in reincarnation—at least, not in the sense in which it is sometimes described. What strikes me as far more plausible is the inheritance of genetic traits, always ready to give rise to echoes of character or familiar resemblances. For instance, when I look at my daughter Giulia (modern makeup aside), I sometimes glimpse in her expressions that bring me unmistakably back to my mother, Santina Lentini, or even to her sister Nella, who died of typhoid in Messina at the tender age of seventeen.



Giulia Corrao and Pancrazia Lentini

the resemblance to my daughter Laura is nothing short of astonishing. Then again, who hasn't stumbled upon familiar resemblances while leafing through old photo albums?

In truth, we should speak of the rare photographs that have reached us from bygone eras, especially when compared to the staggering number we now take with the electronic gadgets at our disposal. We capture so many images nowadays that one wonders whether we will ever truly have the time, in the future, to look back on them all.

And yet, photographs sometimes tell stories—episodes, fleeting moments—that deserve our attention and reflection. For even as times change and evolve, it is only right that we pause to contemplate the adventures—and misadventures—that our ancestors lived through, and which ultimately shaped who we are today.

To speak more concretely: if we know what Maria Crisafulli looked like in 1928, it is thanks to a fortunate coincidence. She was about to board, with her mother Marietta Lentini, one of those smoke-belching ships that carried countless Italian emigrants across the vast Atlantic Ocean, in search of a better life.

We might say it is only natural for such things to happen, and I find it deeply comforting to see, in my mind's eye, a glimpse of my mother whenever I look at my eldest daughter.

I was pleasantly surprised when my cousin Nicola Zanghì—a true-blooded Sicilian disguised as an American living in the States—sent me a picture of his mother, Maria Crisafulli, in her youth:



Maria Crisafulli and Laura Corrao

In those days, we are talking about the 1920s, hunger really existed and work was scarce, not only in Sicily. In the north there were factories that ensured a minimum of employment, while the south was abandoned to itself. To dream of well-being, some had no choice but to emigrate, a goal often unattainable for southerners: in fact, it was necessary to save up enough money to leave, at random.

Many succeeded: climbing one by one on the “Train of the Sun”, destination north, towards the cold and rain, accompanied by the classic cardboard suitcase held with string, containing food and some clothes. Others, however, wanted to make the big leap: reaching America. The undertaking was more difficult because a lot of money was needed to get to the other side of the Atlantic and it was necessary to have a secure connection on site that would offer hospitality at least for the first period.



Communications were entrusted to letters which, too, travelled packed onto ships to reach their destination with proverbial delay: thus lengthening the time needed to coordinate.

The envelope on the side should have been written to my grandfather Giovanni Giuseppe Lentini (Pippo) in June 1959 by his nephew Gianni Crisafulli, son of his sister Marietta.

Giardini - october 1928

The goodbyes were heartbreaking on that gloomy morning of October 1, 1928. In the house next to the church dedicated to the Madonna della Raccomandata, along Strada Umberto I° di Giardini, the Crisafulli family was already ready for the long journey. The tickets for the Taormina-Giardini/Naples train had already been purchased, as well as those for the crossing from Naples to New York, aboard the largest steamship in the world at the time: the Augustus, 233 meters long, capable of carrying 375 passengers in first class, 300 in second, 300 in intermediate class and 700 in third.

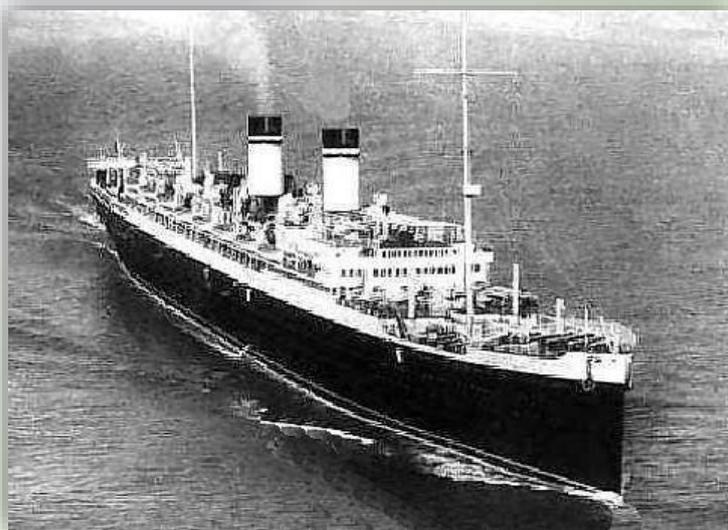
Encouraging the family was the head of the family Concetto Crisafulli, a sure guide, a man of action. He tried to reassure, smiling and masking the sense of anxiety that brought back memories of his first solo voyage to New York on November 24, 1921 aboard the America.

