



## LEIF 2026 ONLINE ESSAY PUBLICATION

The LEIF Festival was founded over thirty years ago to celebrate and preserve Nordic-American cultural roots while fostering community, education, and artistic exchange, and in more recent years has had some international emphasis. This year the Festival is sponsoring an online publication of essays relating to this year's theme:

### **Immigration/Assimilation: what we gain and what we lose**

The essays (or poems, or other writing) should relate to personal experiences with immigration or assimilation in Minnesota, from the viewpoint of an immigrant, an immigrant group, or a second, third or even later generation. We are interested not in a professional historian's view of immigration, but the experiences of real people living, working, or studying in Minnesota. People of all ages and from all ethnic groups are encouraged to participate. The purpose is to share our life experiences, appreciating both our commonality and differences.

For guidance please see my seed essay below, "Newark: Being Italian, Not Being Italian," from which sprang the idea for this project. It is an example how far from the original Nordic roots of the LEIF Festival you might go when writing about your own heritage. In the essay you can see that although I am the Chair of this Nordic Festival committee, I am not Nordic myself. Everyone's contributions are welcome!

Here are some possible issues to consider in your essay or other writing:

*Keeping or losing the language of the "home country."*

*Generational conflict.*

*Changes in customs, cultural mores, and gender roles.*

*Intermarriage between individuals from different cultures.*

*The acceptance (or non-acceptance) of earlier immigrant groups.*

*The acceptance (or non-acceptance) of newer immigrant groups.*

*What happened to you, your family, or your ethnic group?*

*Why does it matter?*

Writers are limited only by their imagination, their recollections, and their life experiences. Criteria for selection include writing quality, clarity, and relevance to the theme of the Festival, **Immigration/Assimilation: what we gain and what we lose**. You do not have to be a professional writer to enter; we want to know about ordinary people.

Essays or other writing are limited to 5,000 words or less; the deadline is May 31, 2026. Please submit your entries in a Word document attached to an email to Jim Reilly [jim8794592@gmail.com](mailto:jim8794592@gmail.com). Any copyright will remain with the author, but the selected essays and other material will be published on the LEIF website, and may be read at public LEIF 2026 events; submission of material automatically grants LEIF 2026 rights to online publication and public reading from August 1, 2026 until July 31, 2027. All submissions will be read by a panel of judges and decisions about what material has been accepted will be made by June 30, 2026; all writers submitting material will be informed of the decisions shortly afterwards. In the event of disagreement of the judges, final decisions will be made by the Chair of the Festival Committee.

Looking forward to seeing your work!

Jim Reilly  
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**NEWARK: BEING ITALIAN, NOT BEING ITALIAN August, 2014, revised 2024 as a part of the collection *The End of the Ice Age is Coming***

August, 2014, revised 2024 as a part of the collection *The End of the Ice Age is Coming*  
If I start at the beginning, I start in Newark, in New Jersey, where I was born in 1943. But it's hard to start there. I felt like an imposter there for as far back as I can remember. Maybe because most people in our neighborhood were Italian, and I was only half-Italian, and that half didn't show in the name "Reilly". There were (and still are) other reasons I felt like an imposter, and some of them I had no understanding of at all then. But the Italian thing was a big one.

Once, in school, 15th Avenue Grade School, the same school my mother had attended, I had to wait in the hall with a teacher while the class did something. What they were doing I don't remember, and why I couldn't be in the room while they were doing it, I don't remember that either. Another teacher came by and started talking with the teacher who was waiting with me. Again, I don't remember who the teachers were, except that they were both women and they weren't Italian. Even though most of the kids in the school were Italian, I don't think that *any* of my teachers were Italian—there was Miss Teats, Miss Warshawsky, Mrs. Levinson, Miss Cooper, Mrs. Gertz (I might have spelled some of those names wrong)—but no Italians. There are many things I don't remember clearly, or at all; that's another reason why it's hard to write about Newark.

While the two teachers in the hallway were talking and ignoring me a student walked by, a tough kid, named Louie, and he said something in Italian. I didn't really hear what he said, but it sounded like swearing; it's possible it wasn't swearing, and it could have been

something as simple as “mamma mia”. But whether it was swearing or not, it sounded like swearing, and swearing in front of a teacher was bad. He kept going and turned a corner of the hallway where we couldn’t see him anymore; the teachers said nothing to him. But they started talking about Italians. They talked for quite a while; I remember their tsk-tsk tone but I remember only one specific thing they said, one of the milder things, it was something like “these Italians act so religious but they sure swear a lot”.

