

Part I.

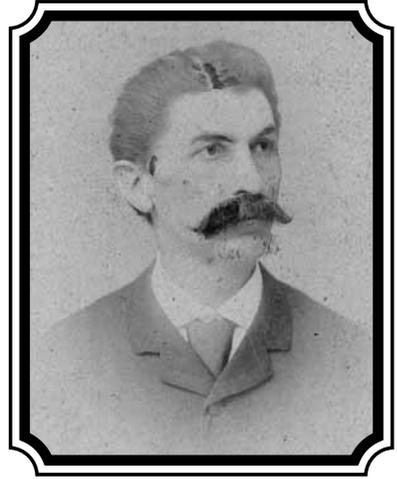
Italia



*Cassano Magnago,
Provincia de Lombardia, Italia
1800 ~ July 6, 1914*



Maria Giuseppa ~ 1899



Bernardo Giani ~ 1899

Prologue Uno

Miracolo!

Angela Irene Giani De Bernardi

March 11, 1886

Cassano Magnago, Italia ~ Provincia di Milano



“*Dio! Hurry!*” Piccolina screamed at the poor undone washer woman. “*Signora* Maria Giuseppa has fallen down the steps! She’s gushing blood like a fountain! God help the poor woman. Get the water boiling! Get the stable boy!”

She cradled the half conscious woman in her ample lap, threatening the stunned boy with the fires of hell if he didn’t find the doctor. Another was sent to fetch Signore Bernardo, Maria Giuseppa’s husband.

For as long as anyone could remember, the cook had been called *Piccolina*, the “Little One.” She’d been left on the doorstep of an old monastery turned family domicile, owned by old Signore Luigi Giani. If the foundling had another name, it was known only to God and the priest who christened her in the kitchen a few days later. It was rumored the nomadic *Zingari*, who wandered Europe in colorful wagons, took children, as well as anything else upon which they could lay their hands. But they must have abandoned this one because as she grew, the sultry Piccolina developed a head of wild frizzy hair and reached such alpine stature, people whispered “Africa.” By 1842, now 17, she was running the Giani clan with an iron will. On this day, March 11, 1886, forty-four years later, the robust 59 year-old had managed the huge household for over three decades. The Gianis had swelled to 105 people, many of whom she’d delivered herself.

“*Stupida!*” hissed Piccolina to the assembled kitchen help. “Run back and get sheets. She’s got to be wrapped in sheets! She’s trembling with shock. *Dio!* Save us all! The baby! Blood is coming everywhere! *She’s lost so many*” she mumbled. Choked with worry and tears, she continued to stroke Maria Giuseppa’s head. “*She’ll die this time,*” Piccolina thought.

Maria Giuseppa, now in her 30’s had three living children: Giuseppina Maria, 12; Carlo Luigi, 7; and Vittoria, 6. Ricardo, Irene and Alessandro had died on or before their third birthdays. As one of the 15 mistresses of the house, she was taking her turn to oversee the many duties, and had gone to speak to Piccolina about the evening meal. Four massive, steep and uneven stone steps led down into the huge kitchen. Over six months pregnant with her seventh child, she caught her foot on the hem of her slips and tumbled down, down, down onto the stone floor below. Now swaddled in sheets, cradled in the strong stable master’s arms, she was carried upstairs to the bedroom of their set of rooms. Maria Giuseppa’s huge dark eyes were closed and the round beautiful face was blue from loss of blood. Piccolina followed, laying a wad towels under her mistress and then tried desperately not to cause more pain when removing the soiled sheets. As quickly as she could, she hastened back down the stairs and met the doctor,



*Maria Giuseppa Poretti Giani
at 16 ~ 1866*

as he raced through the front door.

“We must get ready for the curetting,” he shot.

“Done,” she rejoined. “Everything is under control,” she added, hugging the soiled sheets, racing towards the kitchen.

“*Capo di Stato*,” the doctor thought, with the barest trace of a smile, while bounding up the stairs. “The head of state takes care of all things.”

