

VITTORIO LEVI

Mario Foah



EROE DEI DUE MONDI | HERO OF TWO WORLDS



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Premise

Remembering when and where I first met Mario is no easy task. Someone must have introduced us at some point, of course, but I can no longer remember when or where my sister Laura finally introduced us to her latest, and last, love. From that moment on I have always had the sensation that I had somehow always known and hung out with Mario, a sensation I am certain will never leave me.

Getting to know Mario during a lengthy, free-flowing conversation of memories and anecdotes conducted on both sides of the Atlantic, by video-conference and in-person interviews, helped me understand the experiences that shaped Mario's worldview, increasing my fondness for him as I began to see how a mosaic made of individual tiles comes to form a meaningful whole, not just for relatives and close friends, but even for curious readers and complete strangers.

Mario is fortunately not at all the type to go on with "Lady, my life is a novel." Conscious of a life well-spent, he is devoid of any pretense or bloated sense of self-importance that others, in his place, might, and often do, have.

In my long personal and professional life, I have met and worked with important people in their fields and have often found them, not only aware of their status and accomplishments, but boastful to a point of vainglory. Mario, on the other hand, inspires authentic relationships in high society and with the guy on the street, from the waitress who serves him coffee, to the man opening his taxi at the curb. And he talks about the events of his life with the wit, self-irony and simplicity of a man who has always lived life to the fullest.

This was why I went to Atlanta in March of 2017, to see

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Mario, Roberto and Lucio, Thanksgiving, 2017.
Cover image large
Mario in the office.

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where Mario has lived for the last twenty-five years and to gather the material for this brief sketch of his life.

Our conversations were held in his home, perched on the thirty-eighth floor of a splendid forty-story building of residences, including one owned by Elton John. They provide the basis for this “short work,” which I hesitate to call a biography, for fear of limiting my reader’s expectations.

So, it was, with shameful tardiness, caused by unfortunate events, that I was finally able write this story in late 2017, gaining a joy I hope to be able to pass on to my eventual readers.

1. Arrival in Atlanta

The plane from New York, where I spent a few days in the cold and snow in order to recover from jet lag, less bothersome than I had feared, was smaller than the ones that work our domestic routes in Italy. Atlanta is the base airport and hub for Delta Airlines, but my connecting flight was operated by one of its competitors, American Airlines, whose small planes are kept at freezing temperatures, out of respect for the American cult of savagely conditioned air.

As we approached our final descent, I wrapped myself in my March winter coat and began to observe the people around me. My seatmate was a young Asian man, uninterested in looking out the porthole as he jammed out to the music on his iPhone. In the aisle an enormous black woman attempted vainly to wrap herself in a faux fur far too small for her body.

Mario's first born, Roberto was supposed to meet me at the gate. I had already met his brother, Lucio, two or three years earlier in Rome, at a dinner in a restaurant in Trastevere that has since been replaced by a characterless *bruschetta*. Roberto had insisted, not to "leave the exit area, as Laura had done when she came for her first visit, because it will make it hard to find you." I had a local phone, however, and could call him if needed, as I had done from the "Big Apple" the day before, but I decided to follow his instructions and set up camp in a bizarre location below a staircase where we retrieved our suitcases and which was soon left empty of everyone except the janitor, a friendly, smiling and helpful African-American.

After I managed to explain where I was, I was assisted by Roberto's sprightly figure, dressed in a shirt and very visible suspenders that held up dress pants, which he later told me were tailor-made, like the rest of his *casual* clothing. After a few

steps we began conversing like old friends thanks to the familiar Foah sense of humor, present in all the Foà brothers and their offspring, irrespective of how they spell their name from Atlanta to Naples, Rome, Milan, or Padua.

On the way to Mario's house Roberto drove his Lexus through downtown Atlanta, periodically interrupting our conversation to point out something of interest backed-up by a promise of a detailed tour in the following days. As the car drove up a hill, we left the densely populated business district and entered a more genteel and spacious residential neighborhood. There were many cars, but no pedestrians. If not for the presence of a church, in fact, which rendered the crossing a bit more human, you might have thought there was a curfew in place, a luxurious curfew, of course, but one that felt deserted and lonely nonetheless. It seemed impossible to me that you could go anywhere without a taxi, or a private car or, at the least, in running clothes for a quick athletic tour.

As at the airport, we were greeted at the entrance to Mario's building by a friendly, African-American and then, by a gold-laced porter, also a black man, who received us at a desk resembling that of a grand hotel, or at least that's how I remember it today.

From the oversized hall, we passed into the elevator area, which was full of people going up and down. Everyone smiled at me, a behavior that puzzled me, but I will talk about that later, because now I am called to hug Mario who is standing at the entrance of his apartment, celebratory and welcoming as always.

The guest room was large and comfortable and Mario showed me a high-tech, built-in closet, a sort of walk-in, where I could place my things, but looking around I could not see a bed. Mario anticipated my question with the sense of humor I already knew from the Foà, Americanized in Foah, by noting that the room had very thick carpeting and good air-conditioning, and that I could sleep anywhere on the floor I wanted. Knowing Ma-

rio, however, I began to inspect the couch for a possible hide-away bed as Mario showed me a wall of shelves full of photos and books that folded out into a huge bed with room for two if not three people! This marvel, like many others I would discover living with Mario, was the result of the practical creativity of his late wife Luciana, whose touch and presence can still be seen in the many photos and paintings that decorate their home. A few landscapes, inspired by Italy, adorned the walls in the living room, a space that could easily contain my entire home in Venice, made to seem even bigger by a wall-sized mirror that reflects the huge balcony window providing a view of the city. I would take many pictures from that balcony, or through its windows, as I tried to capture multiple views of downtown, with its towering buildings to the left and immense plains filled with luxurious homes, half-hidden by a dense vegetation that hides entire neighborhoods, or most of the city in fact.

Over the bed in the master bedroom where Mario sleeps, was a painting of a female figure, most certainly not a portrait of the Virgin Mary – we were, after all in the house of the grandchild of a rabbi – but I was nonetheless surprised by the luxuriant sensuality of the nude's shoulders and back that allowed me to imagine poor Luciana in a different, positive light, as a painter of uninhibited artistic freedom.

Starting tomorrow, I would begin my daily sessions of systematic storytelling, taking topics one at a time in order not to lose or forget anything and using my cellphone to record everything I managed to pry from Mario's prodigious and extremely lucid memory. Oh, how I envy him!

2. From Naples to the USA

One morning in 1939, a year obscured by Italy's racial laws, Marina Foà, then thirty-nine years old, and a young Mario were meeting in the Vomero, an up-and-coming neighborhood in Naples. As Mario recounts it, my mother had dropped her shopping bags to hug him with the usual warmth she imparted to any expression of affection. This time, however, Mario was leaving on a transatlantic voyage, a journey that would be the first of many, though he had no way of knowing that at the time. My sister, Laura and my cousin Eleonora were both about one year old, while I was far from any possibility of being conceived.

More than a mere expression of my mother's warmth, the embrace she gave Mario captured the momentous family drama of the moment. She had had to raise not only her own daughter, but also her niece Eleonora of the same age, who had become my sister's foster sister.

Professor Bruno Foà, my mother's brother and father of Eleonora, had already fled into exile with his young wife Lisa Heiman in late 1938, having been chased from his professional practice and university professorship in political economics after Italy passed its infamous racial laws. Giovanni Leone, a criminal lawyer who later became head of the Italian government, had forced Bruno and his cousin Gualtiero Foà from their practices, leaving Bruno to use an economics conference in Germany or England, I am not sure which, to hide out in London as a point of passage for an eventual flight to the United States soon after the outbreak of the war.

Mario, on the other hand, was at a turning point in his own experience as the first of five brothers and de facto head of his branch of the Foà family. They had all lived through difficult times since their father had emigrated to Eritrea after a financial

giornel-bol-ha

li ha fre-sono i il-riare

Due ruol-pro-me- su ma-one, da lella ngo-ir il vido sta-one. lella : è one. jore e di lalla fon-elle an-one

da me m-lel te-m-ko e-a-a-o, se, li di r-r-el ve r-n-a-a-u-e e e a n p-i-ri- a a munita

In Italia non esiste un « problema » ebraico

ROMA, 16 — L'Informazione Diplomatica nella sua nota odierna n. 14 pubblica quanto segue:

Recenti polemiche giornalistiche hanno potuto suscitare in taluni ambienti stranieri l'impressione che il Governo Fascista sia in procinto di inaugurare una politica antisemita. Nei circoli responsabili romani si è in grado di affermare che tale impressione è completamente errata, e si considerano le polemiche come suscitate soprattutto dal fatto che le correnti dell'antifascismo mondiale fanno regolarmente capo ad elementi ebraici.

Gli ambienti responsabili romani ritengono che il problema ebraico universale lo si risolve in un modo solo: creando in qualche parte del mondo, non in Palestina, lo Stato ebraico; Stato nella piena significazione della parola, in grado quindi di rappresentare e tutelare per le normali vie Diplomatiche e Consolari tutte le masse ebraiche disperse nei diversi Paesi.

Dato che anche in Italia esistono degli ebrei, non ne consegue di necessità che esista un problema ebraico specificatamente italiano. In altri paesi gli ebrei si contano a milioni, mentre in Italia sopra una popolazione che attinge oramai i 44 milioni di abitanti, la massa degli ebrei oscilla fra le 50-60.000 unità.

Il Governo Fascista non ha mai pensato né pensa di adottare misure politiche, economiche, morali, contrarie agli ebrei, in quanto tali, eccettuato beninteso nel caso in cui si tratti di elementi ostili al Regime. Il Governo Fascista è inoltre risolutamente contrario a qualsiasi pressione diretta o indiretta per strappare abiure religiose o assimilazioni artificiali.

La legge che regola e controlla la vita delle comunità ebraiche ha fatto buona prova e rimarrà inalterata. Il Governo Fascista si riserva tuttavia di vigilare sull'attività degli ebrei venuti di recente nel nostro Paese e di far sì che la parte degli ebrei nella vita complessiva della Nazione non risulti sproporzionata ai meriti intrinseci e singoli e alla importanza numerica della loro comunità.

Feb. 16 1938

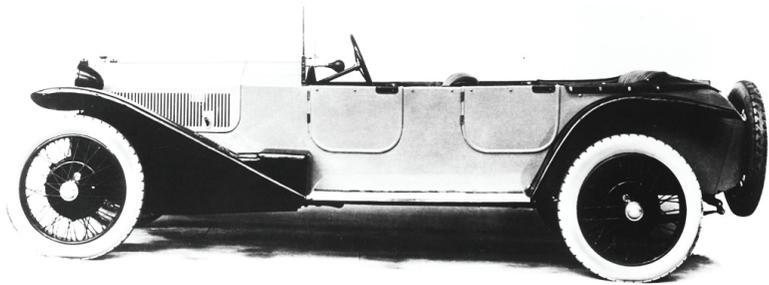
<< Il Mattino >>, September 1938.



Mario and his father Virginio Foà.

collapse, communicating with the family only sporadically from his new home.

Mario had thus barely managed to benefit from his family's earlier fortune. They had lived in a grand, elegant house, with two maids, a driver for their two cars and the mundane social life of his parents. His father Virginio had worked as a stock trader after serving as Vice-Director of the Banca di Sconto, which failed in the 1930's. This move had paid off until the global financial crisis sucked up the fortunes of all of his clients, which Virginio dutifully reimbursed with his own money, placing his family in grave financial difficulties. These problems were made worse by the adventurous decision to move to Asmara, where he lived for a number of years running a successful transport business.



The Foà family car in 1920's.

In those years just before the war, Virginio helped the family as much as he could within the financial constraints of the day. Strangely enough, the racial laws were less strictly applied in the colonies and Virginio had considered transferring the entire family to Africa, a possibility that came and went perhaps due to mounting political events and the uncertainty that weighed even more heavily on a large Jewish family. And would their mother have ever abandoned her beloved parents?

The father's absence created serious problems for the family of a young mother and five brothers, the oldest of whom behaved more like a young father than an elder sibling. This is probably why Mario still has a magic touch with children, knows how to approach and entertain them, and is endowed with the gift of infinite patience. Not long ago I saw him transform a simple gift of a few dollars to Laura's two older grandchildren into a magical, playful moment that bordered on the mystical.

