

Dual Citizenship:

One Family's Expression of Italian-American Pride

By Michael Votto

NIAF member Michael Votto discusses his family's experience obtaining Italian citizenship.

Jure sanguinis - the Latin phrase meaning "continuity of blood" or "by the right of blood" - is the right of citizenship under Italian Nationality Law by virtue of one's ancestry. As with many aspects of Italian and Italian-American life and culture, the rules surrounding Italian citizenship *jure sanguinis* are complex and, in some cases, counterintuitive.

For example, one can be a first generation Italian American and be ineligible for Italian citizenship *jure sanguinis* or be third generation (like me) and fit well into the eligibility requirements. However, as the specific details of eligibility are widely available through the offices of the Italian Consulate, I'd like to share what inspired me to become an Italian citizen as well as my experiences with the actual citizenship process.

At the age of 16, my great-grandfather, Antonio Fuggi, left the tiny village of Vitulano in Benevento for the United States. He had recently finished an apprenticeship as a shoemaker and, on a December day in 1902, he left behind his mother, father and sister. He would never see them again. Upon his arrival in the U.S., he settled in New Haven, Connecticut, where the Ocone family from Vitulano assisted him in getting acclimated to the community.

As his life continued, Antonio faced a decision common to the Italian immigrant experience of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: whether to renounce his Italian citizenship and become an American citizen. Little did he know that the timing of this decision would ultimately determine whether, decades later, his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would be eligible for dual citizenship.

On December 13, 1927, Antonio was naturalized as an American citizen, but fortunately for my family and I, this occurred after the birth of my grandmother, Gloria Fuggi Votto. The timing of one's naturalization is a key component with respect to whether or not future generations are eligible for Italian citizenship *jure sanguinis*. Under Italian Law, one born to an Italian parent is Italian even if born



Michael Votto, visits his family's village in Italy. Photo courtesy of Votto.

in another country. Therefore, even though my great-grandfather later renounced his Italian citizenship by virtue of becoming an American citizen, our family bloodline continued through my grandmother who, although born and raised in the U.S., is Italian for purposes of Italian Nationality Law. In the United States, it was not until a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1970s that American citizens were able to obtain dual citizenship. Prior to that time, an American seeking the citizenship of another country had to renounce his or her U.S. citizenship.

As a student of Italian history, the oldest member of our family's third generation and the unofficial family genealogist, I was thrilled when NIAF began an initiative to promote dual citizenship in 2006. Like many Italian Americans, our extended family is extremely close. Having spent nearly every Sunday for the first 18 years of my life at my grandparents' house with aunts, uncles and cousins piling through the door in search of nonna's red sauce - and with my great-grandparents' naturalization papers framed on the living room wall - I could have never imagined that one day any of us would actually be Italian citizens. ➤

After spending time gathering information about our family history and solidifying my understanding of the eligibility requirements, I determined that my siblings and I were eligible for Italian citizenship through my father, paternal grandmother, Gloria, and paternal great-grandfather,

For my siblings and I, the process above took nearly two years. It began in the fall of 2006 when my wife and I visited the village of Vitulano and obtained my great-grandfather's original birth certificate, continued with our meeting at the Italian Consulate in New York City in July 2007 and

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Amanda Votto, wife of author Michael Votto, poses with his grandmother's cousin, Pasquelina Fuggi. Fuggi helped the young couple obtain Michael's grandfather's birth certificate and research his family history in Italy.

Antonio. While the exact requirements differ slightly among the various Italian Consulates in the U.S., generally the process to be confirmed as an Italian citizen *jure sanguinis* is: 1) gather certified birth, marriage and death certificates for each person in one's bloodline, 2) obtain apostilles (an internationally recognized certification available from U.S. state governments) and have the certificates translated into Italian, 3) submit the certificates to the appropriate Italian Consulate at a meeting with a consular officer and 4) await processing by the Italian consulate and notification that one's documents have been filed in both the official consular records and the town in Italy where one's bloodline originated.

concluded in August 2008 with the receipt of our citizenship acceptance letters from the Consulate.

While I pursued Italian citizenship *jure sanguinis* primarily as an expression of my Italian heritage and pride, there are several benefits and drawbacks to dual citizenship that should be considered before embarking on the exciting and sometimes frustrating journey. First and foremost, becoming an Italian citizen entitles you to a passport from a country that is a member of the European Union (E.U.). This in effect means that one is able to live, travel and work freely in any E.U. member country. Further, as an Italian citizen one may be entitled to certain benefits such as free education and an E.U. pension. Universal health care, the ability to buy real property and pass on citizenship to future family generations are other frequently cited benefits to dual citizenship. On the other hand, dual citizenship may subject a person to certain tax liabilities and military responsibilities and it may create issues in connection with the pursuit and/or maintenance of security clearances.

For many years, immigrants from Italy and countries around the globe arrived in the United States with dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Those immigrants often faced difficult decisions, including the decision to renounce one's native citizenship in connection with the pursuit of becoming an American. Now, many years later, that choice is no longer necessary in many instances. As someone who is both proud to be an American and honored by my Italian heritage, I can think of no better way to demonstrate such pride than becoming a dual citizen of the United States and the Italian Republic. ▲

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To learn whether your family qualifies for Italian citizenship, visit www.niaf.org/citizenship/index.asp. This Italian Citizenship Questionnaire, offered by NIAF and the Embassy of Italy, is intended to facilitate your research as you pursue this exciting possibility.