Marietta, Concetto's wife, tried hard to give courage to her three children, all ready to leave for the New World, with their clothes well ironed, each with their own cardboard suitcase.



The two boys, the young Sarino and the fourteen-year-old Gianni, actually did not seem unhappy with that new adventure. They wanted to travel, learn, discover, driven by that sense of seeking out novelties and the thirst for adventure typical of boys of that age. While little Maria seemed even sweeter than usual, with the inevitable tear to testify to the sorrow for the separation from those places. She was very attached to that small town that lapped the sea.

In Giardini she had everything a fifteen-year-old girl could wish for: her best friends, the town square where she could walk in the evening, the church across the street where she could pray, and above all the scents, the flavors, the smells, the daylight, the rocks, the places, sensations and emotions that, she now realized, had entered her heart little by little and would never leave again.



the steamship Augustus

della Raccomandata, of whom great good was spoken. In fact, the women of Giardini turned to her above all, praying, when they feared for their husbands who had ventured out to fish in rough seas.

When the procession arrived, Marietta prayed very intensely to the Madonna, begging her to let her two brothers who had left for America the year before, and of whom she had had no news, return to Italy. And she was very ashamed of herself when, distracted by listening to the Carabinieri band, her eyes remained glued more than they should on the leader of those musicians. She then prayed even more intensely to the Madonna to have pity on her and forgive her immoral feelings.

On that occasion Marietta slept a couple of nights in Giardini at the home of a friend, who had invited her many times in the name of the affection that had arisen during their school years in an institute in Messina.

Needless to say, the two girls, quite close, took advantage of the opportunity to tell each other a bit of everything: however, Marietta, out of shame, did not feel like mentioning that handsome man who had attracted her attention the day before.

Similar emotions, in truth, were also felt by Concetto and Marietta. For a moment their gazes met, bringing the two back to the episode that had made them meet.

“It was September 8, 1909. Marietta Lentini, then twenty-seven years old, advised by her father Giovanni and her mother Santa Zanghì, had decided to go down from Messina, where she lived, to Giardini to ask for the benevolence of the Madonna



Marietta Lentini Crisafulli

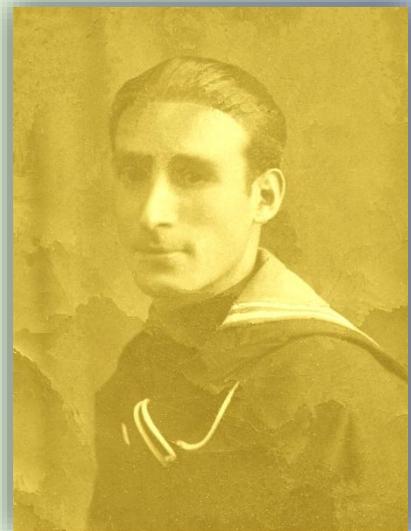
But by then Cupid had shot his arrow, and there was nothing more to be done. It happened that during a walk, on the still-to-be-renovated seafront, the young Marietta's skirt slightly tore, caught in a lobster pot, one of those traps with which fishermen catch fish and especially lobsters. Those were the times, those, in which legs had to remain well hidden so as not to fuel malicious thoughts.

The friend reassured Marietta, saying she knew a good tailor, originally from Linguaglossa, who had now settled down to work in Giardini, who was able to quickly fix the garment without leaving any trace of the accident. In truth, Marietta knew how to sew, and quite well, but she hadn't thought to bring a needle and thread with her.

So, she had to take her friend's advice and in the early afternoon they went to the tailor's shop. It was love at first sight. Concetto Crisafulli, the leader of the band, and Marietta Lentini could no longer separate their gazes from each other, while the young woman's face had begun to turn an iridescent red, enough to finally make the good tailor smile. They married in Giardini on January 9, 1911, two years later".

