

## **Leaving Poggioreale: Rosa Spina's Story**

**By Granddaughter  
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Written for Poggioreale in America**



The soft creases in the smiling face of Rosa Spina (Todaro) are a part of my early memories as a little girl growing up in Chicago. Her face became more and more familiar to me as my mom, Therese Todaro, showed me hundreds of black and white photos glued to the pages of her treasured family albums. She wanted to tell her children about her life with her mama, Rosa, to keep her memory alive. As a child I loved sitting on mom's lap as she told vivid stories about each person in the photos. As the years went by, it was the stories she told about her late mother, Rosa Spina of Poggioreale, Sicily, who captivated me the most. Although I had never met her, it didn't take long before I would imagine with all my might that I could sit on my grandma's lap, enveloped in her floral apron, inhaling the faint smell of basil from her pocket and keenly listening to her words as she spoke in the broken English that mom sweetly described.

Rosa Spina was born in Sicily on October 20, 1882 in a small town called Poggioreale, a place whose name we were taught to pronounce at an early age. Knowledge of her home town became an important part of our maternal family lore. Rosa said that her early life there was a happy one, but she explained that she was not destined to stay there for the rest of her life like her own mother would do. She tearfully told her daughter that she had to leave her beloved mama in Sicily, and she was never to see her again. Rosa cried at each retelling.

Records from Sicily tell us that Rosa was born to Nicolò Spina and Agnese Piccione. As was often the custom, Rosa's marriage was arranged. Her stern father felt compelled to marry off his oldest daughter when she was but sixteen. He chose a man from an established Poggiorealese family and promised her hand in marriage to Salvatore Todaro who was fifteen years older than her. They married a few short years later. The earliest photograph from Poggioreale of this couple shows a lovely Rosa standing tall over her new husband and mother-in-law, Maria Allegra. The stoic sadness of her lovely face can be felt even now, more than 120 years later.

Rosa complied with her father's edict of marriage. She was described as a lovely, respectful and shy young woman who was talented at sewing and delicate embroidery. An indelible memory that she shared with her youngest daughter was the day her papa came upon her on their balcony while she was sewing. She described how she was wistfully looking over the town's stone streets, secretly daydreaming of the man she loved, a handsome local policeman. Nicolò found her in this pensive state and harshly chastised her, slapping her hard across the face, warning her in Sicilian that she was to forget that man because she was promised to marry another! Rosa wept, but she respected her father's decision and knew she would be marrying Salvatore as she was instructed.

On the day of their marriage, Rosa was only nineteen years old and Salvatore was thirty-five when they began their life as husband and wife. Church records show that they were married on April 26, 1902. A solitary photograph was found of the newly married couple and was entrusted to her youngest daughter who, many decades later, passed it on to her own children. Poggiorealese history tells us that traveling photographers would visit local Sicilian villages to take family photos that were posed out of doors. Having



visited Poggioreale twice, I imagine that I can recognize the stone walls of Poggioreale in the background of this photograph. I surely recognize my mother Therese's writing above the rare, softly faded images of Rosa, Salvatore and his mother, Maria Allegro.



Life must have prospered for a period of time for Rosa and her immediate family as one might discern from this family photo taken circa 1907. She had already given birth to two boys. Looking at this family photo we see Nonno Nicolo sitting next to Nonna Agnese who is tightly holding the hand of her first grandson, Rosa's son Antonino born in 1905. Mama Rosa is holding her new, small son Nicolino (born 1905) on her lap. Papa Salvatore is seated beside his mother-in-law looking prosperous. Also pictured are



Rosa's younger brother, Giuseppe Spina, who is posing confidently, almost defiantly, as he looks at the camera. Alongside are his younger sisters, Rosaria and Girolama Spina.



The Spina Family circa 1907 in Poggioreale

This is a family photo that does not look like the period's *contadini* (farmers) nor did Rosa's stories did not speak of physical hard work while she was in Poggioreale. The family is dressed well for the time with the men dapper in their hats, suits with ties, dress shirts and vests. All three men have watches and shiny fobs crossing their vests. The women's dresses were well-made and adorned with detailed fabric and trim, all far more formal than laborers of the town are depicted in photos. If you look closely, you can see

some jewelry on the women. The children's garb was hand-sewn with beautifully detailed fabric and lace as well. It is easy for me to imagine them walking on Poggioreale's Corso Umberto among other townspeople, visiting shops and strolling down the stone street. We have been told by former residents that farmers would not walk down the main street due to the lack of more formal clothing.

By the early 1900s, financial times must have gotten worse for this family. Rosa's own younger brother, Guiseppe Spina, boarded the *SS Piemonte* in Palermo in September 1907; his destination was New Orleans following the path of many Poggiorealesi before him. Conversations of leaving Poggioreale surely intensified in their household. Rosa's husband Salvatore did not want to leave Sicily, but now he was uncomfortably witnessing his wife's siblings following the path to America like his own brothers. By August 1913, Rosa's younger sisters, Rosaria and Girolamo Spina, traveled to Naples to board the *SS Barbarossa* arriving in New York. The ship record states that their brother provided for their passage so they could join him in Chicago where he had finally settled after leaving New Orleans. I can only imagine the tearful conversations between Rosa and her parents about her possibility of leaving Poggioreale for America.

