

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

APRIL 25, 2015

HOSTS

LT. JOSEPH PETROSINO LODGE #285
DAUGHTERS AND SONS OF ITALIAN HERITAGE LODGE #2428
A.P. GIANNINI LODGE #2859

MOST PRECIOUS BLOOD CHURCH HALL
113 BAXTER STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10013

February Brunch/Dinner Fundraiser

On Sunday, February 22nd CSJ sponsored its 35th annual brunch/fundraiser at Russo's On the Bay in Howard Beach, Queens, led by the effervescent and experienced Josephine Morici Cohen, who has chaired this event for all its 35 years. Over 200 people attended, one of the highest totals in some time, as we honored two titans of Italian culture and anti-defamation, John Fratta and Simona Rodano.

John presently serves as State Treasurer, National CSJ Vice-president, and a member of the New York State CSJ Executive Board. As a proven asset, John combines two talents that reflect perfectly the the two missions of CSJ. On one hand he promotes Italian culture with his indefatigable efforts in launching the San Gennaro Feast in Little Italy in Manhattan every single year. On the second hand he fights endlessly against defamation and bigotry against our people as part of his positions in CSJ. He truly personifies then the quintessential honoree for CSJ.

Simona, although she could not attend our affair due to the death of her father, is a passionate, energetic, exuberant individual whose personal traits are a contagion for anyone who meets her. As an artist, producer, actress, and singer, she connects so well with her young charges as she presents bilingual Italian/English stage productions that carry a message while they learn Italian live during the show. She truly personifies a unique style rarely seen anywhere. In fact, as a way to compensate for her absence at the affair, Simona invited the members of the CSJ Board to attend her classic stage production "Sempreverde" at the Queens Theatre in Flushing Meadows. Only Josephine and I could attend the midday event on March 24th, but she gave a stunning performance utilizing all her talents as a singer, actress, and educator accompanied with her usual colorful and striking pageantry!

We brothers and sisters of the Order should be so proud that these two represent the best we have to offer. Is it any wonder CSJ did so well financially with this event? Grazie John and Simona!

As a result of her efforts for so many years in chairing this event, a brief ceremony was held for Josephine to thank her for all she has done in making this event the continuous success it always is every year. She's proven she's really indispensable. Thank you Jo!

Italian Language Task Force

Prior to our launching of the brunch/fundraiser, in early February work by the task force intensified. I met with Prof. Annamaria Monaco at Suffolk Community College in Selden, Long Island on February 4th regarding my concerns of the Italian Advanced Placement program, particularly the necessity in assuring that by next year 2,500 students must take the AP test. As President of AATI and because of her contacts with Carlo Davoli, the Education Director of the Italian Consulate in NYC, she along with Davoli assured me that by next year we will confidently reach that target. According to them, right now 2,993 are registered this year to take the test, a most satisfactory figure indeed! Consequently, since I know that these two as well as secondary school teachers are actively recruiting, we will not have to proceed with more vigorous efforts I originally had planned for, but we will monitor the situation continuously, particularly the actual number who take the test this year. So, matters regarding AP are now promising, and because of our continuous contacts regarding the AP, Prof. Monaco invited me on April 22nd to speak to her Italian club at the College about the missions of the CSJ.

It was a most enjoyable late morning. I found the students truly riveted about the work we do, particularly our tactics, experiences, and successes fighting bias and bigotry. Consequently, the club gave CSJ a donation to show its appreciation.

Besides what I can contribute, other CSJ members of the task force are working doggedly to promote and defend the existence of the Italian language in our schools. Kudos to Keith Wilson for monitoring Massapequa, Bethpage, Farmingdale, and Plainedge—all have healthy Italian language programs. Jean Gagliardo is presently refining her plan to create a program to bond CSJ more closely with Italian teachers who can bring our work right into the classroom. Keith, Rosemarie DiChiara, and Tom Adamo, both from the Caboto Lodge in Seaford, are persevering so hard to re-instate Italian in Seaford schools, and thanks to their efforts so far, the superintendent has promised that in the school year 2016-2017 he will bring Italian back! Of course, we will monitor this promise closely. Furthermore, if certified teachers in Italian are needed, Prof. Monaco from AATI has volunteered to help Seaford in this regard.

However, the toughest nut we have to crack is the Utica schools which this school year terminated Italian. District 6 CSJ Chairman Joe DiCarlo's contact, a teacher of Italian, does not respond anymore. My conversation with a PTA representative was abruptly cut short when she demanded I never contact her again about the matter. My guess is that when they originally reached out to us, we did not respond quickly enough to help since other CSJ issues and crises surfaced at the time that forced us to put the Utica issue on the backburner, but we will continue to rethink our strategy and persevere. Therefore, I have directed Joe DiCarlo and Donato Guadagnoli, a representative from AIAE, to target and contact the two middle school principals in the district for movement on this issue. The middle schools are the spots to launch Italian at a young age in order to build a lasting program. We'll wait and see what reactions we get.

