



## A Better Life?

### Call Your Elders: A Letter to Italy

Two Italian women living in San Francisco compare their experiences during the pandemic.

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#### Ad Break

**Zahir Janmohamed:** I'm Zahir Janmohamed...and this is Call Your Elders...a special segment from A Better Life? A podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds.

In this series, we're speaking to immigrant elders about what challenges they have faced in the past, what brings them joy in this moment, and what advice they have for the rest of us.

Sara Marinelli is a radio producer and writer based in San Francisco. She's originally from Naples, Italy...but has lived in the U.S. for more than a decade.

When the pandemic hit Italy *hard* in March, Sara found it especially difficult to be far away...and it brought up the question, "Where is home?"

**Sara Marinelli:** I've never missed Italy as much as I did during the peak of this pandemic. In March and April, I watched videos of Italians playing music on their balconies every day, and I so wanted to be there.

I wanted my old balcony back. Instead, I was trapped in my apartment, hurting from the forced separation.

Desperate for a connection, I began recording my Italian radio show from my closet. I gathered the songs that people were playing in Italy, and asked Italian expats to request music that brought them comfort. I called the collection "Songs Against Fear."

When I played the songs on the show, I felt comforted too. I know other Italian immigrants who felt the same.

In June, when lockdown in San Francisco was less strict, I went to visit Maria De Venezia, and see how she was doing.

**Sara:** Ciao Maria, how are you? So nice to see you.

**Maria De Venezia:** How are you? I'm so happy to see you again. I'm really, really happy. I'm regretting I cannot hug you.

Sara: No, we can't hug. But maybe we can do the fake Italian kiss.

Maria: Yes.

Sara: [Laughs.]

Maria: [Laughs.]

Sara: Maria is 76 years old. She's been living in San Francisco for 25 years. I met her through Italian Community Services, a local organization that supports Italian elders.

Though we are new friends, I treasure Maria. She's warm, inviting, and she comes from the same generation as my mother.

Sara: During the peak of the pandemic, for us, watching the news was absolutely heartbreaking. How did you feel about, you know, watching the news?

Maria: I was devastated. Devastated because, uh, first of all, here, we were able to go out and walk in the street. They couldn't leave. Not even the district, just one block. I remember that a friend of mine told me, "I go three, four, five times down to the street to put the garbage, just to breathe some air." They were really becoming crazy. And then when I heard about Bergamo and all the long line of, uh, coffin to be cremated, I still have goosebumps. I couldn't believe that the people who are losing their dear...they couldn't be in contact with them. They couldn't touch them. They couldn't hold their arms. That was something that really, I was devastated by that.

Sara: Me too.

Maria: 170 doctors died and some of them were already retired, but they...they were called to go back and, and work in the hospital and they died. That was something I still...if I think about that, I have goosebumps.

Sara: Absolutely. I remember that very clearly. And um, some days I was in a state of panic, crying at night. And, uh, did you ever feel that, uh, "Wow, this country is not going to exist anymore." Did you feel that something really disastrous?

Maria: No. I think the Italians have a lot of strength and courage because they went through hell during the war. And so sometimes they are able to fight against, also, coronavirus a little bit better because of, uh, what they went through. And they also are able to overcome difficulties in their own ways. Like you mentioned before, singing on the deck and playing music. I think that's something that, a virtue that they have. And so Italy will not disappear. I didn't feel that. What about you? Did you feel that?

Sara: No. No, not that way. Not that way. I was very afraid about my family.

**Maria:** Yeah, me too.

**Sara:** I was so afraid that...

**Maria:** ...someone could become sick.

**Sara:** Yeah, I could lose my parents.

**Maria:** Without being there.

**Sara:** Without being there. That was most of the source of anxiety and panic came from not being able to say goodbye to my parents if they died, because as you know, that's what was happening in Italy. People were dying every day, in high numbers. And I didn't know how to comfort myself. What brought you comfort?

**Maria:** Many things. I have to say the comfort is that to check the health of my friends and my family in Italy, more or less every day. I was happy to know that they were safe. Another interesting thing that I started doing with my husband, who is a really good cook...[Laughs.]

**Sara:** Nice.

**Maria:** ...is working in the kitchen with him. And it was a great pleasure because he started making fresh bread, fresh pasta, and biscotti. [Laughs.]

**Sara:** More Italian than that. What can you get?

**Maria:** Yes, exactly, exactly. But it's so nice because, you know, being able to learn how to make the dough is very difficult and then my hands are weak while his hands are so strong. So, I mean, I learn how to do it, how to move my hands in one way and then sideways to make bread, and then eating our products at the end of the day. [Laughs.]

**Sara:** It's satisfying.

**Maria:** Yeah. I enjoy it a lot. Also because you know, this is our life and really, we have to love each other because we don't know if it will last a long time or not. And so we tried to cook the best food. [Laughs.]

**Sara:** It's true...all this homemade...

**Maria:** How about you? What did you do? What were your tools to overcome this terrible time?

**Sara:** For me, when I was really in these days of panic, one thing that helped me to soothe the anxiety was to write. Writing in Italian. And this is interesting because I've been here for 13 years. I've been writing stories in English. I've been

working on a book in English. I thought, for many years, that I couldn't write in Italian again. Then, suddenly, I took an empty notebook in March and I started writing a diary.

