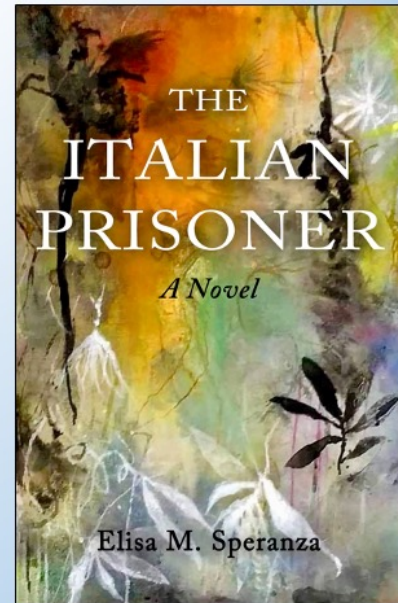


# All's Fair in Love and War

*The true story behind The Italian Prisoner,  
by Elisa M. Speranza*



## Origin Story: Chef Joe Faroldi



Around 2003, shortly after moving to New Orleans, the author met Chef Joe Faroldi, who told her a story about his parents: Giuseppe Faroldi, an Italian prisoner of war being held at Jackson Barracks during World War II, and a local Sicilian woman, Felicia D'Ana. Left to right: Josef Faroldi, Joe Faroldi, Elisa Speranza, and Jon Kardon at Lakeview Burgers & Seafood in New Orleans.



### **Sicilian immigration to New Orleans**

From 1884 through 1924, an estimated 290,000 Italian immigrants – most of them from Sicily -- arrived in New Orleans, fleeing economic and political turmoil. In short order, their indelible influence would be felt on the city.

In the book, the main character Rose’s family runs a corner grocery store in the French Quarter.

Sources: *The Times-Picayune archive*; staff research; [New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp.](#)



At the outset of the war, Italians were under suspicion along with Japanese and German citizens and non-citizen residents of the United States. Some Italians were even interned, famously including Joe Dimaggio's father. In 1942, all Italians, Japanese, and German citizens ages 14 and older in the US were required to register as "enemy aliens." [1940 Alien Registration Act](#),

Read more: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/italian-americans-were-considered-enemy-aliens-world-war-ii-180962021/#fHSxwm52AIS57dW6.99>



But New Orleans' Sicilian-Americans did not seem to suffer such a harsh fate. The Mayor of New Orleans from 1936-1946 was Robert Maestri, the son of Sicilian immigrants. The sons (and daughters) of these families were also fighting in the war.

By the 1940s, many Sicilian immigrant families had settled in the French Quarter and elsewhere in New Orleans. "So many Italian-owned mom-and-pop corner groceries dotted the French Quarter, and so many Italian farmers sold their wares in the French Market, that the Quarter eventually became unofficially known as "Little Palermo," after the Sicilian capital." (nola.com) Visitors to New Orleans today can still find well-known bakeries such as Brocato's and grocery stores such as Central Grocery, and Sicilian-Americans still celebrate Saint Joseph's Day on March 19 with elaborate altars (lower right photo).

Sicilian immigrants and their families were active in all facets of business and civic life in the city—and proud Americans though some faced discrimination (as did Rose's father in the book).

Maestri Photo: <https://64parishes.org/entry/robert-maestri>  
Other photos: Elisa M. Speranza