Embarrassment, shame, puzzlement, a wish that I were somewhere else—after all, I didn’t swear, not at all in those days, so were they talking about me? With that tone of voice? But they didn’t know, with my Irish name, that I was Italian. And I was one of the best-behaved kids you could find, at least on the outside of my shell; let’s leave my dark inner self out of this for now. I was way too good, in fact, for some of the other kids to like me; many of the other boys were rough, and I was not rough, another reason I didn’t feel like I fit in. As the teachers kept talking, I stood there debating with myself “should I tell them I’m Italian so they’ll stop?” But I didn’t say a word. Which was my biggest shame, that I didn’t say anything, even then I felt that, and even now that is something I do remember. How old was I when this happened? I don’t know. Maybe I was in the fourth grade, which would mean I was about nine. And we moved away from Newark when I was eleven, almost twelve. So that’s the age neighborhood, nine to eleven.

I was half-Italian but we weren’t Catholic. My father had been raised an agnostic—his German-born mother was a real hell-raiser, though she was very proper and my father said she did not swear. She was a “radical”, and she converted her Irish-American husband, my grandfather, to her many causes—socialism, feminism, pacifism. He left the Catholic Church and was, like her, an agnostic. Or was he already all these things when they met? I don’t really know for sure. I do know that he went back to the Catholic Church before he died, when he was married to his second wife, also a German, but Lutheran. But by that time my Dad was already an adult and a confirmed agnostic, no going back for him. My father refused to agree to have any of his children raised Catholic, which meant, in those days, that my mother had to leave the Catholic Church to marry him. How this worked out for her is another story, except that there were always regrets. She did make my Dad promise to take us to church, *any* church, and he chose the Universalist Church because it was the closest church he knew to no church. So my folks were married in the old Universalist Church in downtown Newark, torn down shortly afterwards and rebuilt out in the suburbs (in Glen Ridge? again, I don’t remember for sure, and now that church is gone, too). And we were taken to a Universalist church every Sunday; my father was not religious, but if he promised something he did it; sometimes non-believers are morally stricter than believers. For those of you imagining contemporary Unitarian-Universalists, re-imagine, because this was before those two denominations merged, and our church was still pretty traditional, it was Christian, with a cross, Communion, and the Lord’s Prayer.

But it certainly wasn't Catholic. And, since none of my Italian cousins had ever heard of a church with such an odd name, it was easy for them to make fun of it: "It doesn't even sound Protestant, it's probably not a church at all, you're not anything", said with the same tone of voice we used when we talked about the old woman who lived on 14th Avenue and who we thought was a witch who would drag little kids walking alone underneath her front porch and do....what?

In the 1950's in Newark there was still release time from school for religious education. Everyone was let out of school early to go to church, where they learned the religious things you couldn't learn in school, even if we did say the Lord's Prayer at the start of every school day, almost everyone saying the Catholic version. There were only two of us in my class who didn't get released: me, and Melvin, who was Jewish. I didn't know Melvin, and after everyone else had left he remained at his assigned desk on one side of the room and I stayed at my desk on the other side. I usually read to pass the time; I don't know what Melvin did. I don't remember us ever talking, and probably we weren't supposed to, at least not during the release period. But we didn't talk after we were finally allowed to leave, either. There weren't many kids I did have conversations with--a real loner I was, except for family. Family, at least in school, meant especially my cousin Marilyn, who lived downstairs from us and whose father was Sicilian, and my sister Kathie. Kathie has now changed her name to Pavia, my mother's former last name, her "maiden name", but that's another story, too, my sister's story, not mine.

The house on South 16th Street where we lived was one of a row of triplexes, with one flat to a floor, and the buildings were separated from each other by narrow, dark alleys. The one we lived in, #441, had been bought by my maternal grandfather, Regolo Pavia (known as Richard) along with his brother Willie, who had lived on the first floor. After Willie died his daughter Mary lived there with that Sicilian husband, Peter, a hairdresser, her (or his?) widowed mother, Sigodelina, and their kids, Peter Jr. and Marilyn. Diversity in that neighborhood sometimes meant your family came from a different Italian province than another family did, or even just a different village, and Sicilian was *real* diversity. Bobby Herman, one house over on the second floor, whose family was Jewish, was real diversity, too. The alleys that separated our houses were so narrow you felt you could almost reach over and touch the Hermans' house.

