



THE LIFE OF MARIA POMI CONCA



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I was born Maria Pomi in 1910 in a solitary stone house called “Ca Vegia” on the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy. Ringed by the Alps, the lake is only a few miles from Switzerland and has been a resort area since the Romans first settled there thousands of years ago.

Ca Vegia was built halfway between the towns of Varenna and Bellano and we had no close neighbors. However, we knew all the people who lived up the mountain in the 100-person village of Gittana. A few of them were related to us. In my own small family, I was the oldest of nine children.

Early memories

My earliest memories of life took place around Ca Vegia in the 1920s. A lot of tourists from the hotels and the villas along the lake would often travel the lake road outside our house. The tourists would bring their picnic lunch and then end up giving it to us because it looked like we were poor!

However, we weren't; we always had things to eat. My father, Giacomo, was a good provider. He did a little of everything, like fishing and taking care of animals.



Maria's parents, Giacomo and Annunciata.

He knew about contracting work and fixing things so he was the caretaker for a couple of villas. We often went with him to help clean and serve.

Since I was the oldest daughter, I was given a lot of responsibility. I helped to milk the cows, clean the house, and take care of my brothers and sisters. My mother's mother lived with us,

and she taught me to sew and knit. I love knitting; I've done it all my life.

Grandparents

Another part of childhood that I remember is visiting my grandparents, that is, my father's parents. I never knew by mother's father and neither did she.

My grandmother said he came down from the mountains on his horse and so impressed her that she married him even though he turned out to be 68. They had one baby girl together, and then a few years later, he died at 72. My mother was born a few months later.

From the stories I've heard, my mother's parents got along well despite the age difference. He built the family chapel near Ca Vegia. I think he must have been rich because he left enough money to have the priests from Gittana come down the mountain and say a mass there every month.

My father's family was prosperous. My grandfather was the justice of the peace of the district of Perledo. When people had a problem in the family, they went to him and he would fix it. My grandfather used to play with me. He was quite a character. My grandmother was a darling, too. She used to bake raisin bread and sweet bread in a big oven in the wall.

Work life and romance

When I was 12, after I finished the fourth grade, I went to work at the Gavazzi silkworm factory in Bellano, where silk was manufactured from the insects. I was on a machine that helped roll the silk as it came out of the cocoon; I remember how pure and dry it was. The Lake Como area is still famous for its good silk.



Maria in the 1930s.



***Nancy, Frank and Celeste
outside the house in 1940.***

When I got older, I had charge of about six women and I made sure all the machines were working right. The director at Gavazzi was very friendly with my father. Giacomo used to buy a lot of silkworms at a certain time of the year. We'd take care of them and feed them mulberry leaves in our attic. When they made cocoons, we'd take

them and work on them in the factory.

I first saw my future husband, Frank Conca, in November 1926 in Gittana after church one Sunday. I had just turned 16. He was 29, and it was his first time home to Gittana in 15 years. In 1911, Frank had emigrated to America to find a better living and he became a good chef in Boston.

Anyhow, in 1926, Frank's father told him he should get married and mentioned my father and I.

Frank found out where I was working and he left a note at the receptionist's desk that he wanted to meet me at a cafe there in Bellano. My sister and I went and we had a cup of coffee with him.

Frank was very handsome. He was wearing linen knickers below the knee; he looked like a golfer. He was always a very sharp dresser. I liked him, but I

refused him. I told him I didn't want him because there was somebody else I was seeing, but the relationship wasn't serious. I was only 16, still a girl. I didn't know what I wanted.

Before he returned to America, though, Frank walked down from Gittana to see me again at Ca Vegia. We talked some more and I agreed we could write to each other. We wrote once a month for four years. During that time, I was just like a saint in Italy, meaning I didn't date anyone else. I was asked to work in Gavazzi's front office, but then they found out that I was writing to Frank, that I was going to leave, so I wasn't promoted.

In 1931 Frank returned to Italy and we got married. Since I was moving with him overseas, I had to say goodbye to a whole big family. Piero, my youngest brother, was only four years old. I cried as the train rolled away from the station. I was 20 and I was going to America.

The Depression

Once in America, Frank returned to his chef's job in Boston at the Kenmore Square Hotel. The head chef, who was born in a village near Gittana, saved Frank the job while he was gone. That was a good thing because it was 1931 and that was the worst time of the Depression. There were no jobs; there was nothing.

Some friends who were living on the fourth floor of a building helped us rent the penthouse apartment on the fifth floor. I was in love with that apartment. Everything there was outfitted when we arrived, from the curtains and the furniture to the wine on the table, as a wedding gift to us.



The hill town of Gittana overlooks Lake Como.



The family chapel.

In his spare time, Frank liked to go play bocce and cards with his friends and used to leave me alone a lot so I went down to our friends' apartment. We went to Jordans and Filenes. I learned right away to go there for the good bargains. Frank used to take me to the movies on his days off.

I studied to become an American citizen and passed the test. I took English language classes starting right away in September 1931. I continued into the spring, but then I began to show with my first child and I dropped out.