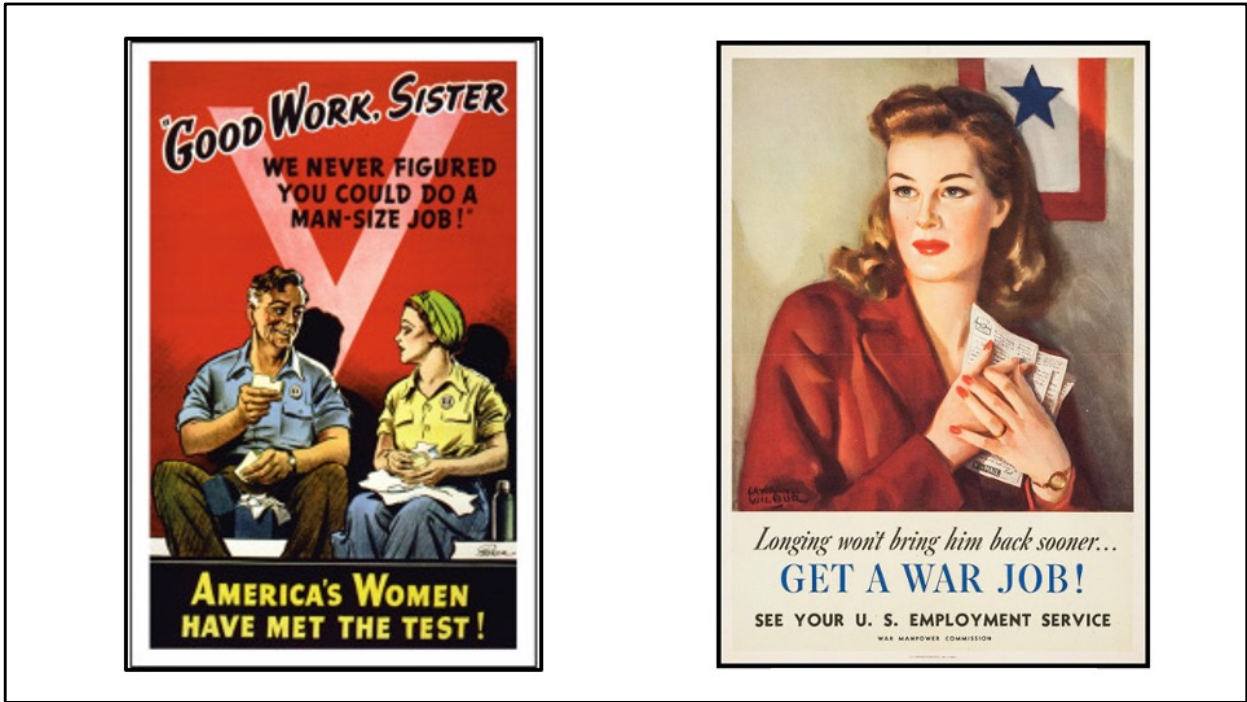


Meanwhile, on the homefront: rationing, hardship, and existential dread. German U-Boats were sinking merchant ships in the Gulf of Mexico, and bad news from the front hung over many families.

Photo: Office of War Information

“On February 7, 1943, the United States instituted rationing of leather shoes to begin on February 9. Each man, woman, and child could purchase up to three pairs of leather shoes a year, using designated stamps in War Ration Book One, and later in Books Three and Four. To simplify the system, only six shades of leather were produced. However, the supply of leather continued to decrease. On March 20, 1944, the ration was reduced to two pairs of leather shoes per year. Shoe rationing continued until October 30, 1945.”

<https://www.vintag.es/2018/03/shoe-rationing-wwii.html>



Many women went to work outside the home (or family businesses) for the first time, responding to government recruitment efforts.



A Higgins landing craft, made in New Orleans. A jeep rolls off a landing boat at Fedala harbor in Morocco during the landing operations of the U.S. task forces there during Operation Torch.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USW33- 000798-ZC [P&P]).

In the book: Rose takes a bookkeeping job at the Higgins shipyard. At the height of the war, Higgins Industries operated seven plants, employing 86,000 people in an integrated workforce—previously unheard-of in the Jim Crow South.