The young Mario spent most of his time with his family, in Via Cappella Vecchia, historic site of Naples' only synagogue. Don't be astonished. Mario's grandfather was a rabbi, respected and loved by the members of the Neapolitan Jewish community, but most especially by my mother, who affectionately remembers him as the celebrant of her wedding to my father, as well as that of Lisa and uncle Bruno (the younger brother of the adventures in Naples, London and New York).



Ida Foà, Mario's mother.

Mario's rabbi grandfather Lazzaro Laide Tedesco, after growing up in the port-city of Livorno and marrying Gemma, moved to Naples, where he happily led the affairs of the Jewish community for many years. The family name of Laide is believed to derive from Leyden, the city where Mario's ancestors, who eventually would end up in Livorno, wound up in 1492 after



Lazzaro Laide Tedesco, Mario's grandfather.

fleeing Spain.

The Foà, on the other hand, trace their origins to Emilia, like my mother's family. Who knows if there was some relationship between the two families. Amilcare Foà, husband of Enrichetta and paternal grandfather of Mario, was from Soragna in the province of Parma, like our Foà, who before going to Parma traced their origins to Soragna and Cortemaggiore sometime in the last century.

As train station director, Amilcare was sent to many locations once considered undesirable, ending up in Sardinia, known then as a rugged, difficult region. He later served as train

inspector on the Cuma-Naples line, a job the Foà recall fondly, because it came with train passes that allowed the entire family to spend the summer at the beach in Lucrino.

Returning to the Laide family, it seems that my mother was friends with both Mario's mother and his grandmother Gemma, and that the two families were more than just formal acquaintances, leading to the reunification of two branches descended from a remote common ancestor.

Mario Foà's family thus lived for a short time in the same building in Naples where Laura was born and where another Foà family also briefly lived, that of our uncle Bruno who stayed there prior to his exile to Britain and North America. This building, which included a spectacular view of the Gulf of Naples allowed Laura and me to grow up in awe of Naples' beauty and contributed, I believe, to her deciding to live in Trastevere in Rome and me in Venice. It was also the place where Mario and Laura's paths first crossed briefly unaware that they would again merge later in life.

As head of the family, Mario would take care of his four brothers, Remo, Ugo, Dario and Tullio, feeding and getting them ready for bed before dining with his mother, a relationship that resembled more that of a couple than of a mother and her son. But in those years it was unthinkable for a lady to work, especially in bourgeois Neapolitan society. For this reason the Foà family faced serious economic challenges that manifested itself in a frequent changing of residence. The struggling family would often come up with the money for the security deposit and first month's rent, only to have trouble paying in later months, forcing them to seek another, more modest, place to live.

It must have been a very difficult period indeed, made even more so by the limitations set on them by Italy's anti-Semitic racial laws. Mario ended up deciding to emigrate to the United States to attend college. In those days, and later on for that matter, everyone had an American uncle that could serve

as a last resort, and Mario did as well. In fact, there were two Foà uncles in the United States, but we will meet them both a bit later.

Mario still remembers the day with great emotion. He took a taxi to the port, accompanied by his friend Corradino Coen, to embark on the “Conte di Savoia.” On the way he stopped by Grandpa Laide’s house for a final blessing. The same tears he had shed with his mother welled forth at the sight of his grandfather. To be clear, Mario is not, and never was, excessively religious. He went to the synagogue because it was the realm of his grandparents, whose little house served as a place of refuge for his mother. He helped his grandfather conduct the service mainly out of love for his paternal figure and probably as a compensation for the absence of his own father. This time, however, the *berahà* was understood as a final farewell, for Mario would not find his rabbi grandfather, who died in 1941, when he first returned home after years away from Naples because of the war. This deep attachment to places associated with his grandfather might, in fact, explain Mario’s distancing himself from religious practice more than his brothers who stayed in Italy. That was also not the last time young Mario would cry. In 1948, he received in America the sad news of the death of his Aunt Emilia, and once again, for the last time in fact, Mario broke down in warm tears. Mario’s favorite aunt had been like a second mother to him, having occupied, along with his grandparents, the years between his second birthday and his entry in elementary school.

Mario claims that from that moment on, he has never been able to shed tears, even at the most dramatic and painful events of his life, of which, unfortunately, he has seen many. Even his suffering over the deaths of Luciana and, later, Laura was not met in that sweetly liberating way, but rather, I fear, in a more acute and desperate suppression of grief.

In America, Mario’s maternal uncle, who had taken the family name of Tedesco, welcomed him into his home in Chi-

cago. He was a difficult person Mario never did quite manage to get along with. Mario did make peace with his father, however, when he emerged from Africa after many years, in spite of all the suffering he had caused his mother. Their lengthy separation was impossible to mend, as one might expect, but the children continued to care for their father with their mother’s tacit consent until the very end.

There are several family photos in the guest room where I slept many nights. One of them depicts a relatively young Mario laughing next to a happy and smiling older man, who looks like a strangely happy Ungaretti, due to his resemblance to the poet. They exude a harmonious, shared joy that I like to attribute to Mario’s innate spiritedness and generous expression of affection.

When he returned to Italy, Mario’s father went to live in Padua, where his sons Tullio and Dario lived, finishing his days at the age of eighty-five in a retirement home where he was surrounded by the affection of his children. The photo that captured such a sense of happiness shows the last meeting between Mario and his father and was taken just a few days before his death.



Mario in the darkroom.

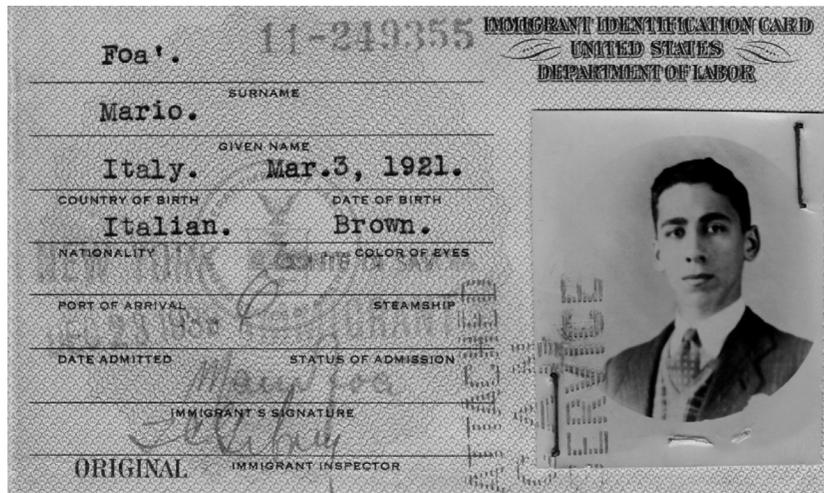
3. First Jobs

After a few months using the generous, but uncomfortable, hospitality of his childless, invasive, somewhat despotic, and utterly bipolar, Uncle Tedesco, Mario decided to break free and follow the path set by many young people of his generation by heading west. Like every Hollywood actor or historic tycoon, who are said to have passed through odd jobs before making the big-time, Mario also held a number of interesting positions before finding his way in business.

Once he worked as a groom and night porter at the Broadmore Hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a large, five-star establishment where one night a cowboy came riding on horse back through the hotel lobby. If horses and horseback are typical of the Old West, this cowboy was not so steady in the saddle. He had had a bit too much to drink, or, to put it bluntly, was staggeringly drunk, while his horse, stimulated by his new, elegant environment, expressed himself by freeing his bladder and intestines on the lobby floor. Poor Mario looked up the guest's room and managed to get him there, removing his boots and Stetson before putting him to bed. The slurring horseman, who appeared to be celebrating a big win at the green table, thanked Mario with an enormous tip, a hundred dollars – a respectable amount even today, but an utterly extravagant sum at a time when Mario would generally receive fifty to eighty cents, and at most a dollar.

Having bedded his cowboy, Mario took the horse back to the nearby stable before returning to sweep, and disinfect, the lobby.

When the cowboy ran into the young man the following day, he of course had no memory of the previous evening and



Immigration Card.



Cheyenne Chief.

even asked how he had managed to get back to his room. Mario told him everything and even scrupulously returned the excessive tip, which, in his mind, was the fruit of the man's drunken state. The man briefly pocketed the bill, but began asking a hundred questions about how Mario had handled the situation, about his personal and family situation, and so on, after which he rewarded Mario's honesty by insisting he take back every cent of his exorbitant tip.

Mario had had some experience with horses, having learned how to ride and even leading a few equestrian excursions. The myth of the Great Frontier had long excited the imagination of young people as far away as Naples thanks to Hollywood Westerns and the exploits of Tom Mix. But Mario had been able to live an experience that many Neapolitans of his age could only dream about.

Some sixty years later, Mario came back as a guest of that same hotel, which had since grown into an important resort with new buildings, pools and five different restaurants. He was with Laura, his son Lucio and Lucio's partner, Nicole. Mario

asked to see the manager, to whom he told the whole story of his experience as a groom in that hotel. Ecstatic at this dive into the past, the manager insisted on honoring Mario as a guest of the hotel with their best possible accommodations. In sixty years he had gone from a young employee with a mop to a VIP guest. Not bad, huh?

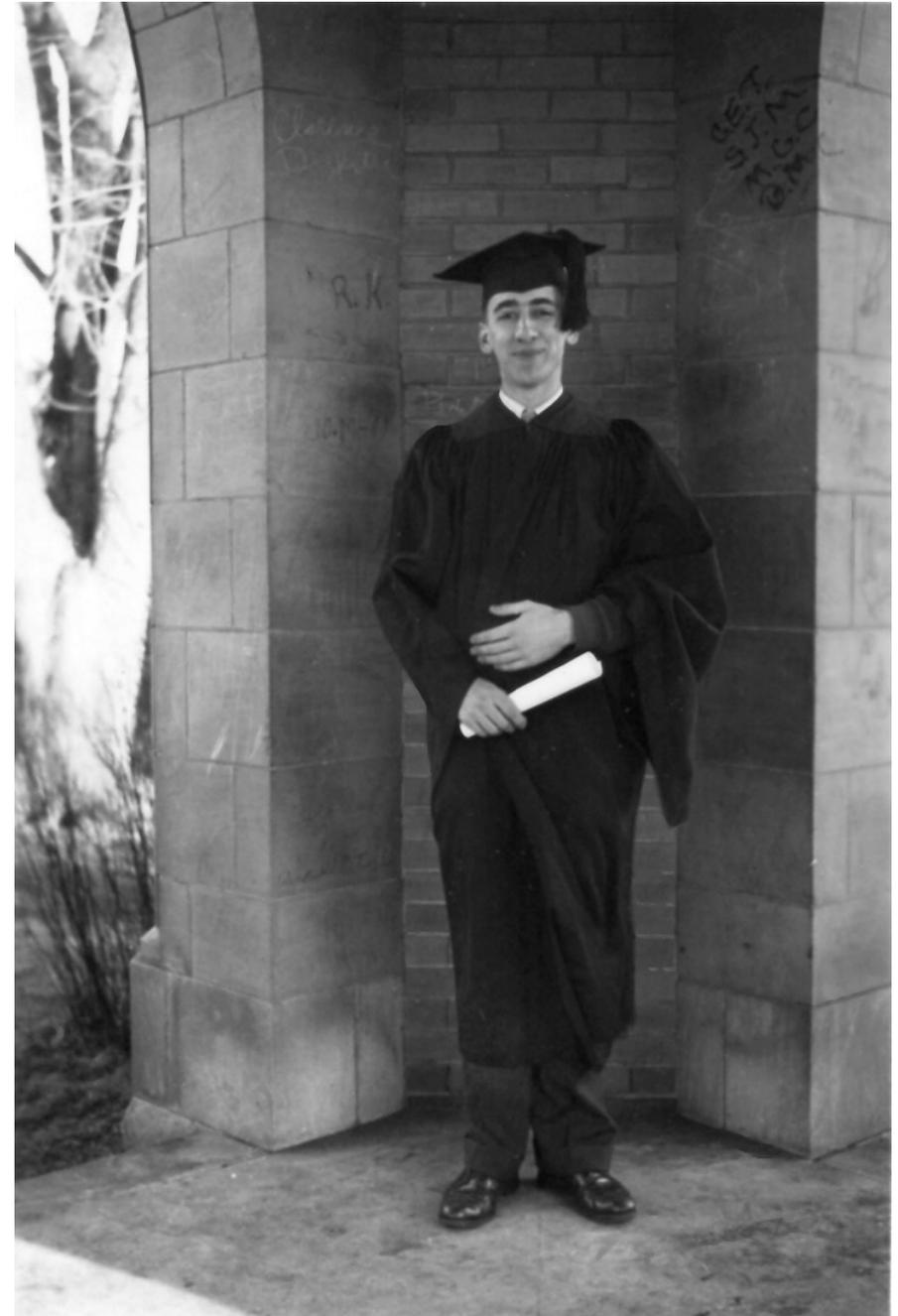
In those same years, Mario was once sent to bring tea to a guest who was not feeling well. When he knocked at the door and a lady in a robe invited him in, Mario was surprised and amazed to find himself in front of none other than Dinah Shore! I know, today, many people may not know her. I am no spring chicken and still had only heard the name without quite placing who she was. Mario recognized her immediately and was a fan who knew all her hit songs. When she offered him

the expected tip, Mario thanked her, but refused, explaining that as an admirer he considered it a privilege to have been able to serve her and the best tip he could receive was the joy he had every time he heard her sing. The next day, the singing star bid Mario farewell with a gentle pat on the cheek.