My grandfather and his wife, my grandmother, Alfonsina, known as Frances, lived on the second floor where they raised three kids, John, Dominick (Dick), and Maria, my mother. There were a lot of Marias and Marys in the neighborhood, three in the immediate family: my mom was Maria, there was her cousin Mary downstairs, and there was "little Marie" a few houses down; you always knew which one you were talking about. Somewhere above was the Virgin Mary (La Virgine Maria), to whom my grandmother often prayed.

When I was born my parents lived elsewhere, on a modest street mis-named Grand Avenue, but, after Grandpa Pavia died, we moved into my grandmother's flat and lived with her. Her bedroom was in the front, a room that opened off of the living room and had French doors. The other two bedrooms—my parents' room and the room I shared with my sister—were further back, off the hallway that started at the dining room and divided the rear part of the flat. There were two stairways, a front stairway, which was only used for formal guests or to get to the roof, and the back stairway, which we used all the time and where the milkman used to leave milk. In those days the door at the bottom of the back stairway could be left unlocked and the milkman would come in and pick up your used bottles and leave fresh milk on your very own landing. And anyone you really knew would come up the unlocked back stairway and knock on the door, or sometimes just come in without knocking.

The front door was kept locked, and if we entered the front stairway at all it was usually from inside, either to descend and greet special guests or to get to the roof, where the back stairway did not go. The roof was used for drying trays of the ingredients that went into tomato paste, one of the many foods still prepared in the old way, and, when I was big enough, I got to help carry the trays up and be on the roof. At the back end of the building, in the basement, reached only by the back stairway, was a wine press which had produced wine as long as my grandfather was healthy enough to make it; once he died that was the end of that. Wine was stored in the basement, too, in large glass vats and then in smaller bottles after it was time to transfer it, an exciting occasion. Both red wine and white, good ordinary Italian table wine, which us kids were allowed to sample from an early age. We drank the last white, which had somehow soured, when I graduated from college years later.

Also in the basement was a sump pump, and it was the job of little Uncle Joe, a plumber, to fix it when it wouldn't work. Many useful things were done by someone in the family—there was even a dentist, my mother's brother John, our dentist, who had moved out of the neighborhood to Montclair, where he had a large white house with columns and a fancy porch. If you got to be important you left the neighborhood.

The tomato paste we made was used for pasta, of course, sometimes bought and sometimes made by hand. I liked the hand-made little hats, *cappelli*, which had a more French-sounding name in my grandfather's language—I will not call it a dialect for fear of offending—I think *chapé*, but I don't know for sure. His language was Faetar, my grandmother's was Caposelese; more diversity. Now that years later I finally know people who live in Faeto, where my grandfather was born, I should ask and find out for sure what those little hats are called. But, as far as pasta, I loved the ravioli best of all, ravioli made by my grandmother and mother together for special meals when regular pasta wouldn't do.

Up on the third floor lived the Kostens, who were renters and who were not Italian. I'm maybe spelling their name wrong. Mrs. Kosten—I think her first name was Irma—worked for the Salvation Army, which was always mentioned very quietly; the Kostens were good

tenants, but not only was the Salvation Army not Catholic, it was different in some transgressive way, and somehow I got the idea that they might assault you if you gave them an opening. I guess they were dangerous to both Catholics and Universalists! Later the Kostens bought a little house across the street and moved out of our building, a major event in the neighborhood. I don't remember who lived upstairs after that, except that they were noisier than the Kostens. When Mrs. Kosten's father (or was it her mother? or was it Mr. Kosten?) died, he (she?) was laid out in the front room of that little house across the street, and Mrs. Kosten invited me in to see the body, something my mother was upset about when I told her. But it was too late for her to prevent it, since I had already gone in and seen the open coffin. For all my mother's upset I no longer remember who was in it.

Skipping over the house where Bobby Herman lived, several—maybe three, but maybe only two—of the other houses near us were also owned by family. Since each of these family houses had three flats there was room for several sets of relatives. My Uncle Dick lived two houses down, in a first floor flat, with his wife Stella, my first piano teacher, and their two kids, my cousins Dennis and Leonard. They moved away before we did, to Florham Park, a suburb you got to by driving out of town on South Orange Avenue; I continued piano lessons in Florham Park until we, too, moved away. There was also big Uncle Joe (my grandmother's brother), Aunt Elizabeth, Uncle Charlie, little Uncle Joe the plumber and his wife Maggie (my grandmother's sister), their daughter Dolly, little Marie whom I've already mentioned, and others I'm now hazy about. There was a woman married to the son of one of these people, I think, and I once told her that I was seven years old, and I added just what I was supposed to keep secret, that my mother was forty.

