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LETTER FROM ITALY

All in the Famiglia

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Bari, Italy

Capital of the southern Italian region of Apulia (the heel of the peninsular boot), Bari is an ancient port city whose architectural treasures include the 12th-century Romanesque cathedral of St. Nicholas, burial place of the original Santa Claus.

The 1960s-era complex of concrete blocks housing the University of Bari's Faculty of Economics is surely not on any sightseer's itinerary. Yet this, too, is an institution that has contributed to the city's notoriety, if not its renown.

For the last several months, Italian newspapers have reported on prosecutors' investigations of the recruitment process at a number of the country's universities. News accounts have featured tales of rigged competitions, horse trading among members of hiring committees, examples of shameless favoritism, and at least one threat of violence (an anonymous letter in an envelope containing several bullets, sent to a member of a selection panel).

Of all the institutions implicated in the scandal, none has received more attention than Bari, which the Rome newspaper */Il Messaggero/* has described as an encyclopedia of "what can happen, should not happen, yet does happen at Italian universities."

Bari's notoriety is due in part to allegations regarding its medical school, where at least six professors have been placed under house arrest pending investigations of hiring practices. The university has also been the target of unrelated charges that instructors and administrators conspired to sell exam questions and even academic degrees.

Yet the news media's focus on Bari is also undoubtedly due to a characteristic of its academic staff that makes irresistible copy: a

remarkable number of instructors with identical surnames, many of them apparently close relatives. Such coincidences are for some reason especially common in the economics faculty.

The Italian press tends to report cases of apparent consanguinity at Bari as if they were *ipso facto* evidence of impropriety, without making any specific accusations or quoting the people involved.

Readers are expected to take corruption for granted. But wouldn't it be interesting, my editors and I thought, to get the professors' own point of view? In a country where family-owned businesses abound, and where children often follow their parents into the same profession, might the maligned scholars at Bari have arguments to justify the same tendency in academe?

This is why, on a warm Wednesday morning in late spring of this year, my friend the photographer Chris Warde-Jones and I found ourselves at the university's economics building. Chris was armed with a pair of Nikon D2X's and an array of lenses; I had my recorder, pads, and pens. We were ready to hear the other side of the Great Bari Nepotism Story. The only question was, would anyone want to tell it?

Journalists, of course, are used to people who don't want to speak with them. Especially in Italy, where the reflexive attitude toward anyone outside your clan or social network is intense suspicion, people view reporters like a particularly annoying breed of mosquito.

Objects of unwanted attention can be tactful. Like the cardinal's secretary who told me that His Eminence's schedule would not permit an interview "at this time" nor, as she elaborated at my obtuse insistence, at any time over the next several months.

Evasion need not be subtle to make you feel like a fool. I once spent days phoning a lawyer's office, with such uncannily bad timing that he was always either on another line, meeting with a client, or, just minutes after being engaged in either of those ways, out for the rest of the day.

At least it saves time when people give you a frank "no." Like the princess (a more common title in Italy than elsewhere, yet still impressive to me) who refused to speak about her involvement in a multimillion-euro inheritance dispute, right before trying to get me to write about her

daughter's victory in a beauty contest.

In this case, though, we had no such clarity. None of the two dozen professors to whom I had written had replied to my e-mail messages. Only the university's rector, a classical philologist who was not personally involved in any of the scandals, had granted us an appointment.

Then, two days before our scheduled trip, the university's press office phoned to say that, though none of the people I wished to speak with had agreed to my request, they hadn't turned it down either.

"They're waiting to see what you're up to," said my wife, who was born in Bari and is presumably learned in the mysterious ways of southern Italy.

Only when a man from the press office met us upon our arrival at the airport did we learn that Giovanni Girone had agreed to an interview.

Mr. Girone, a professor of economics and a former rector of the university, was said to have three children on the economics faculty. It looked as if my wife might be right, and that we had not traveled in vain.

A woman in her late fifties with bleached blond hair introduced herself as secretary to "the Magnificent Girone." *Magnifico*, the Italian honorific for a university rector, is one I'd heard only on formal occasions, but Mr. Girone's assistant uttered it repeatedly during our visit, without the slightest hint of irony.

