

The Nicolo Spina Story

As told by his Great Granddaughter Christine (Tina) Anderson, February 2021

Nicolo Spina was born in Palermo, Sicily on May 9, 1858. He moved to Poggioreale with Agnese Piccione who was born in Monreale on June 15, 1855. Nicolo and Agnese were married in Poggioreale on June 2, 1886 where they raised four children who each eventually departed for America. Nicolo didn't come to America until 1919 after his wife had died. He lived in Chicago until his death in 1927; he is buried in St. Joseph Cemetery in Melrose Park, Illinois.

I have not found any written biographical information about Nicolo, therefore I can only note factual records we located combined with the stories my mother Therese passed down to me and my siblings about our great grandfather.

He arrived in America in 1919 when my mother was under one year old; he died in 1927 when my mother was only eight years old. Her recollections, therefore, are as a small child. Therese remembered, for example, that her grandfather taught her Italian at a very early age; he himself did not speak English. He suffered from asthma and frequently rested in their living room. While she felt love for him, she would sometimes crawl low on the floor trying to escape his view so that she could play alone. He would see her and good-naturedly chide her in Italian, "I see you! I know you are there!" She remembered that he was very kind to her.

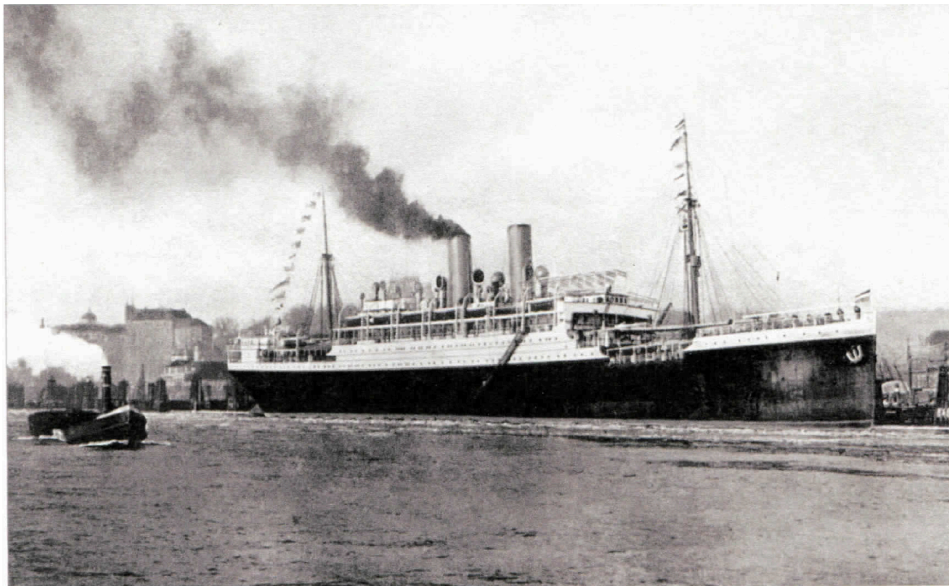
I am thankful that my Grandmother Rosa told stories to my mother so that they can be enjoyed today. My mother was very close to her precious Mama, and she managed to keep her memory alive for another generation along with her memories of her Grandfather Nicolo. I especially appreciate the warm feelings they would conjure when I was very young because I never had the pleasure of hearing them firsthand from my Grandma; sadly she died just before I was born.



Photo Taken in Poggioreale Circa 1907
Front Row: Son-in-law Salvatore Todaro, Wife Agnese Piccione holding the hand of Grandson Antonino (Tom) Todaro, Nicolo Spina, and Daughter Rosa Spina holding her baby Nicolino Todaro. Back Row: Daughter Rosaria (Sarah) Spina, Daughter Girolama (Mamie), and Son Guiseppe (Joe) Spina

We were always told that Nicolo was an artist. It was only recently that I receive a handful of records with the help of genealogist Rosario Sanfilippo of Partanna, Sicily. Documents he retrieved in Palermo list Nicolo's occupation as "indoratore", a word that translates to "gilder", an artist who applies a thin layer of gold onto objects or paintings. We find the same description on his passenger list for the SS *Pesaro* on which he sailed to America in 1919, however, it was crossed out and the English notation "painter/house" was inserted. It is reasonable to surmise that Nicolo was invited to Poggioreale as an artisan to create or modify the ornate wall paintings in the many churches in the town, and perhaps in the homes of wealthy Poggiorealesi. He likely had wealthy patrons as was the custom of the times. In any case, it is clear by observing the photographs of Nicolo and wife Agnese that their attire, accessories and demeanor seem to suggest they were townspeople of some standing.