I was friendly with the teacher. She didn't want me to leave the class. I was smart, picking it up very fast. I was like that in Italy. I was always the first in the class.

In 1932, I had my first daughter, Celeste (nicknamed Tina), who I named after my oldest sister, Celestina. In 1934, I had my second daughter, Nancy, named for my mother, Annunciata.

Although food was scarce, Frank always managed to bring some back from his jobs for us to eat. I remember I used to go to the movies with my girls to keep my spirits up.

The War

During World War II, I worked at a Boston factory that made airplane parts. With most of the men off to war, they needed women's help. Because of Frank's age and poor vision, he could not serve, but he continued to work as a chef.

Frank would often take summer jobs as a chef at different resorts around New England, especially Maine. It was like a vacation for the kids and I. We met some wonderful people.

In Italy and around Lake Como during the War, the rich people lost almost everything because they had to turn it into the government to support the war. During Mussolini's time, they had to give up wedding bands and were given certificates in exchange. My mother didn't give hers up. She was smart. She hid it. My family all hated Mussolini.

For a few months during the War, my parents hid a big lawyer, the son-in-law of the Vatican governor, in the cellar of Ca Vegia. He was against Mussolini and soldiers were looking to capture him.

If Mussolini's men had found the lawyer in my parents' house, it would have been destroyed. The Fascists were terrible. Luckily, the partisans were able to slip the man away during the night through the mountains.

When I returned to Italy again, in 1950, my parents were still very friendly with the wife of the



Rena and Maria in Venice in 1950.

Vatican governor. She invited my friend Rena and I to be guests of the Vatican. She got us a room on the Via di Conciliator and every day we would go inside the Vatican for tea. It was very impressive.

At the end of the war, Mussolini was captured when he attempted to flee to Switzerland. They caught him in Dongo, across the lake. Even though I was in America, I knew all about it.

One of my brothers, Giacomo, died during the war in Yugoslavia. He was an alpino, a foot soldier usually stationed in the mountains. He must have been 26. They never found his body.

Travels during the 1950s and 1960s

When I returned to Italy the first time in 1950 with my friend Rena, we visited Rome and Venice as well.

When we made it to Lake Como, I got a great big welcome. It had been 19 years since I had seen everyone, a long time. All my brothers and sisters had grown up and had started families. The war had



Maria and Frank in 1965.

taken a toll on the country but everyone seemed happy. We had always written to each other but it was great to actually see them.

I loved seeing my mother. She was so happy; she must have been



The five Pomi sisters.

about 60. I remember she enjoyed listening to all the news on the radio coming from Switzerland because we were closer and the reception was better.

That visit, I bought her a little refrigerator. Before that, they

just had the cantina, a stone underground room, for keeping all the food and wine cold. This was a big improvement on their lives.

When Nancy and Tina went over to Italy for the first time in 1957, my father was so happy going around with them to all the family. It was like he had two million dollars with him.

Frank, Tina, Nancy, and I all journeyed to Europe together in 1963 for three months. We first spent time in a nice, old-fashioned hotel in Zurich with a big reading room in the back. I remember Nancy went right away to write to her new boyfriend, Jack, who eventually became her husband.

After Switzerland, we stayed at Ca Vegia and Gitana. Then Nancy and Tina went off by themselves. They went all over. My Italian family was kind of surprised the girls were taking off by themselves, but they were American girls and independent like me.

Back in America

From 1952 to 1972, I worked at the New England Confectionary Company (Necco) on the candy lines. Mostly, I wrapped lollipops using an automated machine, but there was a lot of repetitive hand work. I had many friends there.

By that time, Tina and Nancy both had full-time jobs in offices. Frank retired in the early 1960s. Nancy married Jack Callahan in 1963 and they moved to Canton, MA, to start a family. My grandchildren, Mark and Julie, were born in 1965 and 1967, respectively.

After I retired, I spent my time taking care of Frank, knitting, sewing, and doing household chores. Frank and I together looked after our vegetable garden and fruit trees. I used to enjoy canning pears and making zucchini bread in season. I loved to grow wildflowers and flowering bushes, just like my family did in Italy.



Great-grandkids Emma and Alex.

Frank and I also shared our love of cooking. One of my specialties was the Italian pasta, gnocchi. I also liked to make pizelle and anise cookies. I shopped daily in Boston for food. Neither Frank nor I learned how to drive, but we didn't care. The Boston bus and train system took us everywhere we wanted to go.

When Frank died in 1985, I was very sad for a long time. Luckily, I was able to take my mind off his absence by traveling with my granddaughter Julie to Italy and introducing her to the whole family. Everyone was delighted to meet her. It was the last time I was to see Italy, but I kept in constant contact with phone calls and letters.

In the 1990s, my grandson Mark fathered two children, Emma and Alex. Great-grandchildren!

I would say I've had a very good life. I don't have many regrets. I grew up in a beautiful place with a loving family. I married the man I loved. I enjoyed all the traveling I did and in the end my family has been my proudest achievement.

Salut!



Maria at home in 1987.