Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

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Global Campus of Human Rights

Right Livelihood

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Rooted identity: three generations of women across Europe and Latin America

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The warm smell of tomato, meat, onion, garlic, olive oil, and hot iron welcomed me every Sunday as soon as I stepped into my grandparents' house. I would run across the hallway into the dining room to greet my nonno, who sat at the big dining table reading the newspaper. The smell drew me to the room right in front: the kitchen. With her back to me, the stocky figure of my nonna and her short dark gray hair blocked the view of what was happening on the stovetop. But I already knew.

A large black iron pot was cooking the tuco (a bolognese-style sauce originally from Italy's Liguria region) that would accompany the homemade fettuccine for the family lunch. I was welcomed into the kitchen by my nonna's warm and comforting embrace. "Hola rosa!", she greeted me smiling. She used to call me that because she said that to her, I was a rose.

My nonna immediately grabbed a piece of bread, dipped it into the hot tuco, and gave it to me. The bread softened and turned red, soaked in the intense flavor of the sauce. I ate it in small bites so I wouldn't burn myself. That experience was even more sublime than eating the freshly made pasta for lunch.

The food I grew up with is what connects me the most with my Italian heritage. Along with the tuco and the homemade fettuccine, my childhood was shaped by pizza nights, olive snacks, and afternoons with pignolata - a traditional sweet and crunchy Sicilian pastry.

As the grandchild of two Sicilian immigrants who settled in Buenos Aires, Argentina, at the dawn of World War II, half of my ethnic identity is rooted in Italy, a country governed by the principle of ius sanguinis (right of blood) that recognizes the transmission of citizenship by descent. But according to my documentation, during the first 20 years of my life I was only Argentine.

Despite being born and raised in Argentina, my mother, daughter of Sicilian parents, is fully Italian by descent, and she only obtained Italian citizenship at the age of 50. “When I applied for Italian citizenship the consulate was closed, and it only reopened eight years later,” she tells me. It seems this was due to a corruption report involving a network that falsified Italian passports for football players.

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My nonna's name was Annetta. She was born in 1925 in Maló, a small rural village in the Sicilian province of Messina. She lived in a two-story stone house on a hill with her parents Francesco and Giuseppina, her younger sister Margherita, a cat whose name was lost in ancestral memory and the goat Gigia (many years later, at the age of eighty and after my nonno died, she would have a small white poodle she would name Gigio.) She had a third sister who died as a baby. They never knew what happened to her.

Her father Francesco worked at a lime kiln in the valley area until he emigrated to Argentina in 1931 in search of better living conditions for his family, just like millions of Italians did during those years marked by economic crisis and difficult social conditions. My nonna was 6 years old when her father left, and she didn’t see him again until 9 years later. “They lived a peasant's life, marked by the poverty of the interwar period and, in many cases, by medieval customs,” my mother explains when I ask her about my nonna’s childhood.

My nonna went to a small school in the village until third grade. She loved her teacher very much. Her teacher loved her dearly too and always praised her intelligence. My nonna was fascinated by the books, and she quickly learned to read and write. But, at that time, in rural Sicily children were part of the workforce, so she wasn't allowed to keep learning anymore. They taught her to embroider, and she helped with farm tasks like picking olives and milking Gigia. "If she had been given a choice, she would have chosen books," my mother says.

She couldn't choose.

Food was scarce, partly because there weren't enough men for labor. With her husband away, Giuseppina was alone with two daughters. "I believe part of my grandmother's violence was because she only had girls. She gave birth to three daughters, and she needed labor," my mother explains. My nonna grew up with an aggressive mother, so she spent her time hiding from her to avoid being hit. One day she was so scared of her mother's beatings that she hid in a barrel for many hours. The whole village went out looking for her.

In 1940, when she was 15 years old, my nonna and her family boarded the last transatlantic ship to depart from Genoa to America before the start of World War II. The ship was escorted by military submarines. My nonna didn't want to leave Italy. She didn't want to leave her friends, her family, her village, her cat, Gigia. Once again, she didn't have a choice.

Francesco was waiting for them in Buenos Aires, Argentina. They settled in a suburban neighbourhood a few kilometers from the capital. A community of Italians had taken root there - people who, like them, had come to the country seeking a better future.

Their first home in Buenos Aires was a small, cold room with a pit toilet. They didn't know anyone and they didn't speak Spanish. Having arrived nine years earlier, Francesco had already been working as a gardener for some time. Giuseppina made a living washing clothes for well-off families. Margherita was able to complete primary school in Buenos Aires. Like my nonna, her sister was very smart, and the school principal told Giuseppina to let her finish secondary school so she could become a teacher. But the family needed everyone to work. The most common thing there was to work in factories, yet Giuseppina wanted something better for her daughters, so they continued learning sewing, dressmaking, and embroidery.

Over time, my nonna grew to love Argentina. There was an abundance of food, growth and opportunities. The family moved to a better house, and my nonna and her sister gained recognition in the neighborhood as talented dressmakers and embroidery teachers.