Salvatore still refused to leave Sicily. Eventually, Rosa convinced him to do so when she realized they would have to follow other family members to America if they were to survive. Thus, in spite of his reluctance, he used the money that his younger brother Rosario sent him to buy tickets to sail on the *SS Ancona* on November 7, 1912. It was decided that he would take along their first-born son, Antonino, who was only seven years old. The plan was for Salvatore to prepare the way for his Rosa and their second-born. Did they realize at the time that Rosa was pregnant? We will never know.

Rosa begged her parents to come with her when it was time to join her husband in America. She did not want them to be left behind. Agnese was resolute, and Nicolo vowed to stay by her side in Sicily. Once Rosa and her youngest son would depart, they would be left without all of their children and grandchildren. It must have been difficult for them to see how many people from their own town were leaving for America. Even when Salvatore and their little boy arrived safely in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on November 20, 1912, his ship records showed many names of men from Poggioreale

whose destination was one of several cities in the United States. Salvatore specifically listed Highbank, Texas as his destination to join cousins there. Life in Sicily must have been untenable for so many to depart their homeland.

And so it came to pass that Rosa herself left Poggioreale for an unfathomably distant place called America. She was alone and now about five months pregnant as she tightly held her son Nicolino's little hand. They had borrowed a donkey and cart to make it to the ship in Palermo. She boarded the *SS Ancona* on April 17, 1913, destined to join her husband and her oldest little boy in unknown America. Years later she told her daughter that she felt shy and uncomfortable among so many strangers. She also suffered a terrible fear that her pregnancy would be discovered. She bound herself into a corset each day to hide her pregnancy. She was seasick and ill for the entire voyage. Still, stubbornly, she summoned the grit to endure the ocean voyage for 15 days. She did not complain; she confided in no one.

Like her husband a year prior, Rosa and little Nicolino arrived in Philadelphia on May 1, 1913. Somehow the pair found their way to Texas; the details of that second part of their journey has a long-lost story. When she finally reached Texas, her first look around was one of great disappointment. She was disillusioned and upset. The land was, in her eyes, an ugly brown; all signs of green vegetation were missing. She couldn't help but cry to herself about how she was forced to leave her verdant home. At long last, Rosa joined Salvatore, and the family of four was together again. She was exhausted, pregnant and felt weak. Still, she recalled, she had to summon the strength to help on the farm by cooking and cleaning, and showing her husband's family that she was thankful for the opportunity to be there.

Meeting her husband's Texas relatives for the first time, she recalled that her new family wasn't very impressed with this shy, sad young woman. She said they were impatient and abrupt with her, and had no conception of what Rosa was feeling. She felt that Salvatore's two brothers, Rosario and Vittorio, had forgotten too much of their lives in Sicily and had even changed their first names to be Americanized. They had come to this new land and each married local Italian Texas girls. They were all struggling to make a living, raising cotton; they leased the land, hoping to own it someday. Rosa





Rare photo of Rosa in Texas  
with the Cangelose Family  
Unknown date

felt that her brothers-in-law had embraced a demanding, difficult rural life in America and in the process had forgotten too much about their upbringing in Poggioreale. They did not understand why she appeared to be so unhappy.

Salvatore was, by then, forty-five years old; he and his two very young sons had to learn to pick cotton, taken out of school for the harvest. Since thirty-year-old Rosa was pregnant, she was spared the task of working in the fields for a time. Instead, she learned to perform the work required to run an American farm household, cooking, cleaning and tending to small ones while the other women helped with the harvest. Rosa was, at least, thankful that they had a water pump in the kitchen; in Poggioreale the family had to carry water from the well. She worked harder and longer than she ever had to

do in Sicily, but she did not complain. When the baby was due, she looked forward to a few days of rest. Her sister-in-law made arrangements for a midwife; she said the birth was uneventful.

As for her husband, Rosa recalled that Salvatore, now called Sam, was unable to handle some of the physical demands of farm life. She knew that she needed to work to help her family survive. Rosa wrote to her sisters in Chicago every week without fail. She missed them so much, and envied them as they told of their life in a large city like Chicago with plenty of jobs and much to offer. When she wrote to her parents in Sicily, she never told them of the hardships that she was enduring in America and beckoned them to come, too. But she was truthful with her sisters and poured out her soul to them. They were living with their brother, Guisepppe, who had married and had his own flat. The young women found jobs, and were looking actively for husbands of their own.

They urged her to bring her family to Chicago where life would be more manageable and she could get a good, stable job. And so, for a second time in their marriage, Rosa urged her husband to move the family. The decision might have been easier this time, she said, because Sam was having difficulty coping with life in Texas. She promised him an easier life where she could help support the family.

