

NEWS & FEATURES TOP STORIES PEOPLE EVENTS



Tommaso Bordonaro signing a copy of his book. Photo credit: Santo Lombino

One man's tale of joy and woe: *La spartenza*

ELISABETTA SANTI

L*a spartenza* is a literary jewel, a linguistic triumph and the precious preservation of one man's journey to the USA from a small town in Sicily. Written by a semi-literate contadino who was fluent in dialect rather than Italian or English, his simple and candid style of writing is captivating: 'io ho deciso assoluto andare in America...per i figli poter fare tutte le scuole'. Bordonaro's hybrid language includes words like *il bassamento* (basement) and *abolanza* (ambulance) and was important enough for top writers Natalia Ginzberg and Gianfranco Foglia to fight tooth and nail to get it published.

For those who do not know Tommaso Bordonaro, could you say a little about him?

Tommaso Bordonaro was born in 1909 in Bolognetta, province of Palermo and he worked as a *pastore* from a young age. He didn't go to school because WWI broke out in 1915 and all his teachers left for military service so the local school closed. He immigrated to America in 1947 to join relatives in Garfield, New Jersey.

Having spent little time in school-classrooms, he decided at a certain point to tell his life story. Being 78 when he started writing, his language is an interesting accumulation of Sicilian dialect, Italian and Italian-American slang from New Jersey.

of English and Italian words but it is a language that has attracted top linguistic attention.

Do you feel a certain affinity with Tommaso Bordonaro, being from the same town as him, Bolognetta?

Definitely. Also because I have been an immigrant too, so I can empathize with him. I worked for nine years in Calabria when I was young as a railroad worker and spent six years teaching in Milan so I already had the requirements needed to understand, to a certain extent, Tommaso Bordonaro's story.

When did you first meet Tommaso Bordonaro?

Before I knew about Bordonaro, I was involved in emigration history. I organized a *festa* in Bolognetta for emigrants and a group of almost 100 American immigrants came for the occasion. Tommaso Bordonaro did not come but came the following year in 1988 and bought with him three books containing his autobiography, which he was seeking to publish. That's when we met.

In a way, his autobiography was a way of making up for the fact that he wasn't able to come the year before. He'd written about his life as a sort of evaluation of his existence. At the time his book was entitled "La storia di Tutta la mia vita da when io rigordo ch'ero un bambino". (The story of my whole life or at least everything that I can remember from when I was a child).

Where does the current title *La spartenza* come from, and what does it mean?

The word *spartenza* means separation, division, though it's a

particularly painful departure. It's also a word with traditional religious connotations. It is used with the processions of Holy Friday when the crucifix is carried on one side and *la Madonna* on the other side - they meet and then they separate.

It is also used in Sicilian dialect, for example you can say, 'cu sparti avi megghiu parti' (chi divide, ha la meglio parte) which means if you are the one dividing something like a cake or dessert, you end up better off. It's a bit of a negative expression, but it's a way of expressing what often happens.

Tell me about your

relationship with Tommaso Bordonaro – I'm aware he held you in high esteem.

He was somebody *austera* and *sobrica* like *i contadini di un tempo*. I think that he wanted to justify himself in front of his community – justifying the choices he made in his life: his decision to marry a poor woman, of eloping, of not working in Liguria when there was the opportunity, the choice to emigrate. His writing justifies all of these choices. He brings everything before his community and leaves it up to them to decide, yet at the same time, trusts in the opinion of his *concittadini*. You can see that he had real strength and courage, yet he also felt the need to justify the choices he made.

Could you tell me about the theatre adaptation you made of his book for *Teatro del Baglio* in 2005?

It's a one-act play. It's short because we wanted to convey the essential parts of his life. There are seven characters, each one of them representing a different aspect of Bordonaro's life. It was shown in America too, in Garfield (NJ) and at two universities in New York. We remained faithful to Bordonaro – 99% of the script is taken from the book. We didn't transform, cut or summarize anything because we wanted to preserve his voice. His language is so important to us. After all, Bordonaro, without his language, is something entirely different.

La Spartenza (Palermo: Navarra Editore, 2013) edited by Santo Lombino is available to buy online and on Amazon.



Italian emigrants

Professor Santo Lombino, a self-professed *bare-foot historian* is heralded the *discoverer* of Bordonaro. As an expert in Sicilian emigration, he says it is his passion for humanity that sparked his interest in history, and what led him to editing Bordonaro's diary. We caught up with him in Bolognetta, Sicily.

His writing lacks elaborate expressions but it gets right to the heart of matters in its simplicity. Thus, like Natalia Ginzberg said, he is able to say in four lines something that would take others ten pages: he sculpts out an entire plot with simplicity and brevity. There are of course deformations



Tommaso Bordonaro *La spartenza*

a cura di Santo Lombino
Prefazione di Goffredo Fofi

The cover of Tommaso Bordonaro's book "La Spartenza" edited by Professor Santo Lombino