Agonized cries tore his thoughts to shreds.

“The baby’s dead, with all this! Tragic!” the doctor thought, picking up the threads of his history with Maria Giuseppa and Bernardo.

“Four deceased children. She’s too old.”

When he entered the room he observed that Piccolina had already gathered two experienced female servants and the town midwife.

Back in the kitchen, Piccolina gave the washer woman the soiled bundle, who took it to the adjacent laundry room to begin immediately scrubbing the blood stains.

The door flew open as Bernardo Giani raced to the stairs, taking steps, three at a time. Born to old Signore Luigi when he was in his 40’s, this strikingly tall son favored the Giani side with the long French nose, piercing jet eyes, and high cheekbones. Finely educated at Germany’s Heidelberg University, as were all the fourteen Giani sons, he married the beautiful Maria Giuseppa Poretti, seven years his junior in the spring of 1870.

As he erupted through the bedroom door, his face grimaced when he saw his motionless wife and the preparations for the uterine scraping. The doctor was washing his hands, ready to begin, when the breathless washerwoman flew into the room. A look of horror was painted on her face.

“Oh, Sir! *Signore. Dottore!*” She stammered, as the group turned in shock to face this outburst. “When I was opening the sheets to wash them ... I found... I ... God save us all! Please! Come quick!”

The frantic party raced back down the stairs, through the kitchen, knifing through a bevy of stunned servants, turning finally into the laundry room. The distraught woman carefully unwrapped a tiny female fetus no bigger than a man’s hand.

“Send for the priest,” ordered Piccolina to the same stable boy.

“Get a mirror!” demanded Bernardo.

“There may still be life.” Then he turned to the stupefied audience and continued calmly. “This is one of my own, and where there is hope there WILL be effort.” Bernardo’s look of steely determination passed into everyone present.

The doctor had to pry Bernardo’s arms open in order to remove three previous dead children. Now another?

Presently, a maid pressed a silver mirror into the hands of the *Signore*. The tight, speechless knot drew close. An eternity passed, where time hovered, then stopped.

“She lives,” whispered Bernardo. “There’s fog on the glass. Thank you God.”

“My Son. Do not be encouraged,” stated the doctor, gently bending down to examine the infant. “So tiny. So tiny.”

He began gently to move her arms and legs, trying to get the baby to take air into her undeveloped lungs. Soon, just the barest of newborn kitten sounds could be heard. The assemblage clapped, and then cried “*Miracolo! Miracolo!*” Bernardo cheered her on.

“Breathe! Breathe!” the two men instructed, showing the tiny girl how.

She was fighting like a tiger, willing herself to live; infusing hope to the household.



Bernardo Giani 1859 ~ Garibaldi's Army under Victor Emmanuelle II

Old Nonno Luigi and Nonna Giuditta stood in front, near their beleaguered son.

The priest entered.

“I wish to baptize her, Father,” stated Bernardo, turning, holding his daughter close to his chest, stepping back nearer his parents for comfort. “If she goes to heaven, she should not meet God and her sister and brothers without The Holy Blessing and a name. I wish to name her Angela, an angel sent from heaven to me, and Irene, for her poor little dead sister. Thanks be to God for this miracle.”

“Fight Angela! Fight, *Cara Mio!*” he whispered, cradling her to his chest, while his father and mother, Luigi and Giuditta, lent their arms for support. The priest received the mewling child, and in the presence of the Giani household, in the laundry room over the slate washing sink, he poured the holy waters of naming over the head no bigger than a small blood orange. Bernardo took his baptized angel, and turning with hesitation, he offered his daughter into the capable and waiting hands of Piccolina. With that, doctor and husband raced back upstairs to Maria Giuseppa.

