

I'm the Sum of Three Parts By Ambra Sancin

Saying you're born in Italy sounds simple, but when your hometown is at times referred to as 'Italy's least Italian city', things get complicated.

Try explaining to your friends that you were brought up on frankfurts and sauerkraut, wiener schnitzel and your mother never bottled her own tomatoes.

I was born in Trieste, about two hours from Venice and a stone's throw from the Slovenian border in Italy's north-eastern corner. The city was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the fourteenth to early twentieth centuries and those influences are still strong. So much so, that many older locals find it difficult to call themselves Italian.

Growing up in Australia as an only child with no other relatives, I spent a lot of time with my parents and my first language wasn't English or Italian. It was the Triestine dialect my parents had grown up with. We spent weekends with family friends and their children who had also migrated to Australia in the 1950s, all speaking the same dialect.

My parents' English was almost non-existent, they hadn't yet bought a TV set and the music coming from the record player was opera or Italian crooners. No wonder I started school knowing only a handful of English words, but when I became fluent, I still spoke the dialect at home with mum and dad.

I'm Australian because I have a 'naturalisation' certificate to prove it and, apart from a few short stints living in Italy, I've lived in Sydney all my life.

I feel Italian, as that's the country and culture I'm most attracted to when I travel. It's the cuisine I mostly cook and eat. And if a pair of shoes has 'Made in Italy' on the sole, I'll say, "come to mamma."

But the Triestine part of me is the one that gets nostalgic for a city and distant relatives I'd like to know better. This is also the 'me' I have the most difficulty explaining to others.

"Why doesn't your name sound Italian?" people ask, usually followed by, "Don't all Italians come from large, boisterous families?"

If only it were that simple.