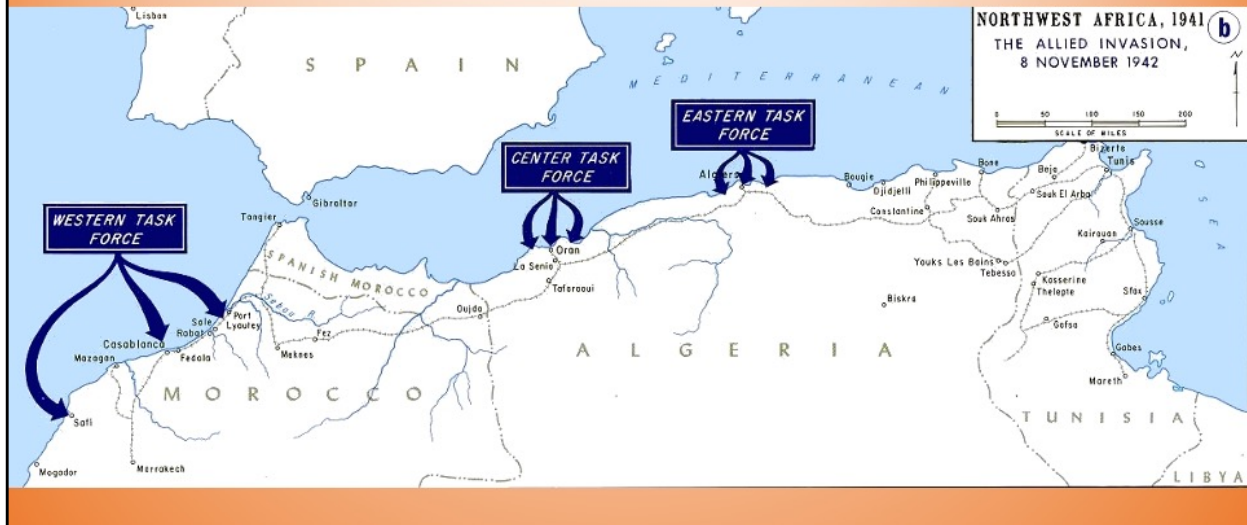




Rose and her best friend Marie worked at the factory. In their off time, there wasn't a lot to do, but they did have the movies like Casablanca, music, including New Orleans' own Louis Prima (center), and danced with each other at church-sponsored events because of the shortage of men.

<https://www.last.fm/music/Louis+Prima/+wiki>

## Meanwhile...in North Africa



November 8, 1942. Under the Command of General Eisenhower, Operation Torch is intended as a pincer strategy: the Americans land in Morocco and the British in Algeria.

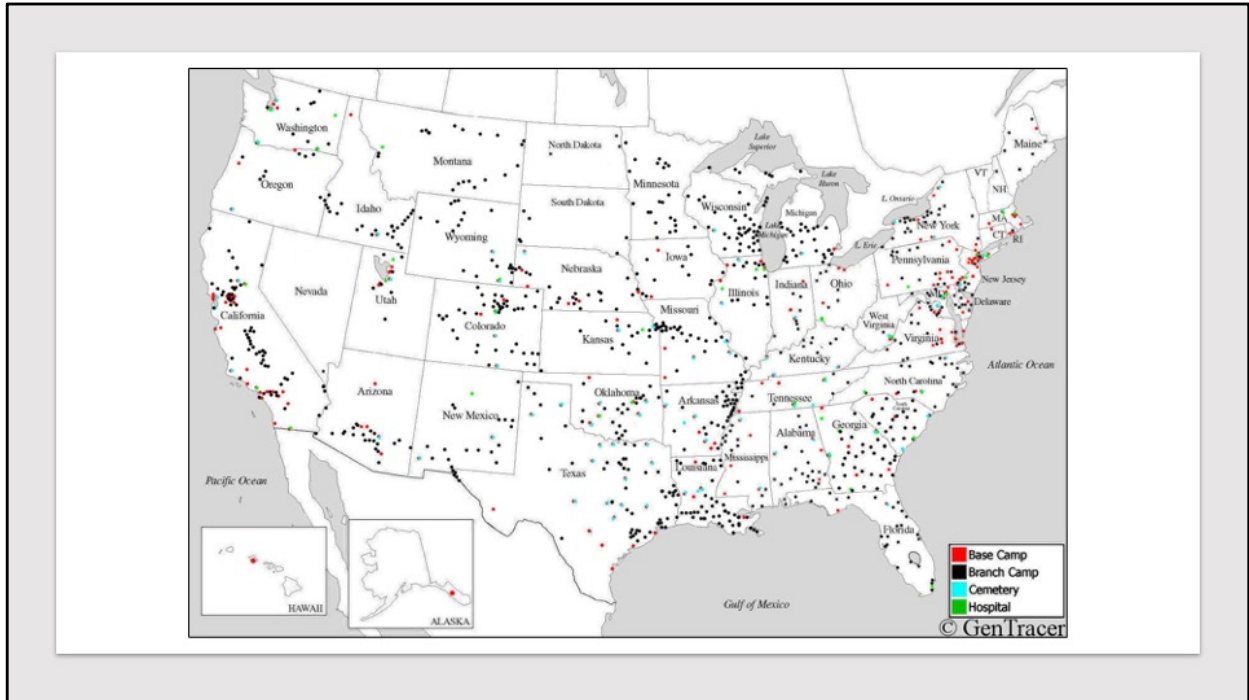
The Allied victory in North Africa destroys or neutralizes nearly 900,000 German and Italian troops, opening a second front against the Axis, permitting the invasion of Sicily and the Italian mainland in the summer of 1943, and removing the Axis threat to the oilfields of the Middle East and to British supply lines to Asia and Africa. It was critically important to the course of WWII.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/operation-torch-algeria-morocco-campaign>  
*Wikipedia—public domain*