In her familiar kitchen, singing a soft lullaby of childhood, Piccolina began to wash the tiny creature in warm water. A tight knot of Giani women lent support while the servants stayed clotted behind, taking up an ancient song. Its sweetness wound back into time, healing, caressing, pouring love over this newest being. The specially carved birth cradle brought from Paris by the family in 1800, blessed by generations of priests and Giani babies, was placed beside the fire. Piccolina sat in her ancient rocker, took this newest Giani unto her, and placed a long foot on the cradle, only to mark rhythmic time. She knew no baby of hers would be put into it when there were a dozen eager and willing arms that knew no sleep. Rocking and murmuring, her thoughts turned to her years with this family. Dead children. She'd held so many. Sickness. Typhoid. The dreaded smallpox. Pneumonia that flooded the lungs. Ear infections so bad they burst the drums while children screamed in pain. Hadn't she just been a part of it all! Now, there was this little miracle.

The first Giani she could remember was that elegant gentleman, the civil engineer, who spoke Italian with a French accent. So tall, so dignified, long dead.

He came to the kitchen for coffee, pieces of *Panetoni* and late night talks. He wanted to impart his memories, tell the family stories before he forgot. Piccolina listened well and promised she would always keep the stories alive. During quiet moments she recounted them to his son, Luigi II, little Angela's grandfather, considering it an honorable duty.

"In 1799 ..."

The big woman brushed a lock of tight gray fuzz back under her head kerchief, and rocking the child, she faded into long ago memory. The servants gathered around her. The fire painted the stones of the kitchen a dull orange. The old clock ticked. The cradle creaked.

Young Napoleon, Italian by birth, swarmed on Milan, soundly beating the Austrians, gaining control of Northern Italy. Returning to Paris, he chose a trusted supporter, a civil engineer, who was blessed with a cool head and warm demeanor that had gotten him through the terrible French Revolution. Napoleon bid the young *Monsieur Gianni* to redesign and rebuild the Simplon Pass, thereby assuring an easier, more direct route south east to Milan. Gianni would also oversee and strengthen his commander's hold on Northern Italy from Lombardy. With that, the young conqueror turned his genius towards the rebuilding of his devastated France.

Then spelled with two "n's" and pronounced with the soft French "j," the young Gianni, together with his newly pregnant wife, began preparations to leave Paris in the early summer of 1800. Devoted servants, some with children, loaded the entire household onto a dozen enormous carts with gaily painted wheels, taller than a tall man's head. Paintings, beds, furniture, linens, cooking paraphernalia, canaries in cages, cats, dogs and people swayed and bumped over the 222 road miles southeast to Italy. Children and family pets often romped ahead while harnesses strung with bells filled the fine air with the music of purpose and adventure.

Massive hair-covered hooves clopped ever onward towards *Le Petit San Bernardo Pass* and the summit of *Monte Bianco* – Mt. Blanc. Its pinnacle, used 2000 years past by the Roman legions, divided southern France from Northern Italy. Acutely ill, Madame Gianni lay



Bernardo Giani ~ Far Right with Brothers and Friends in an Italian Piemonte Alpine Cantina circa 1867

for a month in the back of one of the wagons. Now early July, precious time had been gobbled by her morning sickness, repairs, muddy roads, and a host of other things that slowed them to less than ten miles a day. As the caravan inched its way up the steep all swirled in hoary mists and fog, the great beasts threw themselves to the killing task, while merry jingles turned to march cadence, deceiving the senses into believing it was a celebration instead of a torment. Snow began falling. The good Augustinian fathers at the summit's hospice offered comfort and shelter. The Giannis joined the other stranded guests, gentleman and farmer alike who quartered mules next to fine draft equines, finally sharing a simple meal of soup, cheese and bread, washed down with dry red wine. The toilet was a frigid place, closeted in a tight stone cell. The troop, led by Fathers with candles, were lead up narrow stone stairs to a communal, freezing sleeping chamber into which numerous feather beds had been crammed tight as teeth.