A smile managed to break the spell that had taken over Marietta and Concetto for a few moments. But by then they had decided: they would move to America and nothing would be able to make them back down from their intentions.

Not even Marietta's brother, Giovanni Giuseppe, known to everyone as Pippo, one of the two brothers who left for America, who returned to Italy in 1915: the only one of the two to receive the blessing of the Madonna della Raccomandata, succeeded. He served his country first during the First World War assembling warplanes for the Navy, then during the Second World War as an English-language interpreter after the Allied landing in Gela in 1943. Politically he was always on the right side: first an anti-fascist, then a social democrat.



**Pippo Lentini
in sailor's uniform**

Also present at the farewell was Natalina, Marietta's other sister, a saintly woman and expert seamstress, who in 1922 had married Pippo's father-in-law, Rosario Bellinghieri, who had been widowed at a young age.



Natalina Lentini Bellinghieri

"The rather unusual story had seen two brothers marry a father and daughter: Natalina to Rosario, and Pippo, Natalina's brother, to Sarina, Rosario's daughter.

Natalina had appreciated Rosario's unexpected marriage proposal to allow her brother and sister-in-law to live in loving solitude, without a third wheel: however, to accept she had requested a proof of love from her future husband.

Rosario at that moment did not understand what his future bride was referring to, but the more shrewd Ciccia Paola Spataro, Rosario's mother, knew how to advise her son. He therefore went to the best jewellery store in Catania to buy two beautiful gold earrings with diamonds set in them at a high price.

At that point Natalina, having received the proof of love she had requested, agreed to marry the handsome Rosario, with whom, however, she had no children. So much so that the woman perhaps vented her maternal instinct towards her niece Maria, to whom she had become particularly fond”.

While they exchanged affection and promises, the embrace between Natalina and the young Maria lasted longer than usual, and a few additional tears betrayed even more the emotion of the moment.

To greet his cousins and uncles on that occasion, Pippo did not forget to bring along his daughter Santina, who was only five years old at the time, which had nevertheless been enough to create a strong bond between her and Maria, which has remained unchanged over time.



Maria Crisafulli Zanahi

The departure from the Taormina-Giardini station, with its view of the blue sea of the splendid bay, represented the moment of true separation. The little family was still with their eyes fixed on admiring the spectacle of nature at the base of the Taormina hills, when they were all surprised by the puffing of the steam locomotive that was pulling the carriages of the time, with several doors on their sides, coming from Catania.

The sound of the train staff's whistles mingled with the puffing of jets of steam as the numerous entrances to the hundred-door carriages swung open. They boarded in third class.

The hard wooden seats left no hope: Naples was still far away and the journey was going to be very tiring. A last look at the blue sea, then entering the tunnel the noise of the train suddenly became muffled.

Upon exiting, they just had time to see Isola Bella running away, in the opposite direction to their dreams: the adventurous journey had begun!

“Mom, mom, tell us a story, for example an adventure of Grandpa Giovanni.”

In truth, Marietta was very tired, and was just waiting to be able to sit on the train to relax her limbs, and take a restorative nap: but she had to give in. The boarding to cross the Strait of Messina was not far away. And to keep her three wilds, especially tireless, children at bay, it would have been better to entertain them, telling one of those particularly exciting family stories.

“A long time ago, grandfather Giovanni Lentini worked in Messina repairing wooden boats. In Sicily there is a tradition that comes from afar, and it concerns above all the construction of the typical fishermen's boats, very sturdy, heavy, made with fine and resistant wood, elegantly painted, and with a protruding pole at the bow, useful for the rowers to maintain direction.

Then one day your grandfather was commissioned by chance to build some wooden barrels to contain wine. Little by little he realized that the skill he had acquired in repairing boats, and therefore in handling curved wooden planks, could be useful to him in creating barrels. He was so good at building them that at a certain point he couldn't handle the amount of work they entrusted to him.

Over time he became an expert in the field, until one day a gentleman originally from Giardini turned to him for the creation of special barrels capable of recreating the taste of the wine of the ancient Greeks.