Other relatives who no longer lived in the neighborhood would drop in, often unannounced, always coming up the back stairway, especially Uncle John the dentist, and Uncle Dick after he moved to Florham Park. Some of my father's relatives would come in the back way, too, but some of them the front way. My father's stepmother, who was very proper, and who did not like Italians, came in the front way. One of the best of my father's back-way relatives was his Uncle Hugo, one of his real mother's brothers, who was a practical joker, and always managed to trip on the empty bottles left out for the milkman to pick up. The predictability of this joke disgusted my mother, or at least she pretended to be disgusted, but brought great joy to me, my sister, and my father. Of all my father's relatives Uncle Hugo and his forgetful wife Aunt Dora were the most fun, but I think it was Aunt Elsa who loved us kids the most. She had lost seven pregnancies, and she and my Uncle Herbert never had children; my parents were always sure to share us with them. Uncle Herbert was another Jewish person I knew, and I'm sure that he was the biggest part, along with Melvin and Bobby Herman, of my growing up thinking that Italians and Jews were allies, or at least potential allies in a world that sometimes didn't seem to like either group. Elsa and Herbert's marriage was opposed at first by both families, and my grandfather helped them elope. But that's another story, too, a nice one.

I mentioned my step-grandmother, Lily Reilly (Lili? or was it Lilli?), who did not like Italians. She and my Grandma Pavia had little to say to each other, and my mother often had to hold back her reactions when Lily was around, which was not too often. I didn't understand why my mom's family didn't like Lily. But my Dad's cousin Elsa (the Aunt Elsa I mentioned) told me years later, when I was in my 40's and my parents had both died, that when I was born Lili announced (to whom?) "that just means there's another dago in the family". She was said to have softened a bit after meeting the new dago. Softened, but she remained vigilant when my sister and I were with her so that any bad behavior on our part would not embarrass her. Manners were important, and I suspect, in her opinion, they did not come naturally to Italians; no one else we knew ever expected bad manners from us. Lili would never fail to anger my mother by asserting that Perry Como was not much of a singer and was just, after all, a barber. As a kid I wondered what was wrong with being a barber? *My* barber seemed pleasant enough. But, of course, the point I didn't understand was that Perry Como was an *Italian* barber, one of the stereotypes that described Italian immigrants to the rest of the world. When my father's younger brother Bill married lovely Aunt Kay, also Italian-American, Lili managed to find a reason not go to the wedding, and she didn't let Grandpa Reilly go either; he was not well or strong enough to resist her decision. Lili and my grandpa Reilly and the younger couple were to later share a house; Aunt Kay must have been relieved when she and Uncle Bill had saved enough money to move out.

Moving is a theme here. All of those Italians had moved to Newark, from Faeto, from Caposele, and from countless other poor southern Italian towns. When they later moved from their first, humbler Newark dwellings, they bought places like the grander triplexes on South 16th Street where we lived. My Dad's Irish relatives had come in the mid nineteenth century, and his German side came later for at least partly political reasons; they ended up in Jersey City and later other places, with my father moving to Newark after his marriage. There were other neighborhoods of Newark besides the one we lived in, with Jews, Portuguese, blacks, more Irish, Germans, and other mysterious groups. Us kids did not go to those places, at least not without adults to watch us.

But more and more people started to move out of Newark. For a couple years before my Dad's transfer to Syracuse, N.Y., my parents were already restless. A big element in their desire to move was the fear that the neighborhood was going to "turn black", which brought many of the reactions you'd expect in working class and aspiring lower-middle-class white people, especially on the part of my mother, who was far more racist than my Dad. My Dad, after all, used to play tennis with a black man (a "Negro"), and since I usually went with my Dad when he played tennis, I was, in my mother's opinion, exposed to something she thought I shouldn't see: two men of different races batting a ball around and being friendly. But my Dad's relative liberality didn't mean he wanted to stay put if the neighborhood changed.

When the first black family moved in, toward the South Orange Avenue end of the block, I was given strict instructions by my mom not to talk with them if I saw them. I never did see them, although I knew which house they were supposed to live in; they must not have had a kid in our school since there was, I think, only one black kid in the school. I didn't know him, but I knew he didn't live on our block. Once there was a family of gypsies, as they were then called, living around the corner, and they did have kids in the school, though just temporarily; I was given orders to stay away from them, too. Their presence especially alarmed my Italian grandmother.

