Ma's Citizenship

At the tail end of the Great Depression my Ma decided to become a citizen. She had lived in this country since late 1927, so she had satisfied the residency requirement more than twice over. However, she was completely illiterate and could speak no English, hence lacked the prerequisites for the required exam. There she was, a 52-year-old Italian peasant from a relic area in the Calabrian foothills. She had never seen the inside of a school. She was uneasy in the presence of strangers, a category that included all non-Italians; these were known in our parlance as i nazione—that is, "the nations"—probably elided from gente d'altre nazioni or "people of other nations."

Moreover, the prospect of confronting a judge in the intimidating grandeur of a courtroom should have stopped her cold. Officials of all stripes, Italian or nazione, of the state or of the Church, she justly feared; she knew that none had her good at heart. No doubt she learned this lesson while still in Italy. In 1922 my father had left her and the family and had emigrated to America. The plan was for my father to earn money and send it to my mother so she and the family could follow. The first part went well enough. However, my mother could not make the necessary arrangements—passports, documents, vaccinations, ship tickets and who knows what other impediments. Her father, Antonio Valeo, died in 1925 [I think], thus depriving her of any family help. (I don't suppose that Grampa was literate but at least he was male.) And so the bureaucratic agony dragged on until the summer of 1927, when my father quit his job and went to gather in his family. (Not that he brought great savoir faire to the process: Pa mishandled some documents and the family was delayed in Naples for several weeks. But that's another story.)

By this time my Ma had learned still more about officialdom. Though she had never seen the inside of a school, she had seen the inside of an American police station. Not long after arriving in this country, she went to a big fabric sale downtown. There was a table heaped with odds and ends, remnants and cut-offs of fabric. Another Italian woman explained to Ma that these were free. Hmm! Something fishy here. But after all, isn't this the country where anything can happen? Are not the streets paved with gold? (Quite possibly, a sign over that table blared forth: "Buy one, get one FREE!" A half-literate non-English speaker might easily be mistaken.) So Ma practiced her manual skill was urged of her white-knuckled despair. It is melancholy that, with the ordinary kindness worked up to a sophisticated awareness of a narrowly restricted language. Someone other than me never learn language for manual skills. It is curious not to suffer an irremediable demoralization.

And so my mother practiced her approximation of her hands rejoicing in the connection with what flourished like flowers gnarled from arthritis, hooking a delicate do, butchering our annual soppressate, salamie, pork hands demoralized by that seventh grader.

Finally, the day of course the event became
Ma decided to become an American citizen in late 1927, so she had to pass her citizenship test. She had never lived in this country, hence lacked the knowledge of our language and customs. She had never seen an American court, hence lacked the savvy in our parlance of how things worked. Officials of all stripes were intimidating to her, especially officials of government. She had never seen the inside of an American courthouse, hence feared it. She had never seen the bureaucratic red tape involved in the granting of citizenship, hence feared it. She had never been to a court of law, hence feared it.

Of course, eventually the cops located my father, who brought my Uncle Leonard (who could speak passable English) and my mother was released. My father, irrepressible wag, occasionally reminded Ma of her criminal past. The joke escaped her: she knew what she knew. What I don't know is where she got the temerity to attempt to wrest citizenship from the system. What passion, what desire, what yearning hidden in her heart fueled this unlikely project?

I was then in seventh grade, just beginning to get bookish, hence ready for my first teaching job: preparing Ma for the exam. We had a little brochure listing some of the questions that might be asked. I remember—a reason soon to be clear—only one item: “Question: What are the three branches of government? Answer: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial.” Since my mother knew no English, the answer was only an arbitrary sequence of sounds, all difficult for an Italian tongue to wrap itself around. Still, we worked doggedly every evening.

And Ma practiced writing her name—proof, we were told, of literacy. This manual skill was even more difficult. Her pencil rebelled against the urging of her white-knuckled hand—and she would throw it down in despair. It is melancholy to report that her tutor lacked patience. A little ordinary kindness would have sufficed. There was no need for a more sophisticated awareness of learning development. Now I know that there is a narrowly restricted period for learning certain things, most especially language. Someone denied access to language in early childhood can never learn language—any language. But something of the same holds for manual skills. It is said that violinists who begin after the age of ten suffer an irremediable handicap.