That next morning, despite the pleadings of the good Fathers, the Gianni caravan began the risky downward journey accompanied by the barking St. Bernard dogs belonging to the hospice. Time constraints had taken this dutiful Gianni by the throat, squeezing off the air of good sense. While it had dawned brilliant and clear with the whole of Northern Italy at their feet, the summer storm had left an icy track. Three servants, shouldering gunny sacks loaded with sand given to them by the Fathers, were pressed into casting it in front of the caravan. The rest of the women and young children walked last, making a protective circle around the barely mobile Madame. The young Monsieur Gianni ordered every man and boy to shoulder ropes in a desperate attempt to hold the wagons in check. Even with the brakes wrenched tight, held by the older boys, and with giant back drag boards down, the drivers had a terrible time restraining the sliding, almost sitting beasts, keeping them to the terrible task. Then, while the troop screamed in horror, one cart went over the edge. Its human occupants flung themselves off at the very last second, and had to be pulled up from the steep sides, where they lay prostrate and terrified. Two beautiful horses writhing and shrieking in pain were shot and left to the scavengers. What could be retrieved had to be reloaded on the remaining carts.

At last, a full two months after their Paris departure, the Gianni household arrived in Gallarate, a town in the shadow of the *Monte Zucchero* at the southern toe of *Lago Maggiore*. A son, his father's namesake, Luigi II, was born five months later in January of 1801, fine and lusty for all his beginnings.

Two decades passed; the family lost connections to France. Napoleon, now a fallen angel, sick and broken, died in infamy of stomach cancer in 1821. Luigi II grew and in 1825, he married 17 year-old Guiditta Carabelli, from a fine Lombardian family. Using practical discretion, the family forgot about French roots and became all things Italian. One "n" was dropped and the name was now pronounced it with the hard Italian "g." The great wagons and horse teams that had brought the family over *Monte Bianco* were added to and turned into a thriving moving company, doing business throughout central and Northern Italy and all the surrounding countries.

By 1860, Signore Luigi II, now father of 14 sons, purchased an abandoned monastery in Cassano Magnago, a little town a few miles northeast of Gallarate, to house his hoard. The front housed the massive stable, stable staff, and business personnel of the Giani & Sons Moving Company.

Smiling now, Piccolina remembered her life. Hadn't she fed and tended them through the best and worst of times? In her kitchen, French, German, Italian and sometimes English were spoken. Giani children were born, grew and were sent to countries to "get" the language, because commerce and daily life depended on being multi-lingual. There was never any question that both the boys and the girls would be educated. Beginning with tutors, they went on to attend upper school and finally college. Aside from a penchant for a fine education, one thing was certain in Piccolina's mind. The Giani men had a sincere fondness for women of spirit, whether wife, child or sister. They lived with it, married it, encouraged it, bred it, and with a good nature, they bemoaned their links with these lionesses. Piccolina, herself no stranger to spirit, had to deal with these lively, bright women and their daughters daily. She knew for sure, there wasn't a saint among any of them, and like a true mother, even though she'd never married or bore any children, she knew certainly that all her Giani men were perfect.

"Signore Bernardo comes," whispered someone to Piccolina, who snorted awake; her memories turned to scraps blown away by the winds of life. She looked around for the baby and found it in the arms of Nonna Giuditta, who'd come to help.

"He climbs in the bed beside Signora Giani to keep her warm," continued the servant in a conspiratorial whisper, putting a cup of hot steaming *caff  robusto* into her hands. "Then he massages her all over and runs down here to hold the baby."

"Maria Giuseppa lives upstairs!" Bernardo trumpeted a few moments later, as he ran down the stone steps into the lower kitchen towards the fire, taking the baby tenderly from his mother. "And my Angela lives downstairs," he said in a whisper, putting his unshaven cheek next to the baby. "Thank you God. Thank you Mamma. Thank you good and loyal Piccolina, and thank you everyone! God knows of your goodness."

A grateful murmur arose in the kitchen, and kindled hope once again crackled to flame.

Throughout the huge stone edifice, Gianis milled and paced, whispering woeful predictions of ill end games, shared doom-saying, recounted miracles, finally praying sincerely for those two who were barely clinging onto life. Outside, the stable staff gathered on the front lawn. Coffee and tea boiled and were consumed by the gallons. Concerned neighbors arrived, and stood mute in the entrance hall, waiting out of respect.