It must have been exciting to balance his work with the experience of new things he had long dreamed about. But this was also the time of puritanical formality in America, a fact that makes it difficult to know how many local hearts the young, enterprising Italian, and Neapolitan at that, was able to conquer. The Mario of today smiles slyly with bright, mischievous eyes, but guards the behavior of a true gentleman. I can pull no gossip from his lips, even when talking about those first years as a jetsetter, when he would frequent the likes of Sharon Stone and Gina Lollobrigida, that came through Mario's true and lasting friendship with Dino De Laurentiis.

On another occasion, between his classes in agrarian science, a degree he nonetheless completed despite it having been chosen for him by his wacky uncle, Mario took a summer job as conductor on a narrow-gauge railway. His train carried tourists through a valley, where they enjoyed the view without the physical exertion of having to ride on horseback. The train had two gears, forward and reverse and was limited to going in circles around the valley.

On one occasion a beautiful young couple came to make the tour. The young lady was a budding starlet of the time whose name has now long been forgotten, but who was quite the buzz then. Accompanied by her sturdy boyfriend, the exuberant girl wanted desperately to learn to drive the train, a rather simple task, after all, since you only could move forward, or backward, or use a brake to stop the train. Mario ended up being forced to give an accelerated driving lesson to keep her happy. Then, after returning in reverse, she drove them through the entire panoramic tour. You can imagine the passengers' excitement when they recognized their conductor and enthusiastically



Mario on the day of his college graduation.



Mario with his uncle Tranquillo, on his graduation day.

threw themselves into a battle for autographs and a glimpse of the young actress's radiant smile.

During that summer, Mario already began to show his entrepreneurial spirit, setting up a number of concession stands along his route through the valley and hiring his girlfriends to sell trinkets and souvenirs that made summer wages for himself and all three of the young students.

Once he completed his degree in agrarian sciences at Iowa State University, Mario decided he could no longer subject himself to the plans of his wacky uncle who had his eyes set on transforming Mario (and himself) into a farmer in some barren land or other. So he decided to break free, and took a full time job in a saw mill in Oregon.

Despite his uncle's madness, Mario remains truly grateful for his help, which allowed him to experience new horizons and imagine a life beyond Naples and Italy. His uncle had even lent him money at a certain point, which Mario dutifully attempted to pay back when he was able, but his uncle had become increasingly erratic by then and, after a brief coming together of the American family, began to use the debt as a moral advantage, and railed against his nephew in a way that confirms the consensus that he probably suffered from bipolar disorder. Mario still regrets not having been able to properly mend a wound that he feels he did nothing to inflict.

In those early years, Mario even found himself in the role of university professor, when one of his teachers asked for him to fill in for a few weeks. Class attendance being mandatory in the United States, the professor could not reschedule his classes when he had a conference. Mario enthusiastically accepted to help and on his first day teaching went to class and sat with the students for a few minutes. After listening in on their conversations, he went to the front of the class and explained the situation, underplaying the role his professor had chosen for him. It was an experience similar to that of Bruno Foà, who, as professor of economics in Messina at the tender age of twenty-

four, was treated by the students as one of their own. Even today, but certainly more so in Mario's time, the Italian education system prepares students to excel in the United States despite any language barrier that might exist. Mario, for example, stood out in botany because of his mastery of Latin taxonomy. At the same time, he would sometimes misunderstand questions during written exams, inventing answers rather than admitting his problem, with the kind of results you might expect. His professor understood Mario's predicament, however, and had him redo his exam, orally, which he subsequently passed with flying colors.

During this same period, Mario and other recent graduates volunteered to work with a local Indian tribe, helping children with a range of social problems that included schoolwork and understanding the outside world, which they viewed with curiosity and suspicion. At the end of their three months, the tribal chief awarded the young social workers with the highest possible honor: allowing them to wear the same feather head-dress he wore as a symbol of his rank.

4. Meeting Laura

It was 2010. I had gone down to Rome from Venice to help organize Laura's trip to Mexico to see her daughter who was living in Zipolite, in Oaxaca, just past the Puerto Escondido made famous in the movie by Gabriele Salvatores. In truth, Giuliana had already been there for about a year in order to scope out a possible definitive move with her boyfriend, an entomologist, cave explorer enamored, like her, with Central and South America.

It wasn't her first time. She had lived a long time in Latin America to work on social projects; in Nicaragua, where she returned full of experiences and enthusiasm, but not without some reservations. Even this time she prepared for her return to Milano without much enthusiasm. And when she heard of our intentions, she asked us not to proceed; it would have caused issues for her. So, no Mexico.

"Let's go to Greece, to Yoannina, or to Israel?" I asked Laura, regarding two destinations we had been promising to visit for a while to seek out family and cultural roots. Laura looked at me thoughtfully and said, "No, I am going to North America. I have a friend there I can stay with."

An hour later we were together in the travel agency studying how to organize her first flight to Atlanta – the first of many that would continue up until her recent passing. I believe that was the first time I heard of Mario Foà, or rather Mario Foah, as we both learned later.

My sister had for years been friends with one of our mother's cousins, Bice Chiaromonte Foà (not related to Mario's Family), who sang in an amateur choir and was close friends with Ugo Foà, Mario's brother. For me, who, like my mother,

took great pleasure in discovering our distant family connections, Ugo had to be Dario's brother. When I was a baby and Laura a teenager, he had been a young man who entertained us with elaborate magic tricks for *Purim*, a sort of Jewish Mardi Gras, where we kids would dress up in make-shift costumes to play the roles of Esther and King Ahasuerus.

Laura, on the other hand, explained the two converging reasons that led to her trip to the Foah household in Atlanta, not to see Mario, in fact, but his son Roberto. Laura had always hung out with people younger than her, often her children's friends, and it had been a young American couple who encouraged her during a trip to Rome to contact Maestro Roberto Foah, better known as Dahlan Foah, an eclectic American, part intellectual musician, part entrepreneur, who was born in the States, but whose Neapolitan origins were quite evident.

I am not sure when my sister put the two things together, Ugo and the American nephew. I only know that once, when Mario was in Rome, his brother had had a dinner or a meeting with Laura, in whom Mario showed little interest. He had lost Luciana only a few months earlier and was not interested in forming new relationships, especially of an amorous nature. I believe Ugo had insisted that he was going out no matter what and Mario reluctantly tagged along.

One of Laura's best qualities was her innate ability to empathize with people, if only by her vague presence that was less conscious than an integral part of her being. At that time, at her address in Vicolo del Leopardo, Mario greeted her somewhat formally, using the "Lei" pronoun, to which she responded with the informal "tu": "You're using the "Lei" form, what's wrong with you?" Little did they know that they soon would wear an expression of a more intimate friendship in the form of a ring they had made in the shape of a stylized ginkgo leaf.

A few years earlier, my sister had decided to use only the natural therapies suggested by her homeopathic doctor. When Mario and Laura began sharing their personal spaces,

he learned that she knew very little about the ginkgo plant beyond its use in herbal teas. Proud of his academic background, Mario described the ancient origins of the 250 million year old plant that botanists describe as a living fossil. Its moving vitality is proven in the fact that it was the only plant to grow back from the ashes of the atomic tragedy in Hiroshima. The shape of its leaves, in the form of a two-lobed fan, give the plant its name of Ginkgo Biloba.

In Atlanta Mario showed Laura the tree and said, "See the leaf? Divided at the beginning and, then, united for life, just like us." I am not sure if it was the plant's beneficial properties or its shape that caused them to design two rings as a sign of their love and union as a couple. Nor can I say if Mario's children worried about this new female presence in their father's household, since I was not present in Rome or in Atlanta.

Mario and Laura met, liked each other, and everything was easy, right? Who am I kidding? Laura and Mario, the kids, daughters-in-law, even the grandkids, the whole Foah clan had always been guided by a family spirit imbued with a lacerating sense of humor and irony that can, at times, be off-putting. This common thread is reinforced by a sense of solidarity and respect that make their relationships at once simple and complicated, depending on how you view things. Outsiders have to pass a test, or a series of exams, before being adopted, or, more often than not, grudgingly accepted, by the clan.

Laura only passed the full battery of examinations, administered by the board of the Foah clan, later on, when she traveled to Rome and Milan, and especially to the sarcastic center of Naples, in part because she, for a while, continued to consider her relationship with Mario as a friendship, and I cannot say if Mario's heart and head held other intentions at that time either.

When we spoke in his living room, Mario admitted that he had already given it some thought from the moment they met in Rome, creating an experience that resembled the one

he had lived many years earlier with his beloved wife Luciana. I believe it was not long after the trip to Atlanta that the nature of their relationship took an amorous turn and, perhaps in Rome, their relationship blossomed. Would it be too simplistic to say they lived happily ever after? My sister's strong-willed, decisive and sometimes skittish character had grown more so over the years, posing a challenge even to an affectionate, tolerant brother and confidante like myself had, because Laura and I told each other everything. There were many times I had to urge her to be more cautious in her affairs of the heart. My traditional role, however, has been to filter Laura's communications with my mother, for sentimental concerns, and my father, who generally recognized my masculine propensity for handling practical matters.

Laura and Mario thus had some challenges early on caused by misunderstandings they managed to handle thanks to Saint Skype, who allowed them to talk and see each other, a miracle we now take for granted that was unimaginable just a few years ago. Numerous meetings on both continents, supplemented by daily conversations on their Mac, allowed the couple to stay together and build an ever-stronger and more intimate relationship.

Having found their stride, they were bound by a profound feeling and grew together over the years until the sad ending in 2017. It may sound strange to think of a man over ninety and a woman approaching eighty years old as growing, but Laura and Mario's ability to adapt and reach outside themselves allowed them to live this phase of their life to the fullest. The last time I saw Laura, alive, conscious and even radiant, I left her in the happy company of a Foà, one of Mario's nephews with his new bride who had also entered into her circle of new, intimate friends. It was only a week later that I was urgently called in time to witness her pass away literally in the arms of Giuliana and Michele, two of her three children.

5. Goodbye my beautiful Naples

Naples was liberated, as is known, in 1943, during the famous "Four Days" uprising against the Germans that allowed the Allied Forces to enter the city. This changed many things, though the bombings continued for a while, this time from the Germans, and the eruption of Vesuvius added insult to injury, as it were. For Mario this meant that the years of absolute silence were over as the first bits of news began to pass from the other side of the Atlantic allowing him to learn that his entire family was in good health, not only his mother and brothers, but even his father, who managed to write cryptic, thirty-character messages to Italy after the British occupied Eritrea: little more than post cards and less than a cablegram, these messages would say things like, "I am fine, how are you?"

The opening of communications between the USA and Eritrea, on the other hand, meant Mario and his father could communicate directly, helping to reignite a relationship frayed by years of absence.

While his grown-up siblings struggled to keep the family afloat in post-war Italy, Mario made a crucial contribution, asking an officer friend who was stationed in Naples to try to give his family a hand.

For details on the kind of struggles the family faced, we can read the precious testimony of Dario, Mario's magician brother, available to us thanks to the memoirs he recently wrote in collaboration with his wife. Dario and Aida Foà's *When Two Parallel Lines Meet*, published in Livorno by Salomone Belforte, provides a portrait of 1960's family life using testimony seen from Naples through Dario's eyes.

In those moments, Mario, already a shrewd businessman, had begun buying goods at rock bottom prices for export-

tation from the States. It was almost junk for the Americans, but, given the dramatic situation in Naples in that period, was gold that could be sold or traded for other much-needed goods. Mario sent them in packages that, it is hard to believe, arrived in only fifteen days with no additional expenses and no theft!

