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Danilo Dolci

by Jaclyn Welch

Located off the western coast of southern Italy, Sicily is a large island that has long been the home of mafioso who look to profit from the island's agriculture-based economy. Poor, and often having little education, Sicilian peasants have learned to see the government as being filled with corrupt officials who are more interested in padding their bank accounts than in improving the lives of peasants. Due to this, Sicilians have a strong sense of omerta the idea of receiving help locally rather than getting it from outsiders. It was into this environment that an outsider did arrive to help in 1952.

Danilo Dolci arrived in the slums of Trappeto with the idea that he could use his peace-loving background to make a difference in the lives of Sicilians. Danilo was born in 1924 in the northern village of Sesana (which later became a part of Yugoslavia) to parents who thought nothing wrong with beating their children as a form of punishment. The beatings he received, often occurring even though he had done nothing wrong, would go on to play a big role in Dolci's hatred of violence as an adult. (Mangione, 135)

In 1925, when Danilo was a year old, Mussolini rose to power and declared Italy to be a fascist state. This would have little affect over Dolci's early years which he claims were quite normal but would greatly affect a teenage Danilo. As a teenager Dolci saw Europe enter into World War II, and he detested even the idea of war. Danilo worried his family by tearing down any Nazi posters he came across, even though he realized that he could be drafted into Mussolini's Fascist army at any time. According to Danilo, "I had never heard the phrase 'conscientious objector' and I had no idea there were such persons in the world, but I felt strongly that it was wrong to kill people and I was determined never to do so." Danilo tried to escape from Nazi authorities who suspected him of tearing down the posters, but he was caught while trying to reach Rome and ended up in jail for a short time. (Mangione, 137)

After World War II, Danilo was inspired by the work of a Catholic priest named Don Zeno to give up his middle class standard of living to work with the poor and unfortunate. Though he himself had never been a big follower of the Catholic Church (much to his mother's chagrin), Danilo liked the work he saw the priest doing, and quit school at the age of twenty-five to join him. (Mangione, 134) Don Zeno was running Nomadelpia, a Christian commune in Tuscany who's purpose was to take care of war orphans. Danilo learned to abandon the middle class values of his family in order to see that the people of Nomadelpia were just as beautiful and just as good as members of the upper classes even if they did not lead lives that were filled with luxuries and privileges. Danilo

worked alongside everyone else, cleaning latrines and hoeing gardens. (Dolci, Sicilian, 302) Don Zeno was so impressed with Danilo's work that he had Danilo set up another commune in Tuscany called Ceffare! lo. It was while working at Ceffarello that the army, though no longer under the control of Mussolini and fascists, finally caught up to Dolci he had to serve his compulsory army time in 1951. (Mangione, 139)

It was during this time period that Danilo became aware of the workings of the Christian Democrats, as Don Zeno was being harassed by officials, namely the Minister of Police, who felt he was a Communist. The government wanted to put the orphans into asylums and close down both Nomadelphia and Ceffarello, and even the Vatican turned against Don Zeno, calling him the "mad priest." Danilo had to sit by and watch as government forces took off with many of the commune's children, and then he had to gather up all his energy to aid in the building of a new Nomadelphia. By 1952, he was ready to move on and work elsewhere. (Mangione, 140)

Dolci decided to head for "the poorest place I had ever known"-- the western Sicily town of Trappeto. (Dolci, Sicilian, 302) Danilo realizes that when he first came to Trappeto, he was full of Northern stereotypes about the South, even though he had already learned to see past a person's social standing. As Danilo says, "Coming from the North, I knew I was totally ignorant. Looking all around me, I saw no streets, just mud and dust... I started working with masons and peasants, who kindly, gently, taught me their trades. That way my spectacles were no longer a barrier. Every day, all day, as the handle of hoe or shovel burned the blisters deeper, I learned more than any book could teach me about this people's struggle to exist..." (Dolci, Sicilian, xv)

From the beginning, Danilo noticed that people were suspicious about telling details of their lives to an outsider. When interviewing different people, Dolci noticed that if he changed his interviewing style to fit the person being interviewed, that person would politely, though suspiciously. Danilo learned that he had to be friendly, yet forceful enough to convince them that they needed to tell him the truth. (Dolci, Waste, 13) Dolci made the peasants realize that he was there to help them unite and improve their living standards, unlike the Mafia, who tried to improve their own lives but not those of the peasants. Due to this, Dolci, with his peaceful way of doing things, came to be an opponent of the Mafia.

Dolci began his crusade against the Mafia by claiming that government officials were receiving help in their elections from the Mafia. Rather than making his accusations only in Sicily, Danilo would travel to Rome to participate before the Anti-Mafia Commission to ensure that his worries about the Mafia in Sicily were heard. When Sicilians backlashed at him for this, Dolci would make copies of the propaganda produced against him for his supporters and continue on with his work. (Mangione, 20) His willingness to stand up to the Mafia in his quest to improve the living conditions of Sicilians helped him to gain the confidence of the locals.

Early on, Danilo realized that he would get nowhere with officials if he tried to reach them in conventional ways. He tried at first to talk to officials, or at least their secretaries, but soon found out that "the doormen behave like lazy dogs assigned to guard the tranquility of their masters." (Mangione, 143) This led to Danilo using a new method that would lead to him becoming known as the "Gandhi of Sicily"--- hunger strikes. Throughout his career in Sicily, Dolci has used fasting as a method to force the government to make improvements, with one of his most famous fasts being in November, 1955, when he fasted for a week in Partinico to "draw attention to the misery and violence in the area and to promote the building of a dam over the Jato River that could provide irrigation for the entire valley" (Mangione, 145). Danilo's method of protesting peacefully has proven successful in gaining the government's attention, but it has not always kept supporters at his side. Many supporters of Dolci have left because they do not feel that he follows through with his

protests by making sure that the government follows through with its promises, and others have left because they think the protests are held only to gain publicity for Dolci himself. (Mangione, 40)

Danilo Dolci has sacrificed much to try to improve living conditions in Sicily. He left the middle class to live in substandard conditions, and often puts his life at risk to make improvements. Dolci uses the hatred of violence that he learned as a child and the hatred of poverty that he learned after World War II as motivation for his work in Sicily. He knows that he can not completely change Sicily, but he believes that he can at least make small improvements.

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