Interestingly, the birth documents showing that Nicolo was born in Palermo also notate his father's occupation as "indoratore". One can only wonder if Nicolo studied his father's trade or applied his own skills in Palermo which of course was an artistic center. Perhaps he trained or applied his skills in Monreale where he seems to have met his future wife Agnese who was born there. It can only be surmised that Nicolo spent time at the renowned Monreale Cathedral, with its ornate gilding known worldwide, is located in her birthplace!



We don't know when Nicolo and Agnese moved away from Poggioreale after the last of their children left Sicily. Neither do we know the details of Nicolo's journey to America. We do know by examining the death record of his wife that she died while they were living in Palermo on May 12, 1918. By September 1919 Nicolo was boarding a ship to America. One can assume that he said farewell to his family in Palermo and set his sights on his new life in Chicago where his four children and six grandchildren lived. There he watched his family thrive until he died in the home of his daughter Rosa.

Because of the lack of written biographical information, I have relied heavily on the life stories Rosa had to tell my mother who in turn told her five children as we were growing up. Nicolo's granddaughter, Therese, retold some important stories from her mother who was his oldest daughter. Rosa was born in Poggioreale and lived with him there until she left for America with her

husband and two young sons when she was 31 years old in 1913. She told her daughter that her father was a very smart man who was an artist, and that he had what she described as an “artist’s temperament.” She also said her father was a stern man who arranged her marriage to Salvatore Todaro, a local Poggioreale man who was almost 15 years her senior. Rosa was very unhappy about this unwanted betrothal because she was in love with another man, a local policeman. One day, Rosa emotionally would recount, she was gazing out the balcony of their Poggioreale home when her father approached her. Thinking she was looking wistfully in the direction of the streets and her beloved, he harshly slapped her in the face! He scolded her to forget the policeman because she must marry Salvatore! Rosa was a dutiful daughter, so she fulfilled the obligation her father made. How sad that, years later after Nicolo came to Chicago as a widower to live with his eldest daughter in her family home, he must have softened with age. Rosa said that he expressed that he regretted forcing her to marry Salvatore and imposing his old-fashioned will upon her at the age of 20.

Rosa said that her mother, Agnese, was devastated that her children and two small grandsons left Poggioreale to pursue lives in America. It is said that she refused to leave Sicily in spite of her great sadness because of her children’s departure; we know that she died never having seen them again since the day they left Poggioreale. Rosa used to weep, mourning the fact that she and her siblings never saw her mother again. Nicolo clearly respected his wife’s wishes to remain in Sicily because he only departed for America in 1919 after she died in 1918. He wanted to spend his remaining years with his children and grandchildren.

Rosa also spoke about her father’s determination to create professional portraits with each of his children and their families after he finally came to America. In fact, while reviewing my mother’s photo collection several years ago, I came across the Chicago photographic portraits of Nicolo Spina with his daughter Rosa, her husband Salvatore, and their children Antonino (Tom), Nicholas (Nick), Mary, and Therese (Terry). I also found a portrait of Nicolo with his daughter Rosaria (Sarah), her husband Frank Butera. I then found a third portrait of Nicolo with Girolama (Mamie) Spina, her husband John Butera, and their children Lena and Jasper. I theorize that there must be a portrait of Nicolo with his only son, Guisepppe (Joe) with his family, but I have had no luck locating it, if it actually exists.



Nicolo Spina with Daughter Rosaria (Sarah)
and Husband Frank Butera
Chicago, Circa 1919



Nicolo Spina with Daughter Girolama (Mamie),
Husband John Butera, and Childred Lena and Jasper
Chicago Circa 1919





Headstone located in Mt. Carmel Catholic Cemetary, Hillside, Cook County, Illinois
This is how the stone looks today.
Note that the stone has been laid flat to conform to modern requirements.



The photo on the left shows the gravesite in the very early years.

The photo on the right shows Nicolo's oldest daughter Rose with whom he lived from 1919 until his death in 1927. She lovingly tended his grave with her daughter, Therese.



This photo of Nicolo Spina and his wife, Agnese Piccione, was taken in Poggioreale and appeared on this postcard. It was likely sent to his children living in America.