And so my mother’s hands forever refused to form a passably legible approximation of her name. Oh, those hands! Deft, confident, versatile hands rejoicing in the works and days of hands. Nurturing hands, her connection with whatever in the obdurate world needed her help to flourish—like flowers or children. I see those hands now: small, slightly gnarled from arthritis, unmarked by veins. I see them with a crochet hooking a delicate doily. Or butchering our annual hog, transforming a beast into prosciutti, capocolli, soppressate, salsciaccia, pancetta—all without refrigeration. These were the hands demoralized by a pencil. The pathos of it was beyond the sensibility of that seventh grader.

Finally, the day of the exam came. I did not go to the courthouse but of course the event became family lore. The examination did not take place in
a courtroom, with the judge beetling down from his high dais o'er a sea of supplicants. All were on the same level, the judge moving from person to person. When he came to my mother he smiled kindly and asked, "Missis, what are the three branches of government?" And Ma: "Legisa, excuda, judisha." Ahhh! She then scrawled something resembling "Marianna Parise" and metamorphosed into an American citizen.

At a bar mitzvah ceremony I was dazzled by the learning—largely in Hebrew—of the young boy. Here truly (I thought) is someone fit to take up that ancient fardel of law and custom and moral agency that Jews carry on their backs. But what about youngsters dilatory in their studies, or even mentally incapable? I asked around and was told, in effect, "From each according to his ability." Ah! So a generous God takes 'em as they come.

Quite plausibly, a like generosity explains the citizenship "examination." True, it was so perfunctory as to be without content. Yet neither was it a farce or travesty, for it tested (and how!) a kind of civic passion. Perhaps the judge discounted the external manifestations of civic duty in favor of its ineffable core. Perhaps the larger polity—what we now, in genuine travesty, call the homeland—shares some commonality with the home. Robert Frost movingly expresses the essence of home in this exchange from "Death of the Hired Man":

[Warren]:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in."

[Mary]:

"I should have called it Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

The two definitions of home are virtually identical, but what Warren concedes grudgingly, Mary offers generously from the depths of her heart. Either formulation, applied to the body politic, might encourage a sense of community, a sense of inclusion.

Yes, I know: my distinction between the mystical essence of citizenship and its phenomenal manifestations won't stand up to examination, certainly won't take us deep into my mother's simple heart. Why did she yearn for citizenship? Why endure the cruel self-doubts surely occasioned by the project? What in the world could Ma have been thinking? Now, seventy years later, I can only speculate. Certain hypotheses deserve peremptory rejection. The abstraction of patriotism never moved anyone in our family. Perhaps our homespun rationalism left us all incapable of understanding how a flag could possibly be "desecrated," or how in the first place it could be consecrated, like a Communion wafer. Similarly, it is inconceivable that my mother endeavored to look the other way. For if that were the case, the abstraction would have been displaced by fear or loathing...
my mother endeavored to conquer this mountain just because it was there. For if that were the case, then the record—the trophy—of her achievement would have been displayed for universal admiration, like her crochet work or house plants. But no: the citizenship paper arrived in the mail and just disappeared, probably in a box full of documents.

The only observable consequence of Ma’s citizenship was that henceforth she voted. Of course she could not read the ballot. My father showed her which boxes to X. But this only leads to a further question. Why vote? And how could she possibly imagine any candidate, the being at the other end of her vote? To suggest an answer I must explain the place of FDR in our family.

Roosevelt was not just our uncle in America. He was our lares and penates. He was our cosmic ombudsman. He was a river to us, his people. He was the sun, dependably there even behind the vagaries of the weather. But let me descend to bare literalism. FDR brought "the Relief." He brought the WPA, which extended the town’s water and sewer systems and built bathhouses on the beaches, employing the desperate in the process. He brought the WPA band, where my musician brother Vito played alongside world-class musicians, some among them refugees from the great orchestras of Europe—incomparable experience for a talented but largely self-taught provincial musician. And FDR brought the labor laws that made it possible to form a union at Nash Motors (though not without a violent organizational strike in 1936).

