What were your paternal grandparents like?

My father’s parents were Annunziata Volpe and Frank Joseph Terranella. They lived upstairs from me at 66 Church Street in Lodi, N.J. from the day I was born until I was 19.

My grandmother was born in Santo Stefano Di Camastra, Sicily on March 25, 1897. Her parents, Giuseppe and Rosa Volpe, named her after the feast day on which she was born – the feast of the Annunciation. Her sisters called her “Nunzie,” but once she emigrated to America in 1913, she preferred the name Nancy. She must have met my grandfather within a few years after she arrived in America, because they were married on February 2, 1918, just a few weeks short of her 21st birthday. I remember my grandmother telling me that when she married my grandfather, people remarked that it was a marriage of a bear (Urso) to a fox (Volpe).

My grandfather was born on April 18, 1894 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the youngest child of Angelo Terranella and Angela Urso. My grandfather, having been born in the United States, had a different status than my grandmother, who was an immigrant. Having been educated in New York schools, he was at home in both the English and Italian-speaking worlds. That meant he had access to employment opportunities not available to his older siblings. Those older siblings had moved from Manhattan to Lodi, New Jersey in 1906 to work at United Piece Dye Works, a large textile mill. Since my grandfather came to visit them from Manhattan from time to time, he became aware of the employment opportunities in New Jersey. Somewhere between 1911 and 1915 he moved to Lodi for a job at the Rochelle Park Velvet Company, a textile mill that specialized in producing velvet.

Because he was a hard worker who came from an immigrant family, but was born and educated in the U.S., he was a valuable employee to the mill owners. In fact, he was so valuable to them that when World War I came along, his employers listed him as an essential employee for the war effort, and that got him exempted from the draft. By the time he married my grandmother in 1918 he was already a manager. He once told me that his employer loaned him a horse and sleigh for his wedding. It was winter with snow covering the roads, and in those days cars were put on blocks to sit out the snowy season.

My grandparents had my father in December 1918, and my Uncle Joe just 14 months later in January 1920. My father was named Angelo for his paternal grandfather, and his brother was named Joseph for his maternal grandfather. Italian immigrants were so predictable about this that all someone had to know in order to guess your name was the names of your grandfathers. If you had enough sons, you could name the next one after yourself. And sure enough, when my grandparents had a third son in 1930, he was named Frank. However, he was born with a birth defect and died at the age of 19 in 1949.

There would soon be another Frank Terranella at 66 Church Street when I was born four years later. I grew up with grandparents right upstairs from me. My brother and I would stand at the bottom of the stairs and yell up for my grandmother who would come to the top of the stairs and welcome us. There must have been times when our impromptu visits were at inopportune times, but I don’t ever remember my grandmother not welcoming us with a smile. Growing up with my grandparents upstairs, I didn’t think it was the least bit odd that I could visit them at will. Weren’t everyone’s grandparents close by?

I can still remember the carpeting on those steps to my grandparents and its distinctive smell. Once we got upstairs, my grandmother would immediately want to feed me. Her favorite word to me was “mangia,” which means “eat.” If she couldn’t get me to have some of her Sicilian specialties, she would find some dessert to tempt me, or she would offer me a glass of Seven-Up with a little wine for color. There was no visit that did not involve eating or drinking something. Meanwhile, my grandmother would pour herself a beer and sit with me. She and my grandfather would share a quart bottle of Rheingold beer every night, with my grandmother drinking most of it.

If I went upstairs during the daytime, she would often have the radio on. In those days, WEVD in New York had programming in Italian directed mainly at immigrants. My grandmother loved hearing her native tongue. She would also play Italian music on her record player. I grew up listening to Caruso singing “O Solo Mio” (My Sunshine), as well as the lighter fare like “Torna a Surriento” (Return to Sorrento) and “Oh Bella Piccinina” (Oh Lovely Little Girl) sung by Carlo Buti. And then there was “Giovinezza” (Youth), which was the anthem of the National Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini. I have no idea how this record came into my grandmother’s possession because she was extremely non-political. I suspect that someone gave it to her. There were many Italian-Americans in the 1920s who admired Mussolini for bringing order out of the chaos that was the norm in Italy before him. In any case, as a child I liked the tune, although I had no idea what the Italian words meant. And I didn’t learn its political significance until college.

My grandmother was extremely religious, and she tried to teach me the Our Father and Hail Mary in Italian. But even then, I was a terrible student when it came to languages, and she eventually gave up on me. I wish I could have learned Italian from her. The best I could do was wish her Buon Natale at Christmas and Buona Pasqua at Easter.

We spent several weeks every summer at the house my grandparents had at Lake Hopatcong. There, I learned to swim, fish and drive my grandfather’s motorboat. It was a wonderful place right on the lake in Byram Cove. My Terranella cousins would often join us there. My father would sometimes commute from there to Lodi for work in the summer.

My grandmother contracted colon cancer in 1965, when I was 12. They didn’t let me visit her in the hospital, and by the time she came home to die, she had so deteriorated she was unrecognizable to me. I remember bursting into tears when they brought me to her bedroom to say goodbye to her. The look of disappointment on her face as my father took me out of the room is my last memory of my grandmother. I wish I could have been stronger for her.

My grandfather took the death of my grandmother hard. He sold the lake house because he was just too lonely there without my grandmother. Because he had never learned to cook, my mother invited him to have dinner with us. I would call upstairs when dinner was ready, and he would come and join us at our kitchen table every night. I remember many nights he would shed a tear when my grandmother was mentioned.

 My father died just two years later. By this time, my grandfather had stopped eating with us. He seemed bitter now. My grandmother had always told my parents that the Church Street house would be theirs after my grandparents died. But after both my grandmother and my father died, my grandfather now pretended that no promises had ever been made. Although we had always lived there for free as family, my grandfather started requiring that my mother, now a widow, pay him rent. I would have to bring the rent check upstairs to him because my mother refused to be in the same room with him. The final straw came when my grandfather decided to remarry and required that we vacate the first floor where I had lived my entire life and move upstairs. My mother moved us out to a nearby apartment and never talked to him again.

After that, mother never stopped my brother or I from visiting my grandfather. However, once we moved, my contact with my grandfather was very spotty. I was away at college for four years and didn’t attend his wedding to his new wife. But I would make an effort to see him around his birthday. He was always overjoyed to see me and implored me to visit more often.

After I graduated, we moved from Lodi to Ridgefield Park. Now I was working full time, and I saw him only a few times. He died in May of 1977. I attended his funeral with my brother and my Terranella cousins.

My Terranella grandfather was a very successful man in business. He was a great provider. But he was not outwardly affectionate to me or my father. He left that to my grandmother. She was a wonderful woman who often played intermediary between us and my grandfather.

She had a terrific sense of humor. One time when my grandfather was sleeping, she whispered conspiratorially to me “Let’s go catch a fish.” She attached a paper clip and some string to a stick and made a fishing pole. Then she went into my grandfather’s bedroom and put the makeshift fishing pole over him so that the “hook” was over his mouth. My grandfather finally woke up and was not amused. But my grandmother just smiled and took me out to her room where we had a good laugh. I think she loved to puncture his pomposity. And he could never stay angry at her.

I remember one Halloween she got dressed up as a hobo with an old suit and hat of my grandfather’s. She rubbed soot on her face and knocked on our door posing as a trick or treater. I didn’t recognize her until my father from behind me said “Look closely.” When I turned again, I saw my grandmother’s wonderful smile. I immediately started laughing and opened the door wide for her come in. She was as happy as a child that her prank had succeeded. I gave her a big hug. It was wonderful to have such a fun grandmother living just upstairs.