**Maria:** In Italian.

**Sara:** Yes. I called it “Letters to Italy.” “Lettere all’Italia,” as if Italy were my lover...far away from me. I would shut down everything and just sit at my kitchen table. And I felt that that was home. It was a really strange sensation. I was not home, you know?

**Maria:** [Laughs.]

**Sara:** ...but I felt like I was gaining something again that I had lost. One of the letters became an essay, and I called it “L’Italia in una stanza.”

**Maria:** It's like the song. [Laughs.]

**Sara:** Like the song, “The Sky In a Room.” “Italy in my room.” And I was talking about if I am really sheltering in place and I don't talk to anyone in English, and I write in Italian, I read books in Italian. For days, I could feel that I was immersing myself in Italy.

**Maria:** The whole body was there. Yeah...

**Sara:** Exactly. Exactly. That's exactly what it was. I felt like my soul, my body was there and it was an illusion that...

**Maria:** Allows you to suffer less in some way. Right?

**Sara:** Yes. Did you have anything similar that helped you to recreate this sense of home?

**Maria:** First of all, we have a good selection of DVD that every year we buy in Italy. And so we decided to watching them again. We started from Sicily because my husband is half Sicilian, but Sicily is a very interesting island. So we started watching *The Leopard*. Then we saw “La Siciliana Ribelle,” that it's a movie that gives you goosebumps again. It's the story of a, a daughter of a mafioso. It was a mafioso, but it was a good mafioso. But anyway, I don't want to say anything...

**Sara:** [Laughs.]

**Maria:** But it's a beautiful, beautiful movie. We saw *Cinema Paradiso*...

**Sara:** Si.

**Maria:** And then *Viola Di Mare*. It's, the two lesbians in Sicily and oh, it's very, very, I mean, I like it a lot. Anyway, we were very concerned about enlarging our knowledge about Sicily.

**Sara:** I did the same thing. I started watching some Italian movies that I had missed. Interesting that you started with Sicily. I definitely started with Naples. And I don't know if you watched it yourself. "My Brilliant Friend" by Elena Ferrante, the HBO adaptation?

**Maria:** No, I didn't see it, but I read the book.

**Sara:** It was absolutely moving for me to be far away from Italy, watching these girls in Naples. I just identified so much. One episode in particular, I start crying from beginning to the end.

**Maria:** Awww.

**Sara:** [Laughs.] I was just crying about Napoli, about the girls, about Italy, about my family and thinking about my life and the choices that I had made of leaving Naples, and now being stuck here and thinking, "When can I go again? When can I see my family?" So you know, I started questioning my choice, which is not a good thing to do...

**Maria:** But it's natural. Questioning comes out.

**Sara:** Yes. How was it for you? Did you feel a little bit that way?

**Maria:** You know, the thing is that I divided into two. And sometimes I feel like, "Am I meat? Am I fish?" When I am, you know, because when I am in Italy, I know that I have another life in some other place, like in San Francisco, but I really am Italian there.

And when I'm here, it's already 25 years. I feel like, yes, I know, I have another life in Italy, but I'm here now. Sometimes it's a struggle. What am I? Am I Italian? Am I American? Which is the best place to live? I start with comparing how many friends I have here. How many friends I've, uh, over there. I think if people who don't experience this kind of, uh, life, they don't understand what's it's...inside your mind.

**Sara:** Also, another thing I don't know if it happened to you: I would have these dreams, especially during the hardest moment of lockdown, about streets of Naples, balconies, piazzas, I would wake up with these really vivid images in my mind. [Laughs.] And it brought me comfort in the moment, but also a little bit of sadness because they were not real.

**Maria:** Right. Yeah, as soon as you wake up, you realize that they are just dreams. But still, it was like going back a little bit and being in Italy a little bit. And I mean, I'm still Italian. [Laughs.]

**Zahir:** That was Sara Marinelli and Maria De Venezia. Neither of them have made it to Italy yet, but both hope to visit by the end of the year.

Maria is staying in touch with her family and friends in Italy via WhatsApp every day.

The songs you heard at the top of the episode were “Nessun dorma” from Puccini’s Turandot and “Viva L’Italia” by Francesco De Gregori.

Sara continues to host her Italian radio show, keeping track of Italian news, music, and culture. You can listen to her podcast, Italian Frequency, on San Francisco Community Radio at [www.KXSF.fm](http://www.KXSF.fm).

We’ll be back in a couple of weeks with another call to an immigrant elder.

Next week, please join us for another installment of A Better Life?...a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds exploring how Covid-19 is making many immigrants rethink their ideas about the promise of this country.

We want to hear from the immigrant elders in *your* life...how are they doing? And what’s bringing them joy in this moment?

Reach out to us on social media and tell us how you’re staying connected to them.

This episode was produced by Sara Marinelli. It was edited by Mia Warren...she’s our executive producer. Our audio engineer and senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our assistant producer is Anna Dilena. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Our executive editor is John Rudolph.

And our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I’m Zahir Janmohamed. Thanks for listening.

**John Rudolph:** Call Your Elders and A Better Life? are produced by Feet in 2 Worlds. For fifteen years, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today’s immigrants and advancing the careers of immigrant journalists. Our supporters include The Ford Foundation, the David and Katherine Moore Family Foundation, the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, The Listening Post Collective, an anonymous donor and listeners like you. To support our work visit us at [abetterlifepodcast.com](http://abetterlifepodcast.com). Feet in 2 Worlds is a project of the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School.

Ad Break

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