He objected. Historically he had heard of the Eugenia vine imported by the Greeks in 735 BC during the creation of their first colony on Sicilian soil, called Naxos, but he knew that by then the Arabs had destroyed all those vines and it was no longer possible to produce that wine. Dark-skinned, with a black cap and moustache, that man was unperturbed: - I pay well - he said - think about it - he added before taking his leave.

Grandpa Giovanni tried to document himself, and found a publication in an old library formerly owned by the Capuchin friars of the convent of San Domenico in Taormina, which spoke precisely of the wine produced by the Sicilians during the Magna Graecia era, and of the particular containers. And he got to work.

When some barrels were ready, he waited for the arrival of the man with the black moustache, who, once he arrived, invited his grandfather to sit on his carriage after loading the precious containers. During the journey south, the man was not a man of many words, however, Grandpa Giovanni liked that little man in the corduroy suit, even if he did not yet know his name.

When they reached Taormina, after a steep climb, in a shop the man bought peppered cheese, spicy salami, salted anchovies, semolina bread cooked in a wood oven, and some olives. When they reached what seemed to be a small mountain farm, they sat under a pergola and ate. And to drink, a great surprise: a full-bodied wine with a unique flavor. Grandpa Giovanni had never tasted anything like it, a nectar that emitted the typical scents of the Sicilian land, blending them into a particular fragrance, with an excellent taste.

Noticing Grandpa Giovanni's surprise, the man with the black moustache explained that he had miraculously managed to identify some strains of eugenia grapes among the brambles, plants that he was trying in every way to reproduce. In essence, the wine that Giovanni had tasted had been produced with grapes from ancient vines that had miraculously survived the devastating fury of the invaders and the harsh weather.

In addition to its unique flavor, intense red color, and unparalleled aroma, the most important characteristic of that wine, which differentiated it from all the others, was its constant resistance over time. In essence, the little man with the mustache had noticed that that wine never turned sour, even without any particular treatment.

The place where the seedlings were found was a hill along Mount Venere, terraced with small steps who knows when.



the slopes at the base of Mount Venere, with Etna in the background, had been terraced perhaps in ancient times

The little man with the black moustache spent the rest of his life tending those little plants, and managed to reproduce some of those Eugenia vine plants.

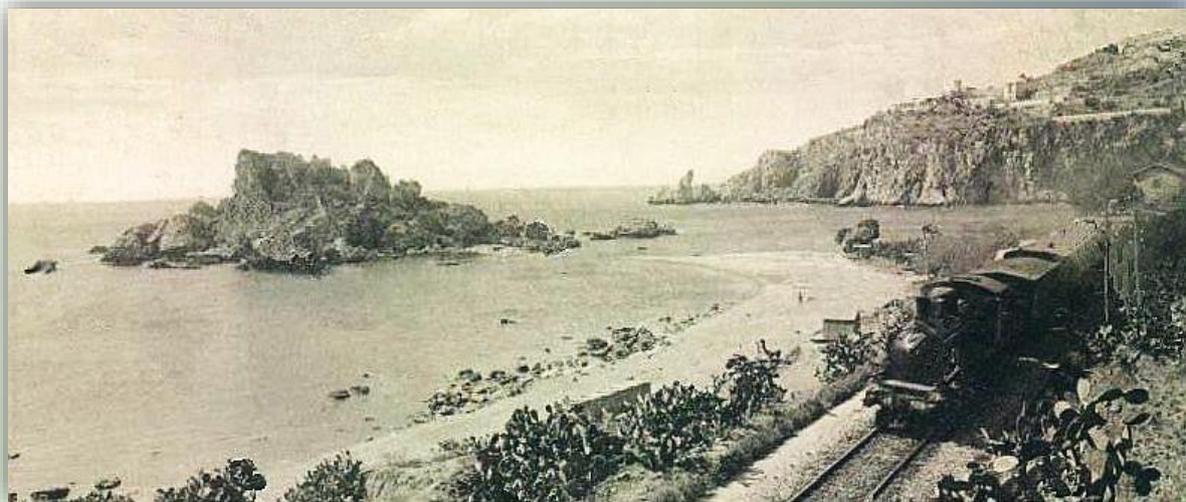


ancient coins found in Naxos depicting the god Dionysus and a bunch of grapes

He did numerous experiments, and tests, and attempts, even asking the greatest experts in the field, without ever revealing the real origin of those small shrubs. One evening, while he was smoothing his moustache and rough beard, he decided together with his faithful Giovanni to fill five barrels of that wine and keep them in his mountain house, the one with a view of the

bay of Giardin, in a safe place, so as to leave a trace of their discovery for posterity. He made Giovanni swear never to reveal that secret, and that only if they were able to reproduce the Eugenia vine stocks in large numbers would they reveal their discovery to the world. But no matter how hard they tried, the two died taking with them the secret of those five barrels containing Greek wine, stored who knows where.