I had mixed feelings about all these instructions. I was a well-behaved child, and I almost always obeyed my parents, and their racism seemed to be shared by everyone I knew. Of course I didn't even know it was called "racism", and I also didn't know why I already felt it was wrong. But I was fascinated by the Romani people, as I would now call them, who glamorously lived in a storefront, and one of the Romani boys actually had a hole in the back of his pants through which you could catch a glimpse of his behind, which also seemed glamorous to me. And while talking with black people might not be quite as much fun as talking with someone with a hole in his pants, I did know the one black student teacher in our school, who was assigned to my classroom for her practice teaching. She was a soft-spoken woman who was kind to me, a kid who had few friends. In fact, she was much kinder to me than the supervising regular teacher, who thought I spent too much time with my cousin Marilyn instead of with the other boys. I was different, and awkward with other kids, especially boys. And if I was different, why shouldn't I like other people who were different, too, like Romani people, or blacks? Maybe *they* would understand me. Only much later did I understand how common such a dynamic is: you think that if you're an outsider then other outsiders might understand you. Not necessarily true, of course, and often a mistake for adults, but it was a consolation for a kid without many friends.

So, wanting to move, my family did a certain amount of house-hunting, which usually meant Saturday and Sunday excursions in the '37 Chevy. We covered all the Newark suburbs except the very wealthy ones. I forgot to mention that we had finally gotten a car, used, but our very own, and roomy enough so that Grandma Pavia, who had arthritis, could get in and out of it the back seat without too much trouble. My father was the only driver, but finally, when it was time to move to Syracuse, my mother learned to drive, too; by then the car was, I think, a '47 Plymouth. Mom had had a learner's permit for years, but had never actually gotten a license; driving was not something that many Italian-American women did in those days, and most of the women in our neighborhood did not drive; they were driven by men. My mother's fear of driving caused her more than one bout of diarrhea; when the man who was paid to teach her to drive arrived at our house for her lessons she was usually in the bathroom. But it was one of those few things, like marrying a non-Italian, that she defied convention to do.

It was hard to find a house my parents both liked and could afford until my Dad was offered a transfer to Syracuse and a raise. We bought a new house in the Syracuse suburbs,

in between North Syracuse and Liverpool. My grandmother, who owned half of the triplex we had lived in, sold her half and came with us, contributing her money to the payments that made the new house possible. She had never lived away from her extended family before, or in a neighborhood where Italian was not spoken. Since she couldn't read or write either English or Italian and had few people to talk with in the new neighborhood, things were lonely for her. My parents finally repented of their desire to protect their kids from television and got one so grandma would have something to do, but of course we all watched the TV. Moving was the end of Newark for grandma, but she never stopped missing it, and she's buried there next to my grandfather in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, which is now divided in half by the Garden State Parkway. It was the end of Newark for all of us, and it took many years before I could begin to figure out how I was, at least partly, Italian, and to try to figure out what that meant and how it fit in with Newark and all the rest of it.

*addendum: a DNA test shows that my "Italian half" includes some inheritance not only from Italy and France,, but also from the Caucasus, Albania, Greece, Cyprus, and a little from North Africa (Libya? Tunisia?). Natural enough—the Mediterranean was there for everyone to sail upon, and Southern Italy sticks right out into it. And there was once a large Muslim settlement in Italy in Lucera, near my grandfather's Faeto, and there's a complicated history involving soldiers from near Lyon in France going to Italy to expel the Muslims and then staying there; thus my grandfather's special French-like language. The Muslims had already been expelled from Sicily to Lucera, and then were chased from Lucera itself. Not a pleasant history, though the village still celebrates it. But some people from the French/Italian side must have married, or at least mated with, some people from the Muslim side, maybe, I'm afraid, even by force. Hence my North African DNA. I joke with my Muslim friends that it's my "Muslim DNA", but DNA doesn't have a religion any more than my father did. What would my mother have thought had she known about this history? And that we are (and she was) part African, even if just North African?*

*People often move, voluntarily or involuntarily. And they usually mate, also voluntarily but sometimes involuntarily. And everyone, if you go back far enough, comes from somewhere else, even from places some people might not approve of: Italy, the Middle East, Africa, Mexico, China, or Haiti. Sometimes it's so long ago you don't really remember, or know, anything about it. Sometimes it's recent, and the newcomers might receive the same scorn my Italian grandparents met with. But aren't we all family if you go back far enough? Aren't we? All of us?*

*Jim Reilly*