“They live,” whispered voices.

Maria Giuseppa and the tiny Angela, already being called “*Angioletta*,” little angel, were rallying, giving reason to believe prayers were answered. In the early AM, the doctor, showing signs of deep fatigue, called for Bernardo, the family and the house staff, and with quiet decorum, gave his orders.

“You will need to get a cigar box,” he stated crisply. “You will need to line it with sheep’s wool for warmth, and you must find a wet nurse who will squeeze drops of milk into *Angioletta’s* mouth every half hour. She will need to be put in a stable surrounded by the warmth of the cattle, horses and sheep. They give a sweet, even heat. Hurry! There’s no time to waste!”

Piccolina knew of a woman near the village who’d just given birth, and her family had a fine, big stable. A rider went to summon the family. An hour later, seated comfortably in the kitchen, where coffee and *Panetoni* were provided, Bernardo began.

“Will you take my baby?” he asked sincerely, gray with fatigue, still cradling Angela. “She is a good baby, so tiny and ...”

He put his face down onto his daughter’s blanket and wept, carrying the entire group with him.

When everyone in the kitchen regained some control, there was no doubt that *Angioletta* had her accommodations. The entourage, including Bernardo, moved into the gray spring morning, passing through the well wishers who cheered when they heard the tiny cries coming from within the blanket. Bernardo would not be parted from his child,



*The Giani Import Business ~
Gallarate, Italia ~ 1912*

so a brother drove. Several Giani wives and the doctor accompanied the new father, leaving the midwives and Piccolina at Maria Giuseppa's bedside, confident their *Capo di Stato* would smack the hand of even an archangel who would attempt to snatch her mistress. At the family farm some three miles away, Bernardo's sisters-in-law finally got him to release the sleeping baby into

the round and willing arms of the *paesana*, who was opening her blouse. When the baby latched on and took suck, again there were cheers, then tears, and applause. In the stable, he personally tended to all the arrangements. He lined the cigar box with meticulous care doing and redoing the sheep skin, fixing a tiny elevation for the baby's head, then placing it into the Giani cradle, moving it as near to the animals as possible. Instructions were repeated numerous times, with numerous requests for confirmation, and finally the totally exhausted and dithered man had to be taken in tow by his brothers because he was falling asleep on his feet.

The days went by; then weeks. Little by little, the tiny fingers began to open from blue clenched fists. Little by little, the kitten mews grew louder and louder, and became lusty cries. Weeks turned to months. Maria Giuseppa and Angioletta lived, although recuperation for the mother took almost two years. That mother and daughter had survived at all, especially the baby, found people all over the countryside shaking their heads with wonder, renewing their beliefs in a benevolent God and true miracles.

Daily visits were made to his daughter by the completely besotted father, who took great joy in giving everyone who would listen A to Z detailed daily nursery reports.

"My God!" whispered the women. "You'd think he had the only baby in the world."

"He even keeps track of what's in the diapers!" stated another.

Often he was joined by his father, who then went back to give the nursery reports all over again.

“Bernardo,” stated an older brother, after three months had passed. “The business needs your attention. Leave your *cherubiane* to *Papà*, and the *paesana*. Come to work.”

He did, reluctantly, but dropped everything when he saw the afternoon angel wagon turning into the courtyard. At his request, the baby was brought daily.

A full two years later, Bernardo and Maria Giuseppa went to the farm to take their daughter, now in robust and full health, back to the Giani compound.

“Come now *Angioletta*,” cooed the nervous parents. “We go home now.”

The toddler had to be torn from the arms of the woman who’d suckled and cared for her as her own. Held firmly in her mother’s arms, screaming, she desperately reached tiny, fat arms back to the only security she’d ever known. The entire group dissolved into weeping, men and woman alike. She never forgot this experience, or her “*prima mamma*.”

NOTE:

Angela Irene Giani’s miraculous survival was written into Italian medical history. Six months after her birth, the first Italian incubators came into being.