A few minutes later, the professor himself, a robust man in his 60s with a mustache and dark glasses (which he later took off to reveal a sightless left eye), emerged to greet us.

"What I want to know," he said, as soon as we had dispensed with the formalities, "is who sent you here? Who sent you all the way from America to write about this?"

I tried to explain that Chris and I were both based in Rome, less than 300 miles away, and that we were merely following up on what the Italian press had already reported so abundantly.

"The pornographic Italian press," Mr. Girone said. I nodded sympathetically.

"I'm very busy now," the professor explained. "I am about to teach a class."

We were happy to wait till he was through, I replied (not bothering to mention that we had no other appointments for the next five hours).

Mr. Girone thought for a moment before deciding, apparently, that it was better to get this over with. "Tell the class to wait a half-hour," he told his secretary as he led us into his office.

Chris asked if he might shoot a quick portrait.

"No, I'm sorry, but I'm philosophically opposed to photographs; I never allow them to be taken," Mr. Girone said, sitting under a framed print of himself shaking hands with the president of Italy. (Readers can find another photograph of the professor on his home page on the statistics department's Web site.)

As the interview began, I approached the issue of nepotism in general terms, intending to leave the more sensitive issue of Mr. Girone's own family for later. But he got right to the point.

Three of his children taught on the economics faculty, he declared, all of them in business administration, none in his own department. "None of my children does what I do," he said, stressing that he had had no role in their appointment. "If I had wanted to help my children, I would have had them go into statistics."

Mr. Girone's wife (who in a common Italian practice had retained her premarital surname and was thus not strictly speaking a Girone) also taught at the university, he volunteered, but she was in the health field.

Familial relationships among faculty members were irrelevant, the professor insisted, as long as there was no evidence of impropriety. It was only natural that children would pursue their parents' profession, he said.

"Is it necessarily a crime if a lawyer does what he can to have his son follow his profession?" he asked, his voice rising in excitement. "Or the pharmacist? Or the magistrate? Or the priest?"

I had just started to raise an objection to this last example when Mr. Girone's laughter made it clear that I had taken his bait.

By the end of our meeting, the professor had evidently relaxed and found our presence agreeable enough to share some sightseeing tips and to show us his large collection of rocks, which included an apparent fossil from Petra, Jordan, and what he said was lava from Etna, the Sicilian volcano.

After thanking the professor for what had turned out to be well over an hour of his time — during which the students waiting for his delayed class had given up and left — Chris and I set out in the hope of finding someone else to talk with.

We did find two of eight professors, said to be related, who all teach economics at Bari. Both politely declined to be interviewed, though one wished me */buon lavoro/* ("good luck with your work").

Chris was reduced to photographing door nameplates with various recurrent surnames, if only to prove to */The Chronicle's* photo editor that he had shown up for the assignment.

The day dragged on like this until we were finally ushered into the baronial office of the rector 40 minutes after our scheduled appointment and only 20 minutes before we were supposed to leave for the airport. The suave and courtly rector unflappably answered the few questions we had time for with the expected diplomatic vagaries, noting that none of the legal investigations under way had so far led to the filing of any charges and promising that a committee would soon produce a new ethics code.

It was hard not to conclude that our expedition had been a failure. The only two people we had spoken with had told us nothing substantially new and appeared unlikely to tell us any more. There seemed no point in pursuing the story further.

A couple of weeks later, however, while checking some information about Mr. Girone on the Internet, I ran across a couple of details that it seemed worth phoning to ask about.

Was it true that a certain associate professor in his own statistics department was his son-in-law?

"He is my son-in-law, now. But he was already here for four or five years as a researcher before he had any relationship with my daughter."

But was it after his marriage that he received his professorship?

"Yes, but I was not involved in any way in that selection process."

And your wife — didn't you say that she teaches in the field of health?

"In health statistics. An entirely different field from my own."

But in your department?

"Departments are merely disciplinary structures," Mr. Girone explained.

"I see," I said, though I really didn't. Yet I felt that somehow it had been worth hearing him say it.

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