For my mother, FDR was most immediately present in the Relief. For food we were almost self-sufficient with our three large gardens. (One covered an entire city lot, 60 by 120 feet. Eventually, with the prosperity of the War, we bought that lot and my parents planted it right up until the year they died.) For peasants, gardening was not just a useful skill but a means of fulfillment. Perhaps it was the endeavor that most shored up their self-esteem. The side effect of paid labor was humiliation, always. It was not just a question of exploitation—though that was, and mainly remains, the case. But paid labor never allowed peasants to use those skills they had. These were of course obsolete skills. But the Italian gardens in town, on the richest soil in the world, were showplaces, at once lush and manicured, a confusion of nature and artifice. How often I stood in some garden with my father and neighbors, the men smoking, perhaps companionably sharing the costly ready-mades. The conversation proceeded from shrewd judgments of this particular garden—for example, on the method of staking tomatoes, or on some variety of vegetable. (As a matter of fact, we never staked our tomatoes, and my father regarded it as an affectation. And our pole beans were family heirlooms, unknown to the world of commerce.) But I think that behind the particulars lay mystery in both senses of the word: as craft and as awesome inscrutable
force. And truly I think that the ground of their reflections was the union, in proper work, of need and love—the worker at once effecting the good and thereby becoming good.

But we were not really self-sufficient, not even in food. We needed a weekly or biweekly trip to the Relief warehouse, where we loaded a coaster wagon with oranges, peanut butter, whole wheat flour, oatmeal, brown sugar, Mazola corn oil, and no doubt other items I cannot remember. Sometimes, when the seven of us sat to eat, my father would study the loaded table, intoning "Richezza! Richezza!" [Wealth! Wealth!]

Now, as I reflect on all this, it seems that my father, though barely literate, was wise in the manner of John Ruskin. In grandeur of scope, Ruskin eschewed the peephole perspective of economics: he distinguished true wealth, the enabler of happiness and virtue, of dignity and self-worth, from "illth," the fraud and delusion intrinsic to the valuation of things as commodities. (For his gold standard, Ruskin looked to water and air; he could not anticipate that both would one day be sold in bottles and thereby come under the purview of economists.) Even in his art criticism Ruskin scorned the gray and threadbare notion that a thing is only what it is. The stones of Gothic buildings, he noted, are not finely worked, nor is the whole structure executed according to a rigorously detailed plan. Considered in themselves these structures seem full of "wolfish life" and "rough strength" but also "uncouth." Considered in a human perspective, as things connected to the ensemble of their makers, these works are "all dignity and honorableness":

...it is the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture, that they...receive the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole.

These stone monuments speak of freedom and dignity, of "the individual value of each soul." Even "inferior minds" are drawn into a cooperative venture, in order that everyone may be personally fulfilled. It is piquant to imagine that when FDR said, "We want a society that includes everyone," he might have been echoing Ruskin.

The gardens of the Italians in the neighborhood were Gothic in Ruskin's sense, but of course they produced food. And food is a powerful archetypal symbol. Incidental to its obvious use, it nourishes the spirit. I am not revisiting a windy trope nor invoking a metaphysical construct. Even simple peasants, even "inferior minds," experience the powerful emotive force in the idea of bread, the idea of breaking bread. My mother, for relevant example, could not have anyone in her house for more than a few minutes without offering food. (Once, when she offered food to the Fuller Brush salesman, I told her she didn't have to do it; she owed him nothing. I carry with me the memory of him standing anything." Indeed.

It is not beyond all others—the host-guest eternities of Philemon and Philemon, a poor couple, and the two strangers happened across, a device that adds little to power to reward good life—of one single hour see ourselves to turn them into two trees rising in the sun. Clearly, they know and show that the heart's root to imagine Food as a natural symbol of infinite resonance: the artifact and a parochial constructs, often ad hoc, of human rights and democracies, for any meaning of democracy. Some people may cherish the absolutely predictable America-haters.

Food, on the other hand, well-being, with gracious relationship. Beyond the Last Supper did not exterminate the power of a symbol of our own body and transubstantiation.

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It is not beyond all conjecture that my Ma inherited—unknowndefect to her—the host-guest ethic from the ancients, even from the tale of Baucis and Philemon, a poor old couple who take in and feed two strangers. That the two strangers happen to be Zeus and Hermes in disguise is a formal device that adds little to the moral force of the story. However, gods have power to reward good behavior. As boon, the loving couple asks only “Let one single hour see our death.” When that hour strikes, the gods change them into two trees rooted in the same soil, their branches embracing in the sun. Clearly, the gods know about the love bond, but they also know and show that the social bond—empathy with strangers—is not merely a convention but an active principle, perhaps in nature, perhaps transcendent.