This was the Naples that the Tuscan resident of Capri, Curzio Malaparte, describes in his famous novel *The Skin*, and the city of the Neorealist films *Paisà* and *Sciuscià*, where black soldiers were stripped of their shoes and clothes to be sold in a city that needed everything. It was also the Naples of Eduardo Di Filippo's *Millionaire Naples*, where a young man is ignored by his family completely absorbed in the trafficking with stolen jeep tires and ready to cut one another's throats for a phial of penicillin: a city that was rich and impoverished at the same time.

Of the many packages Mario sent home, he remembers a lot of shoes he had obtained for free, all arranged by size and model, that not only covered the feet of his entire family, but provided income as de facto currency for acquiring other needed goods.

When the war in Europe ended, Mario was finally able to return home to embrace his family, experiencing the pain of not being able to renew his grandfather's *berahà*. He filled in the gaps of what went on while he was away and how people they had not considered friends before the war had found ways to protect the Foà family. The first of these had been Salvatore Pace, a Carabinieri Sergeant who gave honor to his name, which means "Peace," by suggesting Mario's mother move to avoid detection and register her new apartment in the name of a non-Jewish friend. Marcello Magrì, a young friend of the family, had the courage to put his name on the contract, with the risk of being taken himself, which luckily did not happen.

When Jews were no longer allowed to attend school with "Aryan" children, the Vanvitelli school was, I believe, the only one in Naples to create a separate class for Jewish children. The teacher, Adelina Pinto, who was also Jewish, was the wife

of Massimo Della Pergola, a famous sports journalist who invented Sisal, which later became the Italian Football pool game Totocalcio. The youngest of the Foà brothers, Tullio was not even six years old and yet the principal, Amedeo Muro, pretended he was old enough and welcomed him into that class, which according to the memory of the teacher, had to meet at a different time and use a different entrance than the other classes in order to avoid contamination from the "other races."

Last but not least, Mario affectionately and gratefully recalls his uncles Fiorentino and Mario, as well as his Aunt Emilia. He recalls that, "in addition to economic help, they were always there to offer love, affection, advice and encouragement. They were two beacons amidst the darkness our family had to live in those years." This was the family of Aunt Emilia for whom he would shed his last tears.

If his aunts and uncles were so close, other family members also helped the Neapolitan Foà family during those trying times for everyone.

After living seven years in North America and having finally embraced his family once again, Mario was ready to cross the Atlantic again, following the ineluctable calling that spawned his double identity, familial and entrepreneurial, half Neapolitan, and half American.

It is hard to say, since I got to know him late in life, which half of him is more prevalent. If I had to judge, I would describe Mario as very American when it comes to practical matters and very Italian, if not outright Neapolitan, when it comes to human contact and affairs of the heart. Unlike other immigrants I have known during my personal and professional life who like to wear their cultural integration on their sleeve, showing how in one generation they manage to become "one hundred per cent American," Mario has preserved the mannerisms and customs of the Old World. It is no chance occurrence that his children are perfectly bilingual and each of them has his own relationship with Italy, even though they all have children and

grandchildren. More noticeable is the “sense of family” that has characterized Mario’s emotional life and forced him to keep faith with his Italian origins, enriched over the years with his in-laws and grandchildren. Then there is Luciana’s family, which is less numerous than his, but which remains an important force even after her passing.

I can also testify directly that Mario also assimilated the Levi Mattone family, our family, by embracing my sister’s children, daughter-in-law and grand-children as part of his extended Italian family.

6. New York and the other half of the sky

In 1947 Mario boarded a ship once again, this time to establish himself permanently in America.

His first years in New York were not easy. A college graduate completely acclimated to the American way of life, he found himself doing menial jobs that had no relation with his studies, his interests, or his character. They say, however, especially in that time, that behind each great man there is a great woman. Mario found that woman, almost against his will, in Luciana.

His first love anticipated, in many ways, his later relationship with Laura. Just as he had not intended to go out with Laura in Rome, so too in New York his meeting with Luciana had been foisted upon him. Don’t be surprised, either, by the repeated family names that populate our story: two Foà families, unrelated but on friendly terms, and two Levi families that didn’t know each other but both of which ended up connecting with the Foà family.

Someone had decided that Mario had to meet this brilliant young woman, who was also Jewish, and of Italian origin. If I have managed to portray Mario’s character, you will not be surprised that he feigned complete disinterest in any such meeting. Someone nonetheless organized a dinner without telling him. Completely unaware that they had invited the aforementioned young woman, Mario fell in love immediately, as did she, and the two soon found themselves under a canopy with a broken glass beneath their feet.

In truth, the two had dinner together, alone, for three nights in a row. At the third one, Mario asked Luciana if she would be his wife and she answered with a very solemn “yes.” A few years later, perhaps at their anniversary party, Luciana



Mario with his parents.



Mario and Luciana.



Mario with his parents and brothers.

admitted that she had in fact half-choked on the ravioli she was eating when Mario proposed. If we had to follow the normal North-American script, after having a certain number of kids and living together a few years, we would certainly expect a classic divorce.

Not only does this story not involve emotional break-up, lost and drug-addicted kids, inflated expectations and existential crises, it traces a long, happy, fertile life together.

By using the word fertile, I am not referring to Mario's two children, who follow the Foà tendency of producing only male progeny on both sides of the Atlantic, but rather to the conversation between two partners that lasts a lifetime. As in his relationship with Laura, Mario and Luciana also passed through a necessary period of adjustment.

If my interpretation is correct – since speaking of family affairs can be, not only difficult, but sometimes dangerous – Lu-



Mario and Luciana at the beach.

ciana and Mario developed a relationship that helped them both grow, in a balanced exchange in which neither dominated. If Mario brought the famous Foà sense of humor, Luciana's feisty and refined sense of irony surpassed her husband's. Their children still recall dazzling zingers that captured the joy of their relationship and their mutual desire to laugh.

Sixty years of marriage represents a lifetime and, while writing about Mario and his family, I need to be very careful as the redactor of these notes. Is it even possible to recount our own sentiments with those who are capable of sharing them, let alone those belonging to someone who can no longer correct my inability in this subject?

I had best stick to concrete facts and the practical and visible concerns of everyday life, leaving the rest to the imagination of the reader.

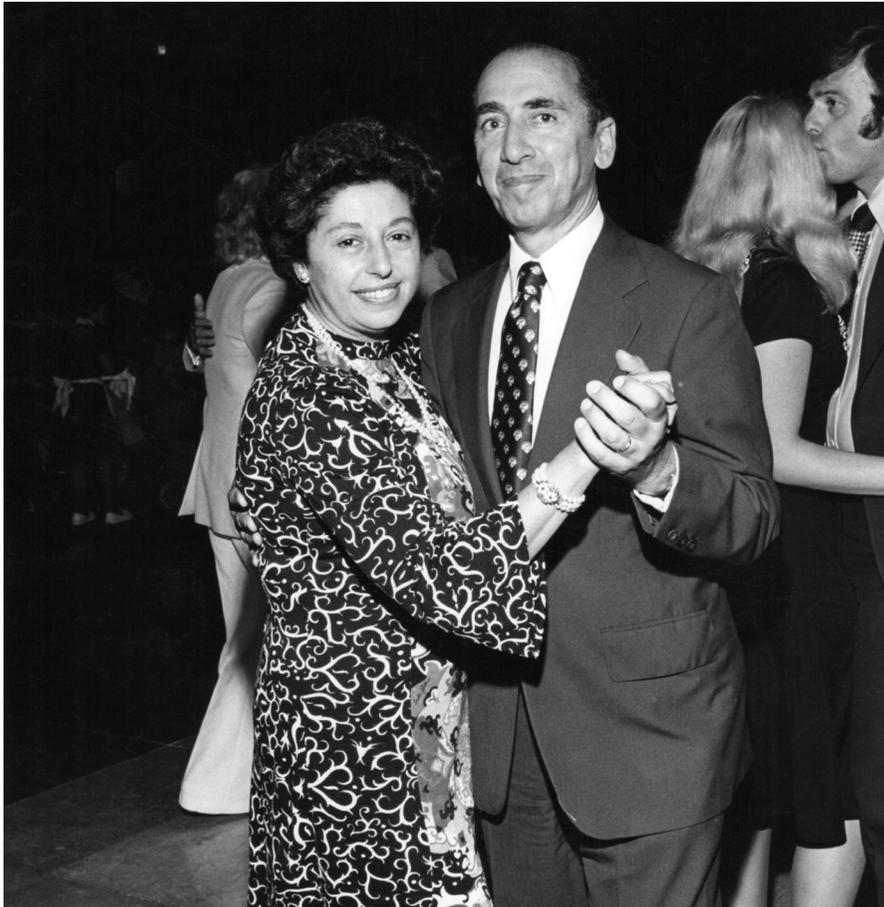
7. The children

I was saying, that capturing a marriage, or rather, a long life spent together over a sixty-year period is no easy task, especially when the person telling the story is not one of the protagonists. Marriages often, or perhaps almost always, involve passing from living together as a couple to creating a family, so a good way of telling the Foah story is to concentrate on the children, two grown men who are still boys at heart: Roberto and Lucio, listed in the order they came into this world, and who, judging from their distinctly Italian names, represent a nice bridge between the United States and Italy.

They could just as easily have been named Robert and Luke, but today Roberto calls himself Dahlan and Lucio, following that particularly American habit of contracting everything, has cut his name down to Lou. While his friends probably called him Robert, Roberto kept his Italian name for years and for the family, he will always be Roberto.

A nice trick for preserving one's Italian identity and language was to send the kids as often as possible to spend their summer vacation with the aunts, uncles and grandmother in Naples. In addition to building the bonds of affection with the Italian Foà family, this allowed both children to master their second language, which, by the way, was also used at home in America. It is still fun listening to Mario talk to his sons on the phone. If he starts with "buongiorno," a few moments later he switches to English and may return to Italian in the same sentence, or when he says goodbye. This bilingualism has nothing to do with the Italian-American slang of Brooklyn-Broccolino, however. Mario, Roberto and Lou, speak a perfect Italian.

I have already spoken briefly of Roberto in the description of my arrival in Atlanta, but, as promised, we spent a few



Mario and Luciana dancing.

more afternoons together exchanging stories and getting to know each other better. On one of these occasions, I was able to admire Roberto's skill in directing a musical group, an orchestra of very high quality whose forty members combined amateur and professional musicians rehearsing a piece of music amidst outbursts of laughter, with a playful sense of authority punctuated by bursts of joviality.

If Roberto today is a happy and accomplished man, this



Mario and Luciana with their sons.

was not always so. As he drove me around on a detailed tour of Atlanta in his Lexus, he told me some of his personal story; of his youthful struggles that gave way to creativity as he grew older and culminating in the all important moment of meeting Honora, his wife and emotional foundation. Once again, for Roberto and Mario, their wives were instrumental in nurturing their husbands' creative energy that seems such a natural part of their daily lives.

I later got to know Honora and was able to appreciate her many qualities, from the urgency of her ability to communicate to her cultural engagement, to her ability to inspire empathy for those she feels need it. A couple is often the sum of two individuals and this is not necessarily a bad thing. In some cases, as with Dahlan and Honora, it is the couple itself that presents itself as an inseparable unit.

They met at a time that is special for Roberto and per-

haps for Honora as well. I believe it was in the very moment he decided to change his name to Dahlan, in the spirit of the New Age movement that encourages personal rebirth, that he met a courageous single mother who brought a child into their relationship: Zach. Today Zach is a grown man who has remained an only child, for his adopted father as well as for Roberto-Dahlan, a happy grandfather thanks to Sarah, Zach's wife.

I found the presence of a baby in the office the father and son share to be both amusing and beautiful. To call it an office is a bit deceptive, however, because the space used as the center of several different companies is permeated by a calm chaos more akin to a laboratory or workshop containing many works in progress, as well as images commemorating past jobs, models, plastic mock-ups and posters of projects and accomplishments, as well as signs of future endeavors.

Suffice it to know that Roberto and Honora designed, had approved, executed and managed North-American exhibits at the World Fairs in Genoa and Korea and have directed similar projects for the United Nations in Vienna and Nairobi.

In the United States the individual takes all the risk. People with resources, who are able to think ahead or able to manage risk, as is the case with Mario, make investments that provide future income or savings.

Touring around the city Dahlan showed me the Martin Luther King memorial and the modest house where the civil rights leader lived in the transitional neighborhood in the shadow of the city's business center. We also passed by the Carter Center, founded by the former president, which was closed, perhaps to commemorate my visit, as well as several buildings where Dahlan has invested his savings as a guarantee for the future.