Dad and I found this information in some writings left by our grandfather upon his death; but we never managed to locate the little house with the barrels of fine wine”.



a steam locomotive in front of Isola Bella

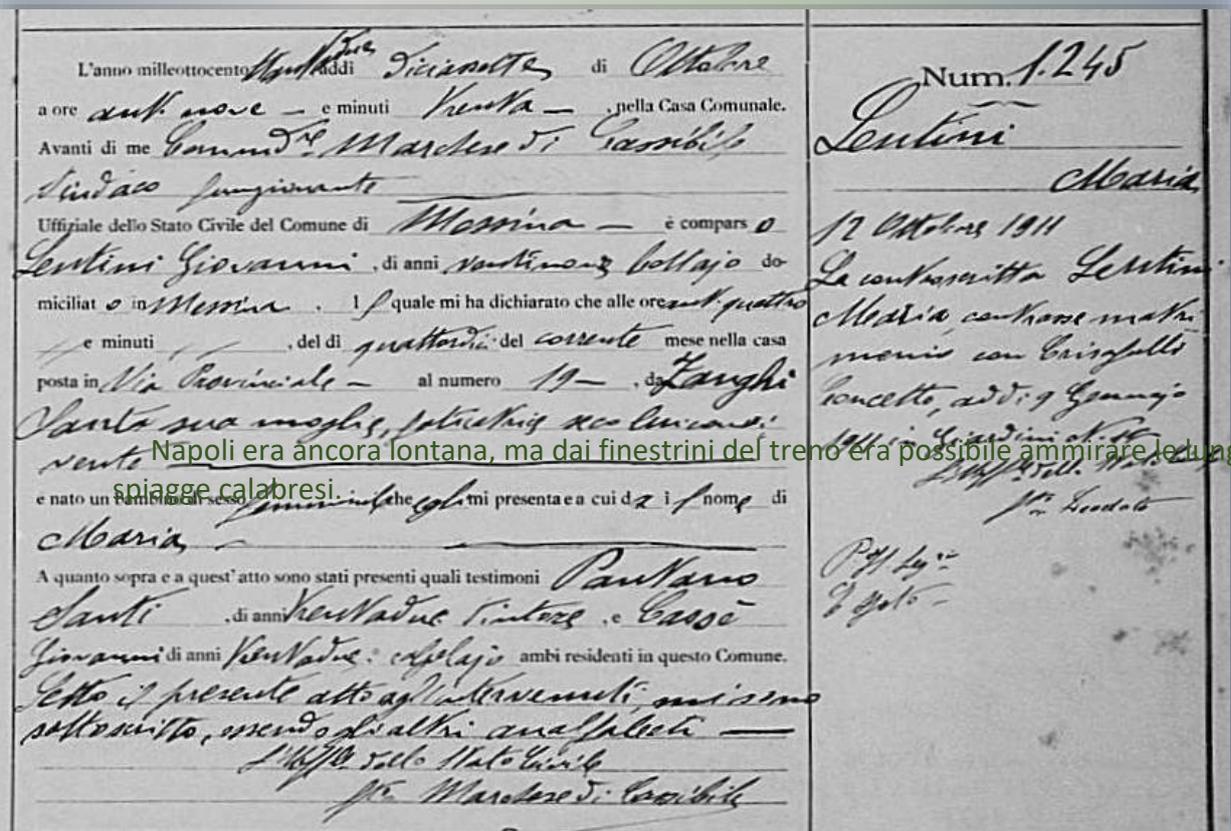
The boys were enraptured by that story. In fact, they did not know that their grandfather Giovanni was a famous cooper: but what struck them most about the story was the existence of those five barrels full of wine hidden who knows where. Sooner or later, all boys dream of going on a real treasure hunt, and that story gave them an important reason to return to their homeland, to look for the secret hiding place.