In another memoir I have written about this tale, for I once translated it for my father and was gratified by his grasp of its import. He sensed that the couple entered a fitting afterlife as trees. Only question the primacy of the ego and such a consummation is devoutly to be wished, for it brings us serenity here, now. My mother, being not at all of my father’s reflective turn of mind, was not part of our discussion, but now it tickles me about the heart’s root to imagine that my mother might, through cultural osmosis, have absorbed essentials of the this ancient story.

Food as a natural symbol differs radically from that other symbol of infinite resonance: the flag. Nothing natural, nothing universal: here’s an artifact and a parochial one, however widespread. Its meanings are social constructs, often ad hoc. These meanings may range widely, from a beacon of human rights and democracy to aggressive xenophobia. Hardly matters, for any meaning tears the social fabric which the flag represents. Some people may cherish the ideal of civil rights, for example, but it is absolutely predictable that others will revile them as security risks if not America-haters.

Food, on the other hand, is a symbol compellingly associated with well-being, with graciousness, with the mutually gratifying host-guest relationship. Beyond that, a more extravagant claim is universally adduced: breaking bread together is a performative rite which holds the world together. Neglect it, and chaos follows. It’s almost impossible to exaggerate the power of bread as symbol, as agency of human solidarity. The Last Supper did not establish that power; rather it took onto itself the power of a symbol of communion so long established that it seems part of our own body and blood—whatever your stand on the doctrine of transubstantiation.

I think that my Ma’s vote for Roosevelt arose out of a primeval, elemental, inchoate, utterly non-rational moral sense, out of that confused
collection of compulsions and inhibitions that account for our condition as social animals. By voting she extended her sense of community beyond the immediacies of family, beyond the Italian neighborhood, into the larger polity. But to say that much is already to go too far. Words like *polity, society, the state*—these are problems for even the most sophisticated thinkers. They were no problem at all for my mother since they were as meaningless as *legislative, executive, and judicial*. Perhaps the marks on the ballot were gestures, perhaps of gratitude, perhaps of faith. No matter: Roosevelt would understand.

Of course my mother could not reason thus. Of course my speculations are not to be confused with positivist argument. I look for meaning in events that without my intercession would be just one damned thing after another. I look for meaning in the heart of someone who loved me: without my intercession, that heart would be just a four-chambered blood-pump. Such truth, if any, is the truth of narrative, a made thing impossible to detach from the maker. As maker, I am like Wallace Stevens' singer: "...there never was a world for her! Except the one she sang and, singing, made." Those who think that truth or meaning is not made but found, that truth is not a personal attainment but a publicly owned datum—let them satisfy the heart's yearnings with the objectivity of science or the delusions of organized religion.

To return to my narrative: My mother's vote for Roosevelt was a rite, her way of expressing an aspect of the social bond which would otherwise be altogether inexpressible. To me this seems wholesome and modest, a case of an ideal made earthy. I am appalled at the general repudiation of this ideal, the general scorn for the mutual relationship of polity and citizen, the general contempt, most shocking among the "family values" crowd, for those generous-minded metaphors for imaging the social process—metaphors I have already evoked: food as communion, the home and the host-guest ethic as normative social models, a conception of things larger than they are, large enough to include the makers, thus honoring the "individual value of each soul."

I am not alluding to a neo-conservative accomplishment: the neo-cons are merely creatures of a long-drawn dilapidation of the social contract. For several hundred years the "dole," the Relief, has by explicit intention punished those unfitted or unwilling to worship the Golden Calf. The infamous Workhouses spawned by the Industrial Revolution were not charities but "houses of correction" designed not to correct but only to deter. By hellish example, not unlike public executions, they demonstrated society's abhorrence of the crime of poverty. The dignity of man inheres in his service to something larger and other—and in this case that Something is the Market. Even the generous and humane J. S. Mill was sucked into this vortex: "...as required by first principles...the receipt of parish relief should be peremptory (i.e., *positive Government*). As a result the workhouses have now been privatized: the formerly healthy contributor to society is now an informal (i.e., *very privatized*)

If I continue along this line of thought and examine the connection of my views. I hope it is already clear in her something like my mother's wisdom ought to produce a sort of cerebral activity (or, intellectual!)? But why? Those innocent views and my effort to exercise that irrepressible penchant for meaning.