Atlanta is a city that grows horizontally, with many streets with reduced, localized traffic where you have to move cautiously, sometimes because of speed bumps installed to calm traffic. So as we moved along I admired the many beautiful, large houses with spacious yards that appear here and there.

The economic income and influx of people resulting from the Olympics, gave a notable boost to Atlanta's population. Despite this, the buildings, malls and houses beyond the downtown area, which appears to have grown up over time, are spread out. It is a growing, populated city that seems discreet, modern and respectful of its inhabitants for a metropolis of its size.

Arriving in Foah Junior's house is also an interesting experience. The covered parking spot attached to the house is engulfed in green vines and bushes, as is the rest of the house, which to me seems enormous and features a splendid entryway and living area with a view of the woods and a lake on the other side. More than a cottage in the woods, it is a veritable mansion that reinforces my impression of Roberto as a mixture of practical ability and dreaminess, a romantic pragmatist, whose tastes are reflected in his own home.

As is often the case, the younger brother Lucio is very different from Roberto. Where Roberto is reflexive and analytical, Lucio is hyperactive, always ready to adapt to the situation to handle everything from everyday problems to major situations. Innate character and experience both come to play in building who we are.

Following Foà tradition, Lucio has two beautiful sons from an earlier marriage. Fortunately, he has now found a wonderful young companion whose amiable pragmatism I was able to appreciate over the course of several dinners in Atlanta.

Lucio and I met in Rome, where we were meeting Laura in an elegant Trastevere restaurant, which has now unfortunately been replaced by a nondescript *bruschetta*. I had to choose a spot worthy of Lucio's position in the family business, as director of an enterprise that had imported Italian food products to the United States for over sixty years.

I liked Lucio immediately due to the light, easy-going tone of our conversation and I was amused by the linguistic and cultural mixture with which this Foà from the other side of the Atlanta expressed himself, exhibiting the family liveliness

in a very American way of speaking, a strange hybrid that in my opinion captures the synthesis of the two cultures that have melded together and continue to express themselves in that family.

I would have liked to have been able to meet with him during my time in Atlanta, but he had gone with a couple of friends on a “guys’ trip” skiing without their wives in Vermont. In any case, I believe a week of freedom, for a busy manager is always a precious commodity and, without having interviewed him for this book, I can confidently say that Lucio is like his father, having lived in various places and having a huge network of friends and associates that help him do his job. He lived in Italy From 1979 to 1986, in Genoa, where he worked for an Italian petroleum entrepreneur with connections in Africa. Initially responsible for the finances of the business, he was eventually put in charge of all the operations in Africa, working in Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, as well as in Italy, England and Hong Kong. He finally returned to the United States to deal with the company’s primary European partners, companies like Exxon-Mobil, Texaco and Shell, to name a few.

After this experience, he returned to work in his father’s new company in 1986, becoming an innovator and driving force, and training his sons, Henry, and later Andrew, in case he decided to go in that direction. I will speak of this company later because of the role it will play in Mario’s life. As company founder, he served as its father, and has now shifted to the role of grandfather and will soon be its great grandfather.

The family recently sent me a photo of Mario taken on Thanksgiving Day. He appears to be in excellent shape, surrounded by his sons, on a boat, with the surrounding Fall colors that are so typical of that region. This is the photo we chose, with Mario’s approval, for the cover of this book.

8. Working for Motta

If I have already mentioned the female contributions in the Foah family, it is because long before Mario hired his son to help with the business, a large part of his success can be attributed to Luciana, the wife who backed Mario up and even foresaw the needs and decisions of her husband. Luciana had a gift, or ability to understand her husband that is far less common than we are often led to believe and which was truly important to their life as a couple.

During the first years of their marriage, Mario took jobs he did not really like that left him chomping at the bit. Family duties, of course, make us more cautious, and Mario was no gambler. He plays and risks only when he knows he has the right cards in hand. Once they are in place, however, there is no stopping him.

Luciana was not about to stand around twiddling her thumbs either, and began to produce her own jewelry. It was through her contacts in this field that she heard that Buitoni was looking for an American distributor. Mario jumped at the opportunity, marking his entry into the food product importation business in which he is still active. Mario’s time with Buitoni allowed him to learn how the business worked, giving him the basis to make the jump from collaborator to entrepreneur.

Motta was another company with a presence in the American market, but they were suffering from a lack of competent personnel and were looking to hire a new manager of their trans-Atlantic operations. Mario, brave or self-confident, refused their initial proposal, offering to serve as partner of the local Motta franchise along with his partner, Joe Maranelli, with whom he would share fifty per cent of the profits and any

losses. They signed the agreement and managed to pull Motta America out of the red for the first time within their first year of operations.

Mario's dear friend and business partner, Joe Maranelli, lived on these kinds of agreements during the 1950's, but he was Mario's polar opposite. With an obviously southern Italian last name with origins in Campania, he had seen Italy for the first time as a soldier in the war. A few years later, the call of Italy seduced him in much the way Mario had been taken in by America and Joe moved to Italy where he became a director for Motta in Milan. He and Mario remained friends for a long time, but his move to Italy gave Mario the freedom to manage the company as he saw fit and make aggressive decisions which his partner might not have approved.

Among his infinite network of friends of all types, Mario has a special eye for those of evident Italian descent. As an importer of Italian pasta, Mario built a company specializing in hard-to-find shapes, rather than the more commonly sold spaghetti, penne and rigatoni. He ran this business with a friend from Boston named Rino Gnesi. After a casual meeting, they launched a business together and developed a relationship that Mario defines as brotherly. Their wives, Lea and Luciana, also became close friends.

In Italy we say pasta is like a mother, and while tortellini are not typically Neapolitan, or even Southern, they are nonetheless very Italian. Mario saw great potential there and found a producer of tortellini with a long shelf life named Gianpiero Calcagno. One thing led to another and Foah and Calcagno, along with their wives Carmen and Luciana, built a long-lasting relationship that was much more than a business collaboration and which continues to this day, as proven by Mario's visits to the Calcagnos when he visits Rome.

Sandro Polli was another supplier who quickly became one of Mario's close friends. Barely knowing Mario, Polli asked him to be his importer, to which Mario responded that he would

be honored, but that he did not have the funds to place the order. In the 1950's Mario was barely making ends meet.

Sandro Polli responded, "I trust you. Pay me when you sell the product." Coming from someone who barely knew him, living on the other side of the Ocean, this was the most generous and important moment in Mario's professional life. Sandro and his wife Mariolina became and remained dear friends.

Another friend worth mentioning is Mario's collaborator Franco Ivaldi, who worked for years as Mario's loyal and untiring associate. For almost half a century Mario could always count on his dear friend Franco, as, I am sure, Franco could as well.

Over the years, Mario met many people who helped him and became his friends. He is grateful to them all. Some of the people who influenced his business and personal life include Alfred Lepore, Frank and Bea Mar, Tsuneo Tanabi, Mario Rubinelli, and Walter Guerra.

On a sad note, Mario was able to see his old friends Franco and Licia Ivaldi when he traveled to New York with Laura. Franco had had a relapse of a disease beaten many years earlier. He still got out of bed, dressed and well-shaven, receiving his guests and preparing them coffee, but Laura's clinical eye could tell that this would be their last meeting and, in fact, Franco died a few months later.

9. And the work goes on... from Motta to Ramsey Imports

The president of the Motta Corporation in those years was Alberto Ferrante, a director who brought the company to its highest point of success and development. A graduate of the Bocconi school of Economics and Business and a long-time partner of the company's founder Angelo Motta, Ferrante oversaw the company's increase in quality and expanded distribution by establishing the Italian Autogrill system along the newly built Autostrada del Sole. He also opened a network of stores covering Milan that expanded the reach of the company's flagship in Piazza Lima. By leveraging government funding, he was able to open a factory in Naples, producing ice cream and Caffè Napoli. From my years in Naples, I still fondly recall the delicious Motarelli bars, the first ice cream with a stick, and the little bowls of the Coppa del Nonno (Granddad's Cup), a creamy coffee flavored ice cream my grandfather Haim would buy for me: historic brands that are still popular seventy years later.

Ferrante also expanded operations throughout Italy and into France, Germany and Peru, with an eye toward a European presence mirroring that of Michele Ferrero. But while Ferrero's success continues today in Ferrero-Rocher, things would not turn out so well at Motta.

During the post-war boom panettone and other baked goods benefited from a growing consumer base that justified Ferrante's plans for international expansion. Ferrante was the prototype of the post-war businessman, endowed with a creative mind, but consumed by work to the exclusion of everything else, especially his private life. He kept late hours at the company headquarters in Milan, located along the Viale Corsica, and Mario had to keep pace with that creative, workaholic

furor. After several Atlantic crossings, Mario overcame his fear of flying and became a jetsetter equipped with the gold cards of all the companies serving routes from New York to Rome and Milan.

Mario recalls misunderstanding when Ferrante invited him to discuss an issue over lunch. "Lunch," in the usage of the day, actually meant dinner, and a late one at that, occurring at Giannino's, the historic restaurant located near Motta headquarters on a cross-street of the Corso Ventidue Marzo, at ten o'clock at night. These were the austere years of post-war sobriety, long before Milan grew into a party city with all its hip restaurants. The Milanese middle class dined at eight o'clock at the latest, and choices were limited to places like Biffi in the Galleria, or in Piazza Scala during opera season. At ten p.m., Giannino's was empty and Ferrante had the kitchen to himself, allowing him to extend his crew's work day well past midnight.

Mario and Ferrante had a productive relationship based on mutual respect and the healthy give-and-take between two strong, decisive leaders. An example of this occurred on one occasion when Mario received a shipment of defective panettone. When the head of production tried to say that "at Motta we do not make mistakes in production or quality control," Mario booked the first flight to Milan and walked into the president's office, plopping the moldy panettone on the president's desk. "What's this crap?" Ferrante quipped. "The crap you guys seem to think I should try to sell Americans at Christmas!" was Mario's response. Mario and Ferrante's ability to resolve their differences are an example of how business was done in those days with problems being solved "among gentlemen," as it were.

Directors of this type, like the already mentioned Ferrero, Mattei at the head of the Italian petroleum company ENI, Olivetti in Ivrea, Valletta with FIAT, Marinotti with the manufacturing firm SNIA Viscosa or Valerio at the head of Montedison, were creating, or at least managing, what would become a magical moment for Italian industry in the years following the war. Their

premature deaths, as was the case of Ferrante who died of a heart attack during a business trip, marked the end of this golden era of business, as can be seen in the subsequent decline of Motta's operations.

Angelo Saraceno, brother of Italian Minister Pasquale Saraceno, was another Neapolitan who crossed paths with Mario. Becoming director of Motta after Ferrante's unexpected death, he soon realized that most of Motta's international activities were deep in the red and decided to make a clean break by closing many of them.

Mario's operation, while one of the only profitable ones, was also slated for closure, a setback Mario quickly transformed into opportunity, counting his chickens, as they say, and finding, I imagine, they were quite numerous. His knowledge of the business and warehouse allowed him to quickly draft an offer to purchase Motta's American operations. Mario soon had to admit that the perfectly reasonable and advantageous amount he quoted, was not something he could afford at the time. Saraceno, who had suspected things had been too easy, offered to personally lend him the money, which Mario dutifully paid off ahead of schedule as he built his new business: yet another example of the type of *gentleman's agreement*, unthinkably naïve by today's standards, that was honored without the engagement of lawyers and allowed people like Mario and Ferrante to get things done.

10. “Amore”

While the company that had imported Motta products into the United States used the name of its parent company, Mario’s new company, founded in the early 1960’s, took the name Ramsey Imports. Mario later created his own brand name “Amore,” which he used to distribute his own products. It was a great name, because you did not have to be Italian to understand its meaning and you could almost hear the name of Rome, a city whose Old World charm had begun to enthrall Americans in those years. Mario chose the name Ramsey, because that was the New York suburb where he had decided to establish his growing family.

Mario began to add other food products to the original line of deserts made by Motta, developing his own coffee in North America from beans and a roasting process he oversaw personally. It should be said, in fact, that Mario has certain abilities that have allowed him to succeed over the years. He was great at marketing before this quality was so generally appreciated, at least on our side of the pond. He was also good at selecting, adapting and refining products to the needs of various market-places. He knew how to develop and grow a distribution system using professional relationships founded in warm, personal ties. In many cases, he managed to maintain relationships with his suppliers even after their companies changed ownership or management was passed from one generation to the next, and Mario began to turn his own company over to his son Lucio. Individuals changed, but a culture of trust and respect built over the years, lived on. Even when inevitable, but rare moments of tension would arise with one of the many companies Ramsey represented, the personal relationships Mario had built helped see them through and maintain strong relations over the years.