Furthermore, regarding schools and the Italian language, Prof. Monaco invited me to AATI's annual Italian Poetry Contest at Old Westbury College on March 20th to observe students in action speaking Italian. Students had to choose an Italian poem, explain the theme in English and then recite it from rote memory in Italian. Middle and high school students from Nassau and Suffolk Counties participated. They were judged on poise, pronunciation, articulation, and dramatics in their presentation. What a pleasure it was to observe the talents of so many in their recitation! Prizes were awarded for each level at the end in general assembly. Winners were cheered by their peers in their respective schools as if they were attending an athletic event! Kudos to AATI for inspiring such passion and enthusiasm in learning Italian!

“History in a Box”

Ever since I personally created this program about universal Italian innovation and invention, it has become ever so popular in the lodges and the schools. I've now done eleven presentations and each one receives rave reviews because it is so informative. One learns that Italians have been masters of innovation and creativity in everyday life, and we should be so proud of this legacy. This past quarter presentations were made at the Gulotta Lodge in East Rockaway on February 11th, where CSJ received a donation as a token of appreciation, the Perry Como Lodge in Northport on April 8th, and three Italian classes at Islip High School on April 16th, where I received a thank you card in Italian from all the students and the teacher.

I love doing it, and if anyone anywhere is interested, please contact me and I'll come running!

Bias and Bigotry Directory

A plenary session report would be found wanting if it did not include an expose' about bias and bigotry this quarter, and there's enough to tell.

In early February we were notified of defamation issues upstate that involved two radio stations in Rochester, 95.1 and 96.5. At 95.1 Kimberly Ray, a radio commentator at the station, had said that Italian men don't kiss their grandchildren on the cheeks, only on their mouth. "You know, it's a dago thing." Silvano Orsi, a member of the Vincent Lombardi Lodge and an attorney who has written in law journals and books on defamation, instantly erupted and contacted Ms. Ray. She treated the matter frivolously, claiming it was all in fun, and refused to apologize. Orsi went further by contacting and complaining to the executives of the station, whereupon Ms. Ray finally and publicly on the air apologized. Great job Silvano! At this point I utilized a tactic that has proven to be effective when the perpetrator apologizes or repents. I contacted the executives and encouraged them to help us fight such defamation. I mentioned that Mr. Orsi runs an Italian festival in Rochester and that the station could help by advertising his event. The executives agreed to invite him on the station for such a purpose and volunteered to match his revenues dollar for dollar! How wonderful it is to turn a negative into a positive, and because of Silvano's dynamic efforts and passion I have recruited him to be a member of our Executive Board. He immediately accepted! A short while later we learned that a shock jock at 96.5, Tom Mule', insulted Italians by calling the men "dagos" and the women "dago bitches." Springing into action, Orsi instantly forced the jockey to apologize publicly on the air, the jockey claiming he didn't mean to offend anyone (which is what the offenders always say). So, much credit should be awarded to Silvano for his literal blitzkrieg on these two issues.

No sooner did we address these issues when another one surfaced in Southampton, Long Island. Although we were successful in the Southampton School District in maintaining the day off on Columbus Day for the students and staff, an article in the Southampton Press on February 4th appeared that headlined a mock trial involving Columbus at the Intermediate School. Having done research, Columbus was put on trial and the students convicted him of murder. Consequently, the students wrote letters and appeared before the School Board urging the trustees to change the name of Columbus Day. I immediately contacted the Superintendent, Dr. Scott Farina, and requested I meet with these students and present to them OSIA's position on this matter. I asked him to contact Newsday, the Southampton Press, and the Shinnecock Nation to cover the presentation. He agreed. I then presented to him and the teachers involved a copy of National CSJ's periodical "Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction" for their review and to share it with the students. On March 4th I made my presentation, entertained questions from the students, and was interviewed by Newsday. My intent throughout was not necessarily to change the students' minds as it was to expose them to a position I'm not so sure they covered. On March 17th Newsday's article on the matter appeared, which definitely was slanted more to the student's interest in atrocities supposedly committed by Columbus than the momentous significance of his discoveries. Southampton Press' coverage was much more even-handed, and on March 19th I was a guest on L.I. News Radio 103.9 FM, the "John Gomez Show." John

was fascinated by the topic and for twenty minutes I was able to cover much more positive information about Columbus. It should also be noted that after the Newsday interview, I met with Roberta Hunter, Southampton School Board member, a Shinnecock, and a local attorney, and suggested we meet to continue a dialogue about this matter. I feel we have to begin to make contact and develop greater understanding about Columbus Day between Native Americans and us. She agreed and I will eventually contact her to begin this process.