When she was 22 she met Salvatore, my nonno, also a Sicilian migrant who lived in the neighbourhood. He came from Biancavilla, a town more developed than my nonna's Maló, and had a more comfortable economic background than her. He had been living in Argentina since he was four. They got married in 1953. My nonna continued working as a dressmaker and my nonno was a foreman at a factory of storage products for agricultural use. They had three children, two boys and a girl, my mother. In 1973 their eldest son died in an accident while practicing rowing. He was 16 years old.

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My mother's name is Adriana. She has the same dark hair and stoic warmth as my nonna. She is a geography and history high school teacher and loves languages. In addition to her mother tongue Spanish she speaks fluent English, French and Italian. "My mom didn't want me to speak the Sicilian dialect because she thought it was tacky. Saying 'u garuzzu' does not sound the same as saying 'il ragazzo'. That's why she was so delighted when I decided to study Italian in the Dante Alighieri Academy", she tells me. Even though she lived in Argentina her whole life, married my father Ignacio who was Argentinian, and raised me, my sister Sofia and my brother Nacho here, my mother does not feel like she belongs in this country: "I feel prouder when I say I am Italian than when I say I am Argentinian". Her friends call her Tana, a very common nickname used in Argentina to refer to people of Italian origin.

Even so, my mother tells me that she doesn't feel very connected to Italian culture, except for the songs. There was a lot of Italian music playing in the family, and that was also her first approach to learning the language before she studied it at the academy. I asked my mother whether she felt like my siblings and I had grown connected to Italy, and she says no: "I think that's also because I myself don't have a connection with Italian culture. Maybe it's something I still need to explore, which is why I would like to live for two months in Rome and two months in Sicily sometime," she elaborates.

My sister Sofia and I don't feel quite the same. For us, growing up so close to our nonna connected us to Italy. I also think that the fact that my mother continued with the lineage of the language, the tuco, the homemade pasta, the pizza, and the Italian music filling our home contributed to this. "What connected me most to my Italian roots was my nonna. Mom too, especially during our childhood and in our youth after my nonna passed away. I think a lot of it was through music. I listen to 'Il ballo del mattone' by Rita Pavone and it feels like my childhood," Sofia tells me.

Three years ago we both returned to our nonna's home region. We now live in Madrid. Unlike my nonna, my sister and I finished school, had the opportunity to choose university degrees, and also chose to emigrate to Europe.

Sofia is 32 years old – a year and a half younger than me – and she is an English translator and an education specialist. She arrived in Madrid in February 2022. She currently works in the private sector and lives in the northeast of Madrid with her Dutch boyfriend, whom she met at work.

Last year Sofia and her boyfriend went on vacation to Sardinia, an Italian island nestled in the heart of the Mediterranean. They caught a bus at the airport that took them to the beach town they would stay at. "The journey was long, and I remember the bus passing through a mountain landscape. In that view, the first thing I saw was the Mediterranean Sea and the same eroded stone mountains with little green dots that my nonna used to show me in the postcards she kept with images of Sicily. That, for me, was like an awakening. I realized that I come from here, and I felt very proud," she describes.

We often do pizza nights at my sister's apartment. Her pizza is just as delicious as my mom's. My nonna's pizza had a thicker, fluffier crust, and my mom added her own twist by switching to a thin, crispy, stone-baked dough. There's always pomodoro sauce and fresh mozzarella, topped with a variety of ingredients like arugula and bacon, tomato and garlic, or ham and peppers. Recently, my sister introduced a new topping combination: mushrooms sautéed in olive oil and garlic, with a touch of lemon zest. That one is my favorite pizza these days.

When we emigrated, my sister and I entered Europe with our Italian passports, so in bureaucratic terms, here we are Italian. Mom comes to visit us every year, and she also enters the continent with her Italian passport.

It might be that for some people from Latin America an Italian passport is just that: a document that opens the doors to a region with more development, more opportunities, and better living conditions. But for me, my mom, and my sister, Italy is rooted in our history, our heritage, and our identity.

In May of this year, Giorgia Meloni's government approved a law that limits the scope of the ius sanguinis principle. Now, only those who have grandparents or parents born in Italy can obtain citizenship. Additionally, these ancestors must have held exclusively Italian citizenship or have resided continuously in the country for a minimum of two years before the descendant's birth. According to a BBC article, "(...) the decision aims to set clearer limits and 'prevent abuses' such as businesses surrounding the acquisition of the passport."

This doesn't affect my sister or me. But if either of us has children in Madrid, the situation could become complicated. A child of Argentine parents born abroad is not automatically Argentine; to obtain the nationality, a process called the "nationality option" must be completed. With the new law, a child of Italians born abroad no longer automatically acquires citizenship by right of blood either. Since our connection to Italy is quite direct because it comes through our nonna and nonno, everything indicates that, for now, our next generation could continue to be Italian.

The law is very recent, so we will have to see how this policy develops when the time comes. But one thing we are sure of: our identity goes beyond what the government and the current political trend decide, and if we ever have children, they will also be raised with a nonna, pizza, tuco, and Rita Pavone.

From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.

The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

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