While the Amore brand still exists, it was taken over by a major player in the specialty food industry that was more interested in Mario's professional expertise than any of the specific products he used to import from Italy, which were limited in comparison to their extensive line up. In his new capacity Mario's full attention went into the challenging task of modernizing this large corporation's operations and increasing efficiency, a task which took him from corporate headquarters to the many remote outposts where the company produced and sold its products.

This is where Mario acquired the fringe benefit of a lifetime health insurance policy, which he slyly hints is probably the worst deal that company ever made, given Mario's stunning longevity. He also recalls the cooperation he received from the large majority of his new collaborators, the bitter resistance of a few hold-outs, and the many sleepless nights he spent worrying about the company's complex operations. The United States is an extensive, varied and territorial marketplace and doing business requires a strategy that addresses the needs of specific regions. There was, to cite an example, one warehouse whose work was unsatisfactory according to Mario's standards. During the work meetings everyone seemed to agree on all the decisions made, but when it came time to execute them they always did the exact opposite.

Mario visited the company and announced with a stern face that this was their last chance to shape up before drastic decisions would be made. When nothing substantial changed, Mario had to return with a list of firings in one hand and their replacements in the other. He harbors no feelings of guilt, he says, because the fired employees were offered a nice severance package and the booming times meant they would easily find new positions elsewhere. Instances like these built Mario's reputation, and the company president would often call on him to take his place in touchy situations, especially when dealing with high-ranking executives that Mario always managed to handle to the satisfaction of the various entities.

In 1986, however, Mario resisted pressures to continue working and left the firm at the retirement age of 65.

Having signed a non-compete clause, Mario informed the board of his intention to start a related, non-competing business. From importer-exporter, he became a broker for Italian manufacturers and local distributors, including local supermarkets that like to use their own brand names while maintaining the quality guarantee of Italian-made products. His old company became, and still is, one of his clients. This was where Lou came in, progressively taking over the reins of the new business called Foah International LLC. Lou has gradually expanded the business, acquiring new suppliers, products and clients. For many years now, Lou has directed all aspects of the company, with Mario serving behind the scenes and assisting with trans-Atlantic public relations from the back office.

11. Dino De Laurentiis and Hollywood

We have seen how Mario's entrepreneurial spirit and practical mind allowed him to succeed in the global North American market. At the same time, his decision to live in the commercial heart of the United States, in New York, led to a number of important developments that could only have happened in the Big Apple.

During his term at the head of the Italian-American Chamber of Commerce, Mario was once asked to preside over a theme party, where Gina Lollobrigida was the guest of honor. Noticing that the Italian actress seemed uncomfortable with the swarms of Americans that followed her around, Mario swept in to the rescue with his Italian language and charm, setting the actress at ease and guiding her through the pulsing crowds. Gina, or Lollo, as her friends call her, and Mario, the hero of two worlds, also happened to leave the cocktail party at the exact same time and Mario found her, surprisingly alone and once again looking lost on the street corner as she attempted to hail a taxi to return to her hotel. Mario's car was in that hotel's garage and so it seemed natural to walk the few blocks together. I am a great lover of intrigue and had already begun to imagine a candlelight dinner together when Mario ordered me to stick to the facts, noting that his life was interesting enough without making things up. They said goodbye in the hall of the hotel and Mario drove back to his home in New Jersey.

The family at home skeptically laughed off Mario's account of events and to this day tease that they do not believe a word of it.

While Mario never did cross paths with Sophia Loren, Lollobrigida's biggest rival who spent long stints in the United States for tax purposes, he did manage to have dinner with an-

other famous Italian exile, Silvana Mangano, whom I idolized as a young man, whom we will hear about shortly. But first, please allow a me small digression.

If it is true that two cannot exist without three, Mario's encounters with postwar actresses eventually gave way to dinners with Sharon Stone. She had come to the Big Apple from the small town of Meadville, Pennsylvania to seek out a career as a model and actress or, perhaps, just to continue her studies. These were the years when Mario was so popular with his sons' friends that they would often share their secrets with him, because of the human qualities we have already observed. Mario does not believe in instrumental relationships, and takes a genuine interest in people as they are and not for their socioeconomic status. Even in his professional life, where most people follow the impersonal mantra of "business is business," Mario builds real relationships based on how he feels about a person. Young people sense this more than most and the so-called generation gap disappears in their dealings with Mario. Sharon Stone was a good friend of Mario's son Lucio, who even took her on a romantic trip to Italy to meet the Italian family. When she was called back to work on a movie, Lucio stayed in Liguria to work on business leads and they eventually went their separate ways. While they were together, however, the budding actress was a regular fixture in the Foah household, where the couple would often have dinner with Mario and Luciana.

Silvana Mangano, wife of Dino de Laurentiis, was a frequent, exquisite and attentive guest of the Foah couple, and was once seated next to Mario in her home, in a group that included her husband, Mario's wife Luciana, who sat across from him and a beautiful, young African-American woman on his left. Luciana made light of Mario's beautiful company during a pause in the conversation, jokingly ordering her husband to "stop dreaming." While this dinner among friends had business potential, Mario always upheld the gentleman's rule not to discuss these things at dinner.

Mario also recalls the interesting dilemma of juggling the conversation between the ex-actress, who had recently lost her son and was, people say, generally depressed, and his interest for the effervescent, exotic beauty to his left whose brilliance and sensitivity added to her charms. She shifted between four different European languages fluently, a rare quality in the U.S. that only in the cosmopolitan circles of Dino De Laurentiis could have been considered normal.

Mario and Dino developed a genuine friendship based on mutual professional respect and other important common interests. Both had grown up in the shadow of Vesuvius, Laurentiis in the "country backwater" of Torre Annunziata and had also worked in the food products industry in his father's pasta factory before beginning his film career. When they met, Mario was already a successful businessman known for his active role in various organizations promoting Italian cuisine in America. De Laurentiis, much talked about in Italy, was a high-class immigrant to the New World, who had come to initiate a number of co-productions with Hollywood, such as *Hannibal*, starring Sir Anthony Hopkins and directed by Ridley Scott, but he had also begun working in the culinary sector promoting high-end Italian food products. He opened a high-end store in New York offering only the best at a premium price. Considered as a pilot for a possible chain, the boutique was located near his New York office in an area where luxury products were viable and Mario offered to manage the operation, offering De Laurentiis the world, but was unable to convince him.

A bit later, this minor interest for the big producer began to lose money and closed its doors forever and Mario passed on the temptation to enter into a partnership that would have placed his own business at risk.

A long-lasting friendship grew out of an aborted business partnership, and De Laurentiis' door was always open for Mario. Sometimes the producer's secretary would dutifully announce that Mr. Laurentiis was in a meeting, but Mario's arrival was al-

ways a good excuse to catch up over a nice espresso. Birds of a feather, they had both been Americanized in the way they did business, but remained Neapolitan in their personal approach to life in which having coffee with a friend never plays second fiddle to meetings.

Given his encounters with Lollo and De Laurentiis, it is no surprise Mario finally had his own moment in the glittering world of entertainment. This opportunity came at the age of 95. Atlanta is now a thriving center of film production with many studios and production houses and Mario was recently contacted for a three and a half minute advertisement spot being shot for Apple and had to do seven different film shoots for this commemorative short.

Chosen as a symbolic representative of Italians in America, Mario is seen exclaiming on the ground, giving instructions to a painter, played by The Rock, as he restores the Sistine Chapel. Mario received three striking seconds and the satisfaction of knowing his presence could still command a hefty salary for a mere three days' work.

In 2018, the superstar Mario appeared on the Italian TV show *Sorgente di Vita*, as he was interviewed about his painful experience under the Racial Laws of 1938 and other events of his life.

12. The Foah Homes

The places the Foahs lived have always played an important role in family life. I have not yet mentioned Mario's interest in real estate, which he most certainly passed down to Roberto and Lucio, both of whom have dabbled in the sector from time to time.

For most of his life, when there were four in the household, Mario lived in single family homes, the classic large, luxurious residences we see in Hollywood movies. Breaking with Italian tradition, however, Mario was never emotionally attached to a specific house, managing them almost like cars and exchanging them when maintenance problems began to pile up and while they were still under warranty, so to speak. He usually stayed in each home for about ten years.

Maintaining the home was not Mario's cup of tea, since he had other things to occupy his time, at work and at home, so he made a conscious decision of moving from time to time and learned about real estate by selling one home and purchasing another one, newly constructed with all the latest comforts. His wife and children got used to this cycle and, perhaps for this reason his sons have both taken root in Atlanta where they nonetheless follow family tradition in possessing an extra home or two.

I imagine this habit of changing homes also suited Luciana's artistic temperament, because, despite the evident stress, the adaptation to a new environment must have fed her creativity. Mario's innate business sense of course allowed him to sell his old home for more than what he paid for his new residence, transforming him into an amateur real estate investor.

In the end it was his sons' decision to move to Atlanta that finally convinced Luciana and Mario to move into an apart-

ment after so many years. While the one they first took when arriving in their new city was only a temporary place to stay, their second and final home has an interesting back-story.

13. The New Apartment in Atlanta

While perhaps not quite a skyscraper by New York standards, the tall building where Mario lives would certainly be considered so in the horizontal city of Atlanta. Located on the hill of the high-end suburbs of Buckhead, it towers over the city center and peers out above the sprawling residential areas where rows of luxurious homes hide beneath a canopy of trees. Mario's apartment provides an infinite view of the city and other areas as far as the eye can see from the thirty-eighth of forty floors, as I have described earlier, providing the most spectacular sunsets imaginable. It is a beautiful, spacious home with its own interesting story.

The Foahs had planned to put off any major alterations to their new, very large apartment, since they had just paid out a considerable sum to purchase it. They had just begun more minor work and had not yet moved in when their doorbell rang and a very gracious young woman greeted them with the classic house-warming cake. They soon found out that she happened to be the wife of the manager of a very famous rock band, whose name we will not mention here. She had also come to ask Mario and Luciana to exchange their new apartment for the one below it so the rockers could build an internal staircase connecting the Foah's current home and their apartment, located above. Not that they had a numerous family to accommodate, the expansion was needed to display the numerous awards, platinum records and other memorabilia the group had accumulated over the years, as well as providing space for visiting guests.

Mario and Luciana were not crazy about changing floors, even if it was only one floor down, so they politely refused. The woman was so insistent and determined in advancing repeated offers through an intermediary that Mario finally blurted out a

sum that would cover the cost of the modifications to the apartment as compensation for the exchange. The hefty sum was paid on the spot with a check.

During the inspection of the home the rockers were about to buy from the Foahs, the lady happened to notice the bidet in the bathroom, which she, as a true Anglo-Saxon, had never seen before. She asked Mario what it was and, without waiting for his explanation, asked him to show her how it was used. You can imagine the response of our gentleman Mario, who quickly replied that she should probably ask Luciana if she really wanted to be enlightened on the subject.

A few months later, however, the rocker couple split up and went to live in different states and the apartments were once again divided and sold separately. This couple consisted of a very young woman and a not-so-young man, a type I did occasionally see in the elevator. Most of the residents in Mario's building are elderly, however. They greet you with rebuilt, and bleached-white smiles as these formerly young move around in groups to the building's various floors dressed and equipped for the practice of various athletic activities.

One day, while I was waiting for a taxi, I noticed a brand-new Porsche pulling up to the entranceway: nothing unusual considering the types of cars I had seen in the garage. Much less usual, however, was the fact that this car seemed to pull up without a driver. I was not drunk. Rather, the old lady driving was so small and short that you could not see her from outside. I still ask myself, curious and fascinated, what it would be like to ride in the car with that lady driving.

While I have described the forty floors and the negotiations with the people on the top two floors, I have not yet spoken of the building's most famous resident, known on both sides of the Atlantic. I am not referring to Mario, about whom I have written everything I could to pry from him or extrapolate from my own research, but Sir Elton John, who, it appears, collects houses around the world, buying apartments and even entire

buildings, as he has done on the island of Giudecca in Venice, where I live.