Continuing the fight against defamation, we came across a commercial on TV and the internet about Halos Mandarins. The commercial begins with a young female child who enters her father's bedroom with an empty box of Halos mandarins (tangerines) and a frown on her face. The father, uncovering his blanket and bedsheets, finds a headless toy horse. Horrified, he rushes out with his daughter and loads up his shopping cart with Halos mandarins with the daughter by his side smugly combing the tail of the headless toy horse as if to show she got her way. CSJ was incensed! This commercial used a godfather movie image with a young child to urge parents to make sure they always have Halos mandarins on hand! At first contact the company thought it was a humorous display to show the popularity of Halos mandarins. Not convinced, thanks to the laborious research and interest of Marianne Prince, President of the John Michael Marino Lodge, who supplied me with oozes of information on whom to contact, I wrote letters to the CEO, the VP for Marketing, the Youth Division head, and the talent Agency who hired the child. I expressed our indignation regarding this commercial and demanded they drop it forthwith! Needless to say, I received no reply and the commercial is still running. Through further research I have found the major daily that exists in the city of the corporate headquarters in California and I intend to expose the company about this detestable commercial in the New York market. We'll see what happens.

Lastly, a most disturbing article appeared in the New York Post at the end of March that literally surprised us all. One can just not believe the extent of the course that defamation takes, but maybe we should not be so surprised. Queens Supreme Court Justice Duane Hart had before him in January a naturalized citizen from Italy, Maurizio Oppedisano, who was a plaintiff in a property dispute. Unsuspectingly, Justice Hart took note of Oppedisano's surname and asked him point-blankedly if he had mob connections. Oppedisano was stunned and could not understand why he would even be asked that question! Hart then turned to an attorney and said that the attorney and he were the only principals in the court who didn't have a vowel in their surname. In fact, the whole scene reminded him of the movie "Good Fellas." The matter stretches incredulity to this day! I called the Post reporter who wrote the story and told her that the matter was egregious, intolerable, and hurtful to the Italian community, and I would write to the New York State Commission on Judicial Conduct to complain. I demanded a public apology and his resignation. The reporter wanted a copy of my letter and sent a photographer to my home to take pictures for a followup story. So far the story has not been written, but I did receive a reply from the Commission which stated that the matter is now being investigated and by law the Commission must notify the complainant of the results. How sad it is that now we must worry about even the supposed halls of justice as a tinderbox for bias and defamation against Italians! How can any Italian appear before Justice Hart's court and expect equal treatment according to the tenets of American jurisprudence! Justice Hart cannot now be considered an impartial arbiter of the courts, especially since we have learned he has been censured twice already by the Commission for other matters before his court! The Commission I hope will mete out the severest punishment possible, which can include dismissal. We'll see.

New Executive Board Members

On a far more positive note, I have recruited new members on our Board to enhance our effectiveness as we grow into a hopeful and powerful entity for OSIA. Gina Ferrara from the Cellini Lodge is now our Financial Secretary. Andy Filangeri from the Brumidi Lodge has resigned to spend more time with his family upon retirement and in North Carolina where he has a second home. We thank Andy wholeheartedly for his two years of service. He came on board at a time when I was appointed Chairman to help us engage in a very difficult transition when we needed a much more organized approach to our monthly cash flow. Andy, thank you so much!

I've already mentioned Silvano Orsi. As one can see he's a real dynamo who gets results and has really supplemented the power and prestige of District 8. Add to him Rosemarie DiChiara and Tom Adamo from the Giovanni Caboto Lodge, who are working tirelessly right now to reinstate Italian in Seaford Schools, and Tony and Nancy Conetta from the John Michael Marino Lodge, who've already jumped into the fray regarding disparaging MTA ads in NYC subways (more on that in the future). One can notice then we can really increase our clout proudly in fulfilling the missions of CSJ. I'm so happy they've all agreed to come on board!

The Upcoming Summer Festival

Mark your calendars for Saturday, June 27th from 11 am to 6 pm at the Smithtown Historical Society fairgrounds at 239 Middle Country Road in Smithtown 11787 for our second annual Italian Culture and Heritage Festival! If you thought last year was exciting, wait till you see this year. Since this year is the 100th birthday anniversary of Frank Sinatra, we've invited Sal Turchio, the New Jersey Grand Lodge Historian to do a Sinatra tribute. Simona Rodano, one of our honorees at the brunch/dinner fundraiser this year, will join us to stage a bilingual production in all its splendor! We'll surprise you with some other new prospects, but we'll also present to you some of our returnees who are back by popular demand.

We're almost finished with the programming and we're turning our attention to the vendors, the sponsors, and loads of publicity.

We've scratched out a tentative budget which is enclosed separately and also is part of our 2015-2016 budget that is also enclosed that you can refer to.

We get more excited and anxious as time goes on because we're literally trying to outdo last year, and we know we have something that is so enthralling. So, please wherever you are, plan to come and let's all show off our legacy and accomplishments!

Respectfully submitted,

Louis J. Gallo, Jr.
Chairman