Italian POWs play cards in a trench as they wait to be shipped out of North Africa.

Photo courtesy American Italian Archive



380,000 Germans and 51,000 Italian POWs were brought to the US and held at largely vacant military bases around the country.

About 1000 Italian POWs were eventually housed at Jackson Barracks, in St. Bernard Parish outside New Orleans.

POW Camps in the United States. Map courtesy of GenTracer



On September 8, 1943. Italy surrendered. The following month, they switched sides and join forces with the Allies.



After the surrender, Italian POWs are given an option to swear allegiance to the United States. Most signed up and were issued this patch to wear on their sleeves, denoting that they are part of the Italian Service Units (ISUs). They were put to work on farms, in factories, at the port and elsewhere, since there is such a shortage of able-bodied men.

Photos courtesy of the DiGregorio Family.



And they were allowed certain privileges, like socializing with local Italian American families.

In the book, Rose meets Italian POW Sal on a visit to the Barracks organized by the parish priest.

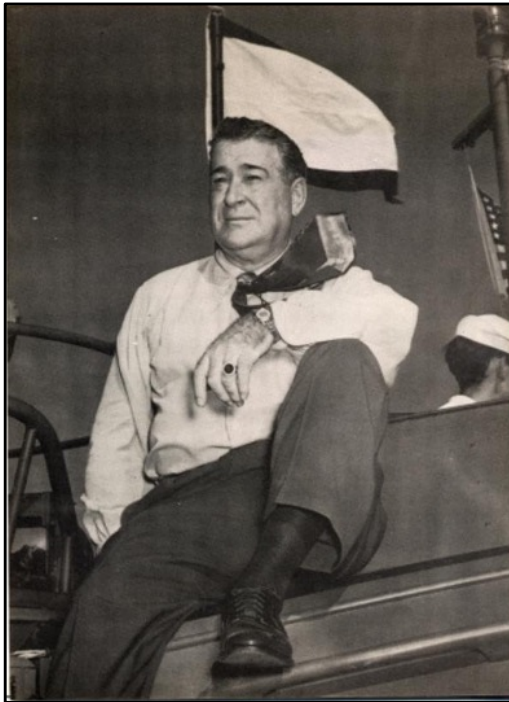
Photos courtesy of the Nuzzolillo family.



One thing led to another.