He is certainly much better than Woody Allen, who purchased Ca' Dario, infamous for its unhappy family history. The famous film director bought his building after a gruesome murder the gossip newspapers of the time described as wrapped up in the "murky homosexual underworld," but which nonetheless built on the building's notoriety as being haunted and bringing ill fortune on its owners. I am not sure if he has sold it, but I believe Allen and his group now stay in the Hotel Gritti, where he filmed the scenes of his movie *Everyone says I love you*.

The house our English knight bought to host his human and canine friends in Atlanta is certainly far from being haunted, at least not by any old ghosts, given its recent construction. It occupies half a floor, or four apartments the size of Mario's, covering a thousand square meters, but that's not all. He also has a few additional apartments on the floor above in the penthouse. I got to go there, ready to pretend having mistaken floors in one of the four elevators if I met anyone, but I was able to walk around freely and even take a few photos of the immense floor outside the apartments' entrance. I found no trace of any custodians or security guards. The walls were covered with large photographs of human subjects dominated by an intense red, along with other dark shades that contrast with the liveliness of the photos' themes. There were a couple of famous period blowups in black and white: an Einstein sticking his tongue out and a street scene by Cartier-Bresson taken during the liberation of Paris.

The building thus has forty floors, not counting the ground floor, with the around-the-clock service of two porters. When you arrive one of them opens your door and escorts you into the atrium, a service that is quite common in the United States, less so in Europe and utterly inexistent in Italy. Surrounding the atrium there are common spaces, the building manager's office and waiting rooms for guests, entertainment or reading. There

is also a spa on that floor, with an outdoor pool and gym, all very high-tech with an instructor who resembles a lifeguard on *Baywatch*.

The parking garage occupies three floors built underground, where each apartment has its own assigned spaces, many of which are often empty, a fact that allows me to notice that rich people's cars never have oil leaks, and, at the same time, the sparkling cleanliness of the area. A space for parking Ferraris, boatloads of Mercedes and today even a regal Rolls Royce can certainly not be allowed to accumulate dirt, but, in case it does, a man magically appears to re-establish the parking garage's pristine hygiene resembling that of an Alpine clinic like the one described in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. There is an external parking lot located to the right of the main entrance, where there is always plenty of space for visitors. But the cherry on the cake is the wine cellar, located underground off one of the garage floors, that a bigwig once used to host an important private event. The entrance was originally covered by an ordinary wooden door, but was decorated for the event with artificial grape vines of true American *kitsch*, which nonetheless mark the nature of the place. Inside there are tables, seats for sixty guests, and a large oven residents can use to cook a special meal for themselves or their invited guests. Soft music bubbles up from a state of the art sound system.

The wall contains spaces for each resident's personal wine collection, all maintained at the perfect humidity and temperature. I had in fact noticed Mario disappearing from time to time during my first days in Atlanta and imagined he was going to get the mail, only to see him reappear with an excellent bottle of Italian red that needed time to breathe before dinner. This is just one of the many examples I could provide of Mario's lifelong love for the culinary arts, which cannot survive, of course, without an equal passion for Italian wine.

Once Mario went to get his mail and discovered that, as often happens, they had misplaced some letters belonging to

the widow of Dr. Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, who had recently moved from the modest home she had shared with her husband into the big building on the hill. It goes without saying that Mario personally delivered her mail and she naturally invited him for a friendly rundown of their mutual acquaintances. Unfortunately, the seventy-nine-year-old passed away the following year.

14. Business Trips

I sincerely hope that no one will come away from this account with a false impression of Mario as some kind of workaholic, one of these corporate types who is constantly at his desk and always thinking about making the next dollar.

Time flies, children leave the nest to attend college, in places that are often far from home, especially in North America. Luciana took advantage of this opportunity to satisfy her own goal of graduating from college and in the 1970's she enrolled in classes, studying Art alongside her children's friends at Ramapo State College.

Mario always took Luciana on his frequent business trips, freeing himself up for the weekend by lunchtime on Friday so the two could spend time touring the interesting places his business took him. Business trips, we have to admit, are often less enjoyable because they leave us little time to enjoy the places we visit.

In a few years, the Foahs traveled just about everywhere in the United States, tinging these micro-vacations with the joy of their shared experience and expanding their network of friends in a country they came to know intimately. Today Mario boasts of having visited forty-eight of the fifty states, a number that includes both Alaska and Hawaii.

Our Knight of Two Worlds was able to build a business from the ground up using a long-game approach to success. Realizing early on that his only vulnerabilities were the localized production in Italy and the complex distribution in the United States, he worked to build a system of distribution for Italian food products, that he later shared with other distributors with similar needs, some of whom were his competitors. He thus contributed to opening American markets to European food

products in a more general way.

In 1952 Mario founded the Specialty Food Association with only eight members. He remained an active member of this growing organization for over fifty years, and had the following to say about his experience as a pioneer in this sector: "In the 1950's a lot of Americans began to travel to the places they had seen during the War, or to places they had heard about from returning veterans. Most of these trips were to Europe. When they came back with a knowledge of new foods, they tried to find them in the US. Our group of entrepreneurs, in the meantime, had come to the United States before or just after the War, and began importing these specialty food products. I was one of these people." Here we can probably see a reference to Mario's partner Joe Maranelli, who discovered Italy in the same way.

Today the Specialty Food Association's semi-annual Fair boasts 2600 exhibits and 3800 members. Attendance at the most recent edition, which is limited to people who work in the sector, was more than 24,000: quite a jump since the early days!

Mario's talent for innovation and work was recognized by his election to serve as president from 1978 to 1979, during which time he made important contributions that can still be seen in the way the industry is run today.

For a quarter of a century the Fair was organized and managed by a specialized private company that, while resolving many practical problems, absorbed a large portion of the membership's contributions. The Board was thus asked to approve negotiations with the management company in the hopes of bringing management of the Fair back in-house for its show in New York that year.

As one can imagine, things got a bit touchy, but the issue was eventually resolved in the Association's favor, allowing the use of Fair revenues to pursue Mario's long-term goal of transforming the Association into a truly international organization. Mario was convinced that, rather than always being held in New



Mario with Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

York, the Fair should travel to other locations, a proposal that met considerable resistance from the Association's New-York-based Board of Directors. Mario expanded the Association's reach, holding fairs in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, New Orleans, San Francisco and Washington. In 1976 it became a semi-annual event with alternating locations in New



Lifetime Achievement Award, 2014.

York and San Francisco, held respectively in June and January. The seed Mario planted had finally borne its fruit.

During Mario's term as president, he was the first to nominate a woman to occupy a position on the council. The council voted down his candidate, and voted for the male rival. When another member stepped down for health reasons, Mario again lobbied in favor of his female candidate, who won this time. After her first term, she was easily re-elected each time.

Mario was thus able to introduce a woman into what had previously been a very male-dominated context. This woman, along with her husband, was founder and president of a company that imported products from Europe. After a few meetings of the Board it became apparent what an exceptional person and manager she was. A few years later, she was elected president of the Association itself, proving Mario's long-term vision and ability to spot talent.

Mario remains a VIP at the New York Fair, where they generally invite him to share stories and anecdotes about the Association's pioneering past that has now taken on a mystical quality that Mario's presence embodies.

In 2014, in fact, the Association established an annual award and recognized five pioneers for their contributions to the Association and the introduction and distribution of specialty food products in the United States. As one of the foundational awardees, Mario was also called to speak for three recipients who had already passed away. During his closing speech, when they awarded Mario the Achievement Oscar statue, he recounted how the Association's beginnings in 1952, a time that for many seemed like a distant, historic past. Mario spoke to a packed hall of a thousand attendees, relating some humorous anecdotes even as he painted a picture of just how hard things were in those early days without computers or fax machines, cellphones or direct dialing: indispensable tools the younger attendees could not imagine working without. Mario, and Laura, who was also present on that occasion, were given a luxury

suite at the Waldorf Astoria, the landmark Big Apple hotel that has been the subject of a movie and served as the set for many. The hotel today has been closed and converted into luxury condos for wealthy New Yorkers.

Mario was used to receiving public recognition by that point, having been awarded three years straight by the Lombardy region for helping their food products reach an American public.

He also served as president of the Italian-American Chamber of Commerce, an institution founded in New York in 1887. Mario became president one century later, in the 80's, as the Chamber was facing difficult financial times due to its mounting debts, declining membership and total lack of new ideas. Under these circumstances, most people viewed the presidency as a hot potato to be avoided at all costs, while others saw it as an empty chair in need of a figurehead. Never the one to be discouraged, Mario took the bull by the horns and attacked his new job with serious intent. After a little digging around he learned that the Chamber was one of the few organizations concerned with Italian trade that had never received funds from the Italian Union of Chambers of Commerce, called Unioncamere, an organization Mario belonged to and whose president at the time was Piero Bassetti. Mario went to Milan to meet with the Unioncamere directors, where he learned that the Italian-American Chamber had not received funding primarily because their policy that the presidency could only be held by an American citizen, residing in the United States. The issue had apparently been discussed in the past, but nothing had ever been done about it.

After returning from Milan, Mario brought the issue before the Administrative Council and succeeded in having the clause eliminated. The funds from Italy allowed the Chamber to balance the budget for that year.

Mario cancelled debts for unauthorized expenses, paid off all legitimate bills, and brought back sustainable, balanced



Mario and Luciana.

management to the Chamber. With these fires put out, he launched a campaign to increase membership and promote the Chamber's initiatives, moves whose success reached well beyond the years of his term as president. The Chamber began holding an annual conference in Milan attended by Italian and American members.

To liven up the dry work of administration, Mario organized a convention in Venice and one in Sorrento the following year, offering members and their guests to take advantage of the touristic interest of these two locations. During that same period, the Italian-American Chamber also participated in a meeting of the presidencies of all the Chambers of Commerce in North and South America, from Canada to Chile, that was held in San José in Costa Rica. All the presidents were present as was the president of Costa Rica, who invited some of the honored guests to his home. Do you think our Mario could miss

an event like this? The president was none other than Oscar Arias Sanchez, who just a few years later was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his defense of human rights.

Unfortunately, however, except for the personal satisfaction of developing a friendship with Piero Bassetti, Mario's experience with the Chamber of Commerce was not altogether positive. This was perhaps why he served only the one two-year term that allowed him to proudly hand over an organization moving forward with a number of initiatives and whose balance sheet was finally in the black. That was also more or less the period, the last years of the 1980's, during which Mario assumed the title of Knight of the Italian Republic, an honor he received from the head of state Francesco Cossiga, inspiring Laura's nickname for him of the "Knight of the Two Worlds."

It was also during those very years that Mario had another notable encounter to add to the many we have already heard about. While he was in New York inspecting the final touches on the hall being used for an upcoming convention Mario felt someone grab him from behind shouting, "Finally, another Mario!" It was Mario Cuomo, governor of New York State, who, like our Mario, was also of Italian origin from the Campania region. That meeting led to a number of dinners of the Cuomos and the Foahs, in which they most certainly ate Italian food, and probably food from Campania.

Another Italian in New York Mario got to know personally was Furio Colombo, whom we know as a journalist, writer and member of the Italian parliament, but who was then responsible in the US for the Italian Industrial Group IFI, whose most important members were the Agnelli family and FIAT, as well as other entrepreneurial and financial institutions.

15. Uncle Enrico Leide

I have already mentioned the uncles Mario met when he came to the United States and who were both brothers of his mother. The one who chose the name Tedesco to distinguish himself from the rest of the family, was the one who welcomed Mario to America and submitted him to his mythical delusions by trying to transform him into a farmer after he graduated in Forestry Science. The other uncle was known in the Foah family as "Uncle Coca-Cola." He was the good uncle.

Uncle Leide was a musician by profession and he had been the first in the family to move to Atlanta after spending a few years in New York. He founded and served as a cellist and director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra up until its collapse during the financial crisis of 1929. After the orchestra's closure, he served as a university professor for many years. He began a new musical start in the 1970's by founding the Old-Timers Symphony, consisting of aging musicians and instruments, reinforced by a few younger artists for the wind section, for evident lung capacity issues.

Uncle Enrico remarried in later life to a lady known to us as Aunt Lucy, who was already a grandparent like him, as well as a member of the historic family that had founded Coca-Cola, the city's main company in those years. We must never forget that Atlanta was quite racist at the time, as it unfortunately remains among some older residents of the city of *Gone with the Wind*, even though later, it would also become famous for the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King.

It goes without saying that in Atlanta's WASP culture an Italian, and Jewish at that, must not have been seen as a great catch for a young debutante, or even an elderly lady like Aunt Lucy. But the family appears to have bitten the bullet and never

expressed their disapproval to Lucy.