The journey continued without incident and everyone, during the crossing of the Strait of Messina, got off the carriages to admire the sea and the two coasts, the Sicilian and the Calabrian, from the ferry. On the ship they ate pasta with sardines,



Santina Lentini at 12 years old

Naples was still far away, but from the train windows it was possible to admire the long Calabrian beaches.



Napoli era ancora lontana, ma dai finestrini del treno era possibile ammirare le lunghe spiagge calabresi.

the birth certificate of Maria Lentini, known to all as Marietta, born on 10/17/1883

The Crisafulli family, Concetto, Marietta, Maria, Gianni and Sarino, had to prove that they were physically in good health and had not contracted any diseases, particularly infectious ones, to land overseas.

For this reason, on October 2, 1928, before leaving Naples, they had to undergo a medical examination to demonstrate their healthiness upon arrival in America.

On the side you can see the certificate of good health of Marietta and Maria, miraculously survived the passage of time, signed by Dr. Terranova, complete with photo.

The ocean crossing lasted about eleven days.

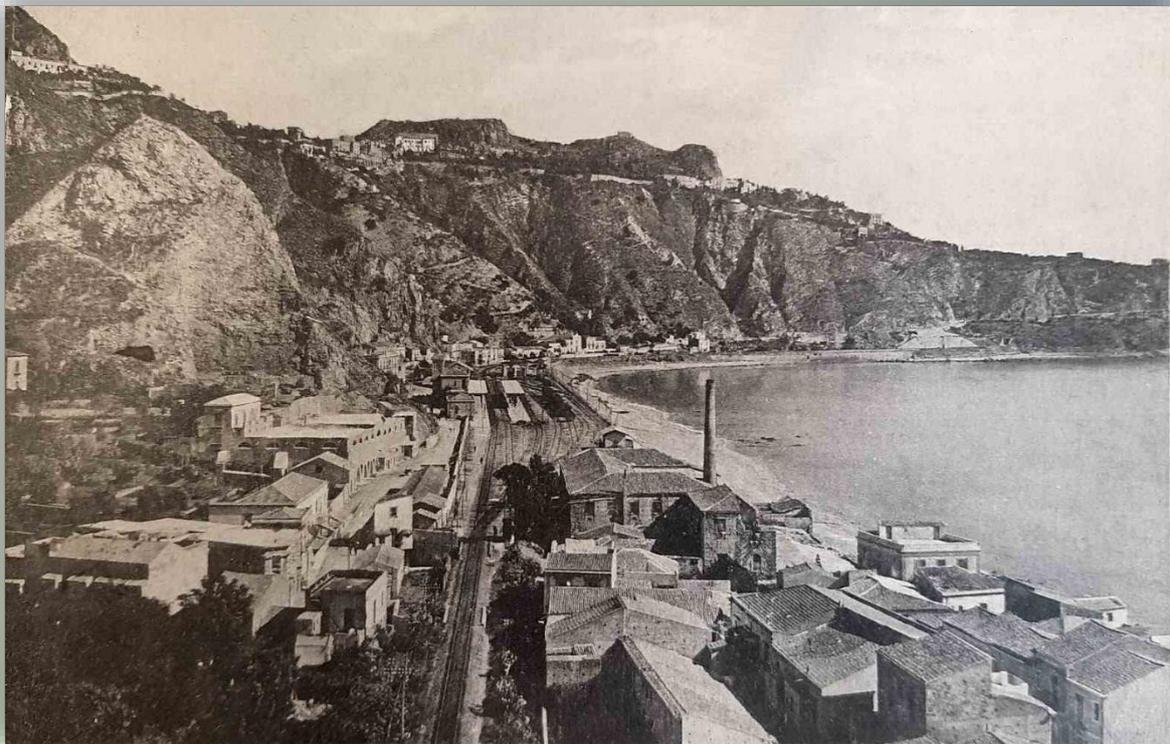


the certificate of good health of Maria Crisafulli and Marietta Lentini

Concetto Crisafulli and Maria Lentini arrived with their three children at the port of New York in the United States on October 13, 1928 aboard the Augustus.