I read recently a kind of Spinoza. He was a Jew, and the species of reason was formally and brutally "unintelligible to the average people" (i.e., a relief") As a philosopher of nature and the species of reason, the species of reason of Euclidean geometry, and his being a metaphysician, a kind of mind to figure forth the metaphysics abhors excessive intuitive concepts (plato, straight line is the shortest distance between two points). Spinoza is a moral antagonist of Euclid. Metaphysics abhors excessive intuitive concepts (plato, straight line is the shortest distance between two points). Spinoza is a moral antagonist of Euclid.

Now the thesis of the passage is that Spinoza, s philosophy, his upbringing is determined by the dream of tracing Euclid: and even his Greekness? Perhaps his brilliant ratiocination to
account for our conditioned sense of community into an neighborhood, into perhaps the marks on the faces of faith. No matter:

Of course my speculative bent. I look for meaning in just one damned thing someone who loved me: four-chambered bloodmade thing impossible Wallace Stevens' singer: she sang and, singing, was not made but found, the owned datum—let activity of science or the Roosevelt was a rite, which would otherwise be some and modest, a case serial repudiation of this polity and citizen, "family values" crowd, among the social process—emotion, the home and the perception of things larger reformers, thus honoring the establishment: the neo-cons of the social contract. was by explicit intention the Golden Calf. The and Revolution were not to correct but only to positions, they demonstrated dignity of man inheres in his case that Something S. Mill was sucked into receipt of parish relief

should be peremptory disqualification for the franchise" (On Representative Government). As also required by first principles, the workhouse has now been privatized: the sweatshop is no longer a cost to the parish but a healthy contributor to GDP. The shame and pain abide. Also, by way of informal (i.e., very private) initiatives the poor are still denied the vote.

If I continue along this road, I'll be carried ever further from the homely and lived virtues of my mother. Before leaving off, however, I want to examine the connection between her simple heart and my own book-fed views. I hope it is already clear that now, in bookish old age, I recognize in her something like wisdom. I use the word with some trepidation, for wisdom ought to proceed from abstract thought, or at least from some sort of cerebral activity. (Could I question that and still pretend to be an intellectual?) But why do I find her wise? The consonance between her innocent views and my own remains a conundrum, indeed a mystery. In order to exercise that mystery, I must further indulge the intellectual's ir"}

The thesis of the book [Betraying Spinoza, by Rebecca Goldstein] is that Spinoza's philosophy is rooted in his Jewishness, that among his gifts his upbringing is determinative. This is a dubious thesis. Would anyone dream of tracing Euclid's achievement back to, say, his toilet training or even his Greekness? Perhaps it is also demeaning, for it reduces Spinoza's brilliant ratiocination to mere rationalization, an abstruse offering of good
reasons in place of real causes deep in Spinoza’s psycho-biography. Spinoza, poor guy, didn’t know of these real causes. Goldstein, as biographer, must try to know Spinoza better than he knows himself.

So the thesis is counterintuitive and a bit insulting—a “betraying” of the philosopher not intended in the title. Nonetheless, it may be true and is certainly not demonstrably false. And if it may be true for a giant intelligence like Spinoza, then what about me? I pore over my beloved texts; I try to hone my critical faculties; I advertise myself as beneficiary of the whole Conversation of Mankind. Yet in the end, perhaps my real inheritance I got at home, by way of those gardens and the Relief and the seven of us at the dinner table. And not least by the example of my mother, for whom citizenship, morally understood, is but an extension of family, home, garden, the host-guest relationship.

So?

So maybe what I cherish in that larger Conversation (Ruskin, for example) and what I spurn with contumely (orthodox economic theory) is determined by all that in boyhood was imprinted on my soul? So what about my unstoppable talk? Can it all be gathered up into a one-sentence text? And did my Ma provide that text when she said, “You don’t understand anything”? So, after a lifetime of effort, have I become an anti-intellectual intellectual?