My mother, a precocious pianist who was always looking for “family musical talent,” cited Uncle Enrico as the source of the musical vein passed on to Dahlan Foah, who has not only continued in this area, but also came from New York to live in the city where his great-uncle had founded the city’s first symphony orchestra so many years earlier.

On the theme of racism, however, Mario affirms that it is indeed a horrible beast that is hard to get rid of and tells of a trip he took with his family in the 1960’s. They stopped in North Carolina for gas and something to eat. As a New Yorker, Mario was shocked to see the bathrooms marked for *Men*, *Women* and *Colored*. This was during the brief presidency of John F. Kennedy. Mario is also dismayed by the current resident of the White House and wonders what would have happened if Kennedy had been able to serve out his term. While the debacle of the Cuban missile crisis does give him pause, he does not believe the conspiracy theorists about foreigners organizing the assassination.

A few years after that horrible day, Mario and Luciana were in evening attire at a concert in New York, where they crossed paths with Jacqueline Kennedy at the theater entrance. Mario bowed like a gentleman and said hello, and the former First Lady stopped, walked back two steps and exchanged his greeting, visibly pleased by the gallant unknown man paying her homage.

16. Thirty, Sixty and Ninety

For members of the Italian business community, the numbers thirty, sixty and ninety are well known, marking the number of days for paying for merchandise over time. You bought on credit paying a third of the merchandise per month for three months. I doubt seriously Mario ever had to use this formula in his business in the United States, but he did end up involved in this sort of bargain once in his life, but the numbers involved, not days, but years.

In 2011, his grandson Zach, his son Roberto and Mario turned 30, 60 and 90 respectively. To celebrate this memorable occasion, they brought together friends and family from all three generations. In North America, on similar occasions less momentous, like a *Bar Mitzvah*, one would go out to celebrate, renting space in a hotel to carouse into the wee hours without messing up anyone’s home, which are often not up to the task when it comes to space, elegance, or location. Dahlan’s “house in the woods,” however, was the perfect location for the triple celebration: large, beautiful, comfortable and, more importantly, equipped with outside space leading gently down to the lake: the setting of a Hollywood stage director’s party. Rather than some scene from the *Godfather*, however, Dahlan’s house is more like a country house for intellectuals in tweed jackets, a place you imagine running into characters like Woody Allen, or Sean Penn, and, in fact, Laura was there that Spring to celebrate the three men’s important milestones in a truly special way.

I was not there, but, knowing the people involved, and having heard Laura’s account of it, I am sure it was a memorable party, with a catering service worthy of the occasion and the sophisticated tastes of the birthday boys. When they re-

turned home that evening, Laura, who had had quite enough to eat, was surprised to see Mario head straight for the kitchen to prepare a plate of pasta “as God commands,” because, while Laura had eaten everything, curious cat that she is, Mario had only nibbled and was not about to give up his plate of spaghetti with tomato sauce.

I think that at this point of the story, you probably have a pretty good idea of the mettle of Mario Foah, whose humanity and intelligence extend to the practical concerns of everyday life that must be coherent to the very end.

Mario’s birthday party happened during Laura’s third trip to Atlanta. In the years that followed the two would meet four or five times a year, usually for a month at a time, alternating between Old and New Worlds. In Italy they would generally divide their time between Rome and Naples. While in the US, in addition to spending time in Atlanta, Mario would arrange trips to New York for the Fair, or to other places such as Louisiana, California, Florida and Colorado. They even took a cruise to Alaska experiencing the stunning views that can only be seen by ship during the summer.

Laura’s lifelong passion for visiting new places was able to express itself during the last years of her life in her relationship with Mario, creating many unique and unforgettable experiences.

If my description of Mario has not been clear so far, it is certainly due only to my deficiency as a writer. But I have one last trick up my sleeve. Nothing can capture the essence of Mario, his philosophy of life, style and feistiness, better than his own words. So, if you will allow me, I’ll grab a nice, cushy chair, so I too can enjoy these last two morsels recounted by Mario himself.

“Among my business trips, I would go to Detroit three times a year. There I had a young taxi driver, a black man named Bill. I would call him before leaving and he would come to pick me up at the airport. After years of this, it happened one time



Mario and Laura.

that I had to stay in Detroit because I had not finished all my rounds with clients. Before taking me to the hotel Bill asked me a favor: 'We've known each other for three years, he said, and you haven't met my family, my wife and two kids. Would you like to stop by my house, just for a few minutes?' Of course I went. The table had been laid out with a spot for me and I had a very pleasant evening with them.

Here's another one: "I lived in Colorado, in Colorado Springs to be exact, for three years after graduating from college. When I was still in college I would go there during the summer, because I found a job on a ranch near a place called Woodland Park, a small town of about seven thousand inhabitants today, located in a dense forest at 8400 feet above sea level. In this little town there was a man around fifty years old who never spoke to anyone. No one could tell me anything about him. He would wander around the town, and never asked anyone for anything, but would accept anything you gave him, especially food or clothing. I had met him several times and said hello each time. He would answer with a nod of the head and with his hand. One day the owners invited him to eat at the ranch. He devoured the food they offered and left immediately after lunch. He thanked the owner quickly and left. I met him a few times more and tried to talk to him, asking him what he needed. He never answered. When I came back the following year, I asked about him and was told he had died. Who knows what he hid behind that silence and what his life had been like. Maybe he had suffered some trauma too hard to tell curious passers-by. When I went back to school, I wrote a short story about him. It was published in the school newspaper and I even made some money. They gave me twenty-five dollars, which was an amazing amount of money for a poor starving student in 1943. My story ended with these lines: "On a Thursday afternoon I met him and that was the last time I would see him. He looked very sad. He did not say hello and continued walking. He had a jar of honey in his hand, perhaps the last sweet thing he

had in his life."

So that's Mario: a cross between Steinbeck and Miller, with a dash of Kerouac, but always with moderation and no excess in one direction or the other, a Zadick who is how he is without even knowing it. Let's conclude by giving Mario the last words in a dialogue-interview that covers past, present and future.

17. Conclusion

To close this run-away incursion into the life, or rather, the many lives of Mario, I arranged an interview, which I will transcribe exactly as it came out, a casual conversation held over drinks among friends.

Tell me about Naples and your Neapolitan-ness.

In the 1920's and 30's there were more horse-drawn carts than there were taxis. During the various trips I took with my grandparents I remember distinctly that when we went to Livorno or Milan we would always take a carriage. With all the horses riding around the cities it was easy to find a horseshoe. Since finding a horseshoe was believed to bring good luck, especially in Naples, I picked them up whenever I found them. I had a big box full of them.

In 1939 the Italian government asked all its citizens to donate all the unused metal they had in their houses. I did my duty and took the entire box to the collection center. A few weeks later I boarded the *Conte di Savoia*, headed for New York. As I was crossing the road in front of the Maschio Angioino Castle, on my way to the pier where the ship was moored, I found a horseshoe on the street. I naturally picked it up and took it with me to America. I have always kept this horseshoe with me, on my desk when I was in college, and later, on my work desk in New York, and now in Atlanta. It is a part of me. Deep down inside, I have held onto a little piece of Neapolitan superstition and I am still convinced this charm has brought me good luck and contributed to my success in various endeavors in life.

That's not all. You probably know that walnuts with three halves and four-leaf clovers are considered to have the same effect as finding a horseshoe. I used to find, not just horse-

shoes, but four-leaf clovers, and special walnuts. It happened so often that once, in the very moment when I was telling a friend about it, I noticed and picked three four-leaf clovers, to her great surprise.

All right, so you have been fortunate because of a piece of metal and four-leaf clovers. Listen, though, can you tell me anything about the women in your life? About the two Levis of your life?

My love life could not have been better. With Luciana it was love at first sight and we married soon after we met. We spent a long happy life together and grew up and matured side-by-side but in completely different directions.

Luciana was born an artist. Once we came to live in Atlanta she opened a studio where she spent most of her time. People who came to see her often bought her work. Other paintings decorate the walls of family and friends who were always asking her for one. A museum in Atlanta purchased two of her paintings, the Stone Mountain Museum, where they can still be seen today.

We spent a lifetime of profound and happy love that I was certain would be eternal. At the celebration of our sixtieth anniversary, I invited everyone there to save the date ten years later to celebrate our seventieth. Unfortunately, we did not make it there. Just a few months later, an incurable disease took her away. I was in a state of desperation and solitude, held up by the affection of my sons and relatives.

I met Laura, a friend of my brother Ugo, about a year later when I went to Rome. After meeting, Laura and I began to write each other every day. We became pen pals. After a while of this I finally worked up my courage and got my two hands to type out an invitation for her to come to Atlanta, promising to show her America, which she had never seen. She accepted my invitation and our friendly correspondence became, as I had hoped, a love story. We spent seven wonderful years together



Mario and Laura in Alaska.

– two aging grandparents got a new lease on life, a new reason to live. We went to New York several times, Florida, San Francisco and took a beautiful cruise to Alaska: all fantastic trips! Unexpectedly, Laura came down with an incurable disease and I lost her a few months later, finding myself once again in the deepest, sad, solitude.

I should consider myself the most unhappy and unlucky man on earth for twice losing the person I loved most. I look on the bright side, however, and count myself lucky for having been fortunate enough to find true, deep love twice in my life. Sixty years of joy and happiness with Luciana and seven great years with Laura were intense enough to cancel my profound sorrow at losing them.

At this late stage in life, I still think about the future, however short it may be. I am happy and satisfied with my life, of what I have been able to do, and remembering the happy years



Mario with his brothers.

with Luciana and Laura.

A good lesson for life, dear Mario. Concluding this truckload of information about your life, do you have any concluding words of wisdom or anything else you would like to add?

When you reach the age of 98, like me, your life has surely had some important and memorable events that you have more or less covered.

One aspect of my life I am particularly proud of is that, despite being away from Italy, I have managed to stay connected to my homeland and my family there. Today you can go from New York to Rome in about seven hours for varying prices that are nonetheless reasonable. In the 1930's and 40's you had to take a long, ocean voyage at a cost that not everyone could afford.

As soon as the war was over I decided to go back to see my family. It took me two years to come up with the money. I

did not return as a foreigner, however. I had remained not only Italian, but intensely Neapolitan, and, most importantly, I still belonged to my family, even after having been away for so long, seven long years without hearing from them because of the war. I found the same family love intact when I returned in 1947. Later on, traveling to Italy got much simpler. My decision to go into the business of importing Italian food products gave me the opportunity to travel to Italy on a regular basis, every year. Even today, after eighty years in the United States, I still belong to my Italian family. Love has bound us together as it always will. My family has participated in my adventures in the United States, just as I have participated in the lives of all my Italian loved ones.

I am proud to have managed to remain a part of the clan that has expanded over the years, participating in their moments of happiness and pain. In any case, among our family on both sides of the Atlantic, cousins, uncles, sisters-in-law, since I could not have any brothers-in-law, there was always a feeling of togetherness that made me feel that the Italian Foà family and the Foahs in America were one and the same.

Of course, the nuclear family I created and follow every day has a certain preferred status, for obvious reasons, but I like to think of our families, spread out all over the world, as one big family, based only on affection, and not on birth registries and being related, but only on affection, which is the only thing that counts, in the end.

In closing, I want to thank you, Vittorio, for having collected my memories, which, without your direct questions and the idea of your project, would never have come together so well. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Author

After a series of interviews on the thirty-eighth floor of a splendid building in Atlanta, amongst whom lives Elton John, Vittorio Levi decided to tell the story of the life, the memories and some anecdotes of his dear friend and almost brother-in-law, Mario Foah

It is a certain type of biography, a trip in space between Italy and the United States, from 1938 to 2017, and is filled with many characters, co-protagonists of a life full of events and satisfactions for Mario.

Vittorio Levi was born in Abruzzo, Italy, a product of his family's internment in 1942. Raised in Naples, he holds a degree in Political Science. He then transferred to Milano for work. After dedicated many years and work in marketing and publicity, today he is pleased to write in his free time. He is the protagonist of a daily blog entitled, Contromattinale.



Translation to English

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He learned Italian while serving as an officer in the United States Navy, when he was stationed in Naples, Italy. It was there that he fell in love with the language and people and was inspired to follow his passion for travel, language and the written word. While he eventually received degrees from the University of Paris-Sorbonne, Arizona State and Yale, where he completed his PhD, he claims that the school that most influenced him was the one provided by his years wandering and playing the “scugnizzo” on the streets of Naples. It was there that he met his future wife Giuseppina, with whom he lives in Tucker, Georgia.

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