The largest steamship of the time was 27 meters wide, and weighed 32,652 tons: equipped with four propellers, it developed a maximum speed of 19 knots. Seeing those enormous cities for the first time, full of large buildings interspersed with wide streets, amazed Marietta and her children. From their father Concetto's stories, they already knew what they expected to see: but spectacular stories are one thing, and the reality right there within reach is another.

However, after a while, nostalgia for Giardini, that magical town nestled along the sea, began to make itself felt, and it took a long time to overcome the melancholy of the indelible memories of their childhood.



how the historical part of Giardini looked in 1928

His cousin Antonino Zanghì, a purebred from Giardini, arrived in the United States for the first time on October 15, 1928, just two days later.

The entire Crisafulli family was waiting for him at the port of New York, with fluttering flags in their hands. It was a moment of happiness for everyone, and a great opportunity to relive, between laughter and jokes, the carefree moments spent in front of the sea at the foot of Taormina.

When Nino, a fresh nineteen-year-old sailor, saw his little cousin Maria, he felt his heart beat fast, while he couldn't take his gaze off the lucid beauty of that young girl, who was starting to bloom like a white rose.

Nino Zanghì, with his wanderings around the world on luxury cruise ships, became a great chef of value, specialized in international cuisine. He worked above all on the ship Andrea Doria, where he appears, with the wrong first name, among the crew members.

Traveling on intercontinental ships that shuttled between Europe and America, Nino had the opportunity to keep in touch and bring news. But above all he had the opportunity to see his beloved cousin Maria Crisafulli from time to time, whom he happily married and with whom he had two children, Nicola and Nina, who currently live in the United States of America.



Zaina	Mr. Mario 43 yrs	Operaio brasatore. Rescu
Zampieri	Ms. Luciana	Venditrice
Zanella	Mr. Carlo	Assistant Waiter bcl
Zanghi	Mr. Eugenio	First class Caffettiere
Zennaro	Mr. Sergio 20 yrs	Assistant to the Tourist C
Zillio	Mr. Simeone	Camer t
Zincchinof fi	Mr. Giovanni	Giovanot 2a. Rescued by

an excerpt from the list of the crew on board the Andrea Doria

In Giardini, meanwhile, on the one hand they were happy for the happy conclusion of the Crisafulli family's journey, which could now fit into a nation that offered job opportunities, but on the other they felt sorry for the lack of those deep affections.

Natalina especially felt the lack of Maria. And while she sewed around the large table, together with her friends, sometimes she brought up the subject of those relatives who had had to leave in search of a better future.

Over time, because of the sadness she felt, she began to live a withdrawn life, and decided to avoid wearing the wonderful gold and diamond earrings, given to her by her husband Rosario in the name of love, until she saw her beloved niece Maria again. But the years passed and the possibility of meeting became more and more remote.

It was her brother Pippo who noticed the state of dejection felt by Natalina, who tried to stay closer to his sister whenever possible. But despite the affection of Pippo, who had always been by her side and had never abandoned her, Natalina was increasingly withdrawing into herself, both because of her husband's death and because of the lack of her niece.

Once it happened that her other niece, Santina, had to go to a university party. Pippo took advantage of the situation to ask Natalina to lend her daughter her diamond earrings to make her more beautiful. But Natalina had already decided that she would give the earrings to her niece Maria, the American: and to avoid letting her brother find them, she sewed them into the collar of one of her blouses.

She only spoke about it with a trusted friend, saying that she was looking for a way to have the jewels delivered to her niece, without letting the family know.

The days passed, and Natalina, as a good seamstress, sewed splendid dresses and embroidered fabrics with skilled and expert hands. Until one day her best friend, her confidant, secretly and in a low voice told her that an uncle of hers was about to leave by ship for America and would disembark right in the port of New York. She could thus, through him, send the earrings to her niece, as she had hoped for a long time, to communicate to Maria the unchanged affection and constancy of her intact feelings.

To ensure that the precious items reach the hands of her favorite niece, she advised her to leave the earrings sewn inside her blouse. In this way, without knowing, no one could take advantage, while there would be no reason to take possession of a simple blouse.

And so, the earrings disappeared forever.