The Todaro family of five left Texas for the big city. They rented an apartment; soon Rosa got a job where she worked in downtown Chicago sewing men's suits in the garment industry. After a while, Sam stayed home with her newest and fourth child, my mother Therese. Rosa found a job working in what was called a "sweat shop" where many women toiled in poor conditions doing production sewing. Occasionally she brought home remnants of work supplies such as scraps of silk fabric used for vests and bobbins of thread. Some of these items made it to the 21st century when her daughter Therese passed them on to her children as mementos of a time long forgotten.

As soon as Rosa could manage, she began to save money from each paycheck. Like others, her distrust in banks was the result of living through the depression years, so for years she kept her savings pinned to her garments. Life began to blossom and they kept their Sicilian traditions alive

even though they all took on Americanized first names. In a few years, she saved enough money to buy a building to house her entire family. Now calling herself Rose, she purchased 3137 Polk Street in Chicago's famed Italian neighborhood where many *paisani* lived. She turned the roomy two-flat with a basement and large attic into a home for her entire family. With the help and guidance of her brother, now called Joe, the remodeling of her apartment building took place to accommodate more family. Antonino now called himself Tom, and he assumed the role of the male head of the family alongside his mother since his father Sam had become ill.

Soon the entire Todaro family of Chicago lived in the house on Polk street: Rose and Sam, their sons Tom and Nicolino (who now called himself Nick,) daughter Mary and her youngest child, Therese, born in 1919. The brick two-flat swelled to house this growing family and it became their family center. Her new daughter-in-law Loretta Mandoli moved in and gave birth to Rose's first grandbaby, Rose Marie. After leaving the house to marry, her oldest daughter Mary returned home with her small child, Doris Pasthoff, after she became a widow. Years later, her son-in-law Christopher Tondola moved in when Therese got married and they had their first two children, Carm Rose and Rose Ann Tondola. The house wasn't sold until after Rose's death in 1950. Rosa Spina of Poggioreale had made her indelible contribution in America. She was a woman ahead of her times who took the reins of her family and led them to stability, teaching by example what tenacity and hard work can accomplish.

Back home in Sicily, Nicolo and Agnese were heartbroken that they had lost their four children to America by 1913. All three daughters wrote regularly and begged them to come to Chicago. Agnese was resolute; she vowed to never to leave Sicily; her husband promised to stay by her side. They both kept their word; Agnese died on May 12, 1918. She was never to see her children or grandsons again; she never got a chance to meet her daughters' husbands or her new grandchildren born in America. On September 30, 1919, Nicolò himself boarded a ship bound for America. He wanted to live his remaining years with his children and grandchildren in America. He insisted on a photo with each of his children. The photo below was taken in 1920 and in many ways bears a strong remembrance to the 1907 family photo taken in Poggioreale.





Perhaps ironically, it was the home of his oldest daughter, Rosa, where he lived out the last few years of his life when he bravely left his beloved Sicily. His wife Agnese was buried in Palermo in 1918; he was buried in Chicago in 1927. Rose Spina Todaro died in America in 1950 when she was only 61; my mother was pregnant with me, her third child, when she had to bear the burden of losing her own mother. Surely she tried to quell some of her grief by preparing for my birth. Mom told me that I was supposed to be my father's first son for whom he was waiting impatiently. But before she died, Grandma Rose divined with her Poggiorealese wisdom that no, I would be born a girl and should be named Christine, the feminine version of my



father's name. To my great sadness, I never got the chance to meet my grandmother.

Poignantly, Rose told my mother that one thing her father Nicolò said he was determined to do before he died was to ask for her forgiveness for his stubborn actions when she was a young woman in Sicily. In remembering both his edict and his harsh actions, he would shake his head incredulously. "How could I have been so foolish?" he exclaimed in Sicilian. After all, Rosa and her policeman were in love, everyone knew that. Why, in heaven's name, did he insist on her marrying a man she didn't know or love? He decided that he was a stupid man, and God would surely punish him. He lamented that maybe that's why he had been stricken with asthma, this difficulty in breathing! He wanted to see Rosa again, and to beg her forgiveness.

And so he did.

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Christine (Tondola) Anderson, Granddaughter

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Story details were obtained from verbal and written stories by Therese Tondola, her photo albums, and supporting records from both America and Sicily.



Rosa Spina and Salvatore Todaro  
Taken from their 1902 wedding portrait in Poggioreale



The SS *Ancona*  
Both Salvatore Todaro, Rosa Spina and their young sons  
sailed on this ship less than one year apart.





Rose and Sam in Chicago  
In their later years, sitting on the porch of 3137 Polk Street  
Bottom Left: Rose with Daughter Therese Tondola  
Bottom Right: Rose with Son-in-Law Christopher Tondola







A typical Sunday attending church in Chicago.  
Members of the Todaro Family  
1930s



On one of their frequent family picnics.  
On the bench: Sam and Rose Todaro.  
On the ground: Sisters Mary (left) and Therese Todaro.





Above: Rosa with her two youngest granddaughters, Carm Rose Tondola and Rose Ann Tondola, shortly before her passing.



Salvatore "Sam" and Rosa "Rose" Todaro  
Chicago, 1945

Bottom Left: Nicolò Spina in Chicago.  
BottomRight: Rosa tending her father's grave in  
Chicago, 1927.

