



Members of pensioners club in Molfetta pose outside their headquarters for photographer, using club chairs which they often take outdoors to bask in sunshine.

Sunshine, wine and Social Security

By John Robaton



Pensioners often turn up at dockside in early morning to talk to fishermen.

● Molfetta is a small but important fishing town located just north of Bari, right above the heel of Italy on the Adriatic Sea. On the edge of Molfetta's old sector is one of the town's principal squares, where many clubs are located. These clubs are the center of social activity for senior citizens and are usually formed according to political affiliations. Every party has its own club for retired men, as do many commercial and religious organizations.

But the most famous club in Molfetta is the one known as the Retired Italian-Americans Club, which has about 60 members, most of them widowers. These are the men who left their native land years ago to seek their fortunes in opportunity-

filled America. Many of them settled in Hoboken and Newark, N.J., although some migrated to other parts of the U.S. Now they have returned to Italy and the town of Molfetta where their monthly Social Security checks can buy a modestly comfortable standard of living.

The amount of their individual checks varies but generally is anywhere from \$150 to \$250 monthly. Checks were previously mailed from Washington but now they are mailed from the American Embassy in Rome. The checks arrive usually between the 6th to the 12th of the month, and lately arrangements have been made so the checks can be cashed at a local bank, saving a trip to a bigger town. With this



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income and some accumulated savings, the men are able to carve out a pretty good life.

Expenses are low, providing the retirees remain in good health, since benefits do not include medical costs in Italy. Many men have bought their own apartments; others rent modern, five-room apartments for just \$50 a month. Widowers usually live with relatives — brothers and sisters who remained all their lives in Italy. A few have even married again, and in spite of their age have produced a son or daughter by a younger wife.

Fish is a staple part of the retiree diet, and since it's so plentiful, it's also very inexpensive. Fruit and vegetables are fresh and cheap. In fact, quite a few of the men have bought land where they cultivate their own gardens. If they don't own grape arbors and make their own wine, they can still buy a good bottle of wine for about a quarter.

Clothing isn't very expensive, but then again the old men haven't much need of a wardrobe of new clothes. Nor do they need heavy clothing, since Molfetta has such a mild climate. A suit lasts a long time, which is quite understandable. They usually wear their finest only on Sundays when they faithfully go to confession and communion at the local Catholic church. A visit to the home of friends for dinner, a special festival or celebration of a feast are about the only other occasions when the men dress up.

A typical day begins early with a morning constitutional to the harbor area. As the sun rises, many of these retirees recapture the memories of their young manhood as fishermen. They watch nets being prepared for the next trip to sea. And once in a while a few of them will go out in a small craft themselves to while away the hours fishing. In the evening, some of the pensioners stroll again to the waterfront to watch the catch being unloaded.

The Retired Italian-Americans Club itself opens about 9 a.m. each day, and it's not long before it's filled. It is a plain place, one small room with a table in front, a larger room in the rear with several tables and a cabinet to hold the American flag, with many chairs, each stamped "U.S.A." on the back. Besides a few photographs of club celebrations and dinners back in the United States, the walls are decorated with the pictures of Presidents Kennedy and Roosevelt, Christopher Columbus and an American flag.

The old men spend most of their time playing cards, drinking a little wine, reading the newspapers and



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basking in the warm Italian sun. But whether they're playing cards indoors or sitting outside the clubhouse watching the passing scene, the old men are usually found deep in conversation. They talk mainly about their past life in the United States. Most of their immediate families are still in America, their sons and daughters and grandchildren, friends who migrated with them and who haven't returned. Conversation topics include the Depression years when they worked long hours for little money.

They are frequently found of pulling from their pockets the most recent photographs their families have sent them from the U.S., and this also inspires a lot of talk. The men seem to know everything that's happening back home, because someone or other is always receiving American magazines or the local U.S. newspaper.

Surprisingly, after so many years in the United States, the English they speak is still broken. Yet during their stay in the New World, these men usually found little need to speak fluent English. They confined their social activities to their families and Italian-speaking friends.

Politics is of little interest to them. Unlike members of other clubs in the square. One retiree said, "America has been good to us. We're Democrats, sure, always voted Democrat, but Democrat or Republican president, it doesn't matter to us. The president is always good, because he is the president of the United States."

The only political issue they have an active interest in is whether the U.S. Congress is going to pass a law increasing their benefits. They never stop talking of the latest rumor concerning such an increase. They all know, practically to the day, when their checks will arrive, as well as the day the checks of their friends will arrive. The postman knows all of them and, if they aren't at home on delivery day but at the club, it's not uncommon for him to drop the checks off there.

After a morning of talking and listening and nodding, or gambling a bit over cards, the club becomes deserted during lunch hour. In Italy, the biggest meal of the day is at noon and the women, be it wife or sister or niece, always manage to have it prepared and waiting. There's a bottle of good wine on the table, usually a red wine made in the Molfetta region. The meal begins with a big bowl of any one of an infinite variety of pasta. Then there's meat or fish,

along with fresh vegetables. Cheese and fruit top it off followed by the afternoon siesta.

Later in the day when the sun starts to go down, the old men will often take a cup of bitter, black espresso coffee at a cafe (called a bar in Italy), and then return to the club or to work in their gardens in the cool evening. There's only one movie in town, plus a few dancing places for the young. Yet most retired Italian-Americans prefer to chat at the club or at homes of friends in the evening. They watch little television. Instead, they go to bed early.

President of the Retired Italian-Americans Club is Tony Fiorentini, a 78-year-old widower who came back to Molfetta to settle a few years ago leaving his two children and many grandchildren in New Jersey. For 35 years in America, he worked as an ornamental iron worker and as plant foreman. Tony worked and saved. On a visit to Molfetta about 12 years ago, he bought some land on the outskirts. Over the years he acquired a small but spacious five-room villa. There's a fountain in front with goldfish. Fruit trees are all around — plums, pomegranates, pears, peaches, lemons, tangerines, apples. From his grapes he makes wine, and from the olive grove in the rear of his home he produces enough oil to last throughout the year.

Flowers are everywhere. Tony loves to have lots of people for feasts and parties, with music. While it's getting more difficult because of his age and health to keep up the pace, he tries to spend weekends at his home with friends from the club.

When he's not at his villa, Tony stays in town with two unmarried sisters — one 80, the other 72 — in an apartment they own. "They serve me coffee in bed every morning," he says. "They do all the shopping and cooking and housekeeping. I don't have to do anything." His \$150 a month is ample enough. "I don't have anything to worry about as long as I don't get sick," he says.

Typical of the retired expatriates, Tony's life still revolves around the United States because that's where his thoughts are most of the time. Wistfully, he thinks of one more visit back, but in reality knows he will never return.

"My children are at work in New York City all day and my grandchildren are all at school or summer camp. There's no one at home, so I'd be by myself all day. It would get very lonely. My friends are here.

"But I say, always, 'I love America! God bless America!'" SUNDAY GROUP