Photo courtesy of the Nuzzolillo family.





*“Right here in New Orleans, Italian prisoners have the freedom of the streets, and are even entertained at bathing parties on Lake Pontchartrain. All of this coddling of our enemies is excused by the statement that it is required by the laws of war, and the requirements of the Geneva Convention. Is there anyone in this country foolish enough to believe that the Germans are showing our men, officers or privates, like consideration?”*

*--Andrew Jackson Higgins in a letter to Congress, 1945*

Not everyone was happy about the Italian POWs being allowed to mingle with the local population, however. Powerful businessmen such as Andrew Higgins spoke out against what he considered “coddling” of POWs.

From p. 231, *Andrew Jackson Higgins and the Boats that Won World War II*, by Jerry Strahan

Photo: Wikipedia

## LAST OF ITALIAN GROUPS DEPARTS

Battalion Going Home Via  
Fort Eustis, Va.

The 727 men of the 316th Italian Quartermaster Service Battalion, last of such units stationed in this area, left New Orleans Wednesday afternoon by train, bound for their homeland via Fort Eustis, Va.

The unit has been stationed at the port of embarkation since April, 1944, when Italian prisoners of war were given the opportunity to change their status by joining the newly organized Italian Service units after cessation of hostilities with Italy.

The men have been working as warehouse and dock laborers at the port and as housekeeper personnel at Jackson Barracks. Enlisted men up to the grade of warrant officer were paid \$24 per month, of which \$8 was in cash, and the remainder was either put into coupons or trust funds, which they cannot touch until they return to Italy.

Accompanying the battalion to Fort Eustis, from which it will sail in a few days, is Major Percy Redfearn, commanding officer; First Lieutenant Raymond L. Radcliffe, First Lieutenant Myron Corsi, a military police officer and



When the war was over, the POWs were repatriated, in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

“Dietro i reticolati per farci l’ultimo sguardo. Dec. 19, 1945”. “Behind the fence for the last look.”

Photo courtesy of Linda DiMarzio Massicot.

Clipping: *Times-Picayune* December 20, 1945



But that wasn't the end of the story. At least 10 women from New Orleans followed their sweethearts to Italy, married there, and waited for the proper paperwork to bring their new husbands back to America.

DiMarzio-Pezzana double wedding in Sicily to the Messina sisters.  
Photo courtesy Linda DiMarzio Massicot



The last living Jackson Barracks POW in New Orleans, as far as we know, Mr. Giovanni DiStefano and his son Ron.

Marguerite Graffagnini, who married POW Mario Maranto. Sadly, Marguerite passed away from COVID-19 in 2021.



Descendants of the Jackson Barracks POWs and the French Quarter Sicilian American women they met and married, at Jackson Barracks April 23, 2022.

*Mille grazie!*

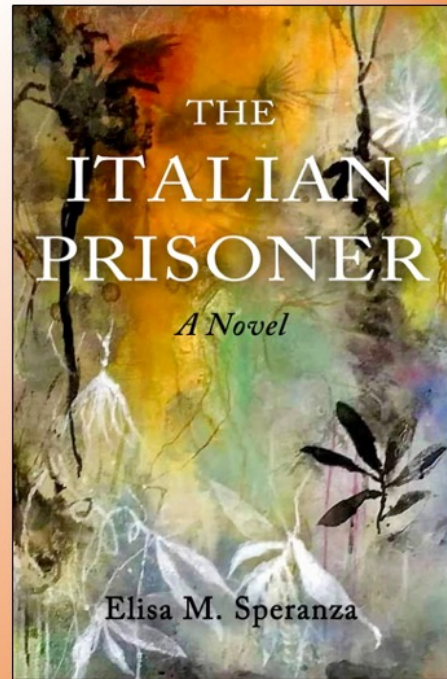
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Visit [www.elisamariesperanza.com](http://www.elisamariesperanza.com) for much more information, including links to articles about the real-life POWs and other historical aspects of the novel.