

Part I: Moira Orfei and Other Brilliant Italian Women

Judith Harris (November 24, 2015)



On Nov. 15 beautiful Moira Orfei died in Brescia at age 84, plunging many Italians into a special kind of nostalgic mourning. A circus kid, she flew on a trapeze, appeared in 34 films and had two children. As her life shows, Italian women star in an huge variety of fields, from politics to cinema, haute cuisine. Here in Part I we begin to meet a few who go well beyond the traditional image of "la



mamma." With Elena Cattaneo, Nadia Santini, Roberta Pinotti, Lina Wertmuller, Maria Teresa Salvemini Ristuccia

LOS ANGELES -- On Nov. 15 beautiful Moira Orfei died in Brescia at age 84, plunging many Italians into a special kind of nostalgic mourning. Her family owned the famous Circus Orfei, beloved of Italians since it was created in 1960, and a part of the childhood of countless Italians. She grew up in it, a circus kid who learned to dominate elephants, fly on a trapeze, ride horseback in a ring, train birds and enchant everyone.

She wore her signature bold, gaudy makeup on stage and in both real and reel life; she appeared in no fewer than 34 films, with titles like the famous "Scent of a Woman" (1974) and her last, "Natale in India" (2003). She was taken ill with a stroke in 2006 and never recovered. Her funeral was an Italian event.

Despite her busy career, **Moira Orfei** raised her two children. Even in the U.S. the challenge of women's lives, caught between family and career, is still a surprisingly hot button issue, debated almost daily in the press as top women argue over why they just can't manage (so don't bother) and why and how they must. An October Pew Research public opinion poll of US women illuminates their continuing battle to balance work and family. Only 12% said that working full time is an "ideal situation" for a mother. Almost half (47%) agreed that part-time work was the acceptable solution for a mother with young children. And one out of three (33%) said not to work at all if you have children.

Italy has always loomed large as a bastion of "la mamma" -- that pasta-cooking, gossiping, loving and forceful woman exemplified by the aging mother-teacher in Nanni Moretti's recent movie, "Mia Madre." But there is more to the story than that -- a lot more. Here are just a few fascinating, successful Italian career women, among them a scientist, a politician, a chef, an author and more. Some of these are famous names, others will be new to most readers.

Elena Cattaneo, born in 1962 in Milan, is a specialist in research into neurodegenerative diseases, particularly the Huntington chorea. After working at MIT she moved on to the University of Lund in Sweden and then returned to Milan, where she taught at the state university. In 2001 she received the gold medal of the Italian president for her studies on the Huntington chorea and stem cells. More prizes followed, and she was made a lifetime member of the Italian Senate in 2013.

Nadia Santini is the first woman chef to be honored with three Michelin stars and was nominated to be best chef in the world in 2013. Her Ristorante Dal Pescatore at Canneto sull'Oglio in the province of Mantua is a family affair: Nadia herself and her husband Antonio, her sons Alberto and Giovanni with his wife Valentina, and Antonio's mother. This is a cuisine steeped in Valley tradition, but with uncanny elegance for pumpkin tortelli, snails, saffron risotto and capriolo (roe-deer) in a sauce of Cabernet and blueberries, but with a modern elegance. As one reviewer wrote, her cuisine is "a symphony."

Roberta Pinotti heads Italy's most masculine of government ministries, Defense, and is married and has a daughter. Asked about women serving in the armed forces here, she replied, "Those who take maternity leave and so have to give up an operation can sometimes be penalized, I recognize. But a woman's sensitivity does make a difference. When I was in Afghanistan speaking to our troops there, I mentioned their families. One soldier came up to me later and said that 'this is the first time that we are mentioned as individual people.'" The late Tina Anselmi, WWII partisan fighter and politician, was an inspiration, she says.

Lina Wertmuller, cinema director, was born in Rome in 1928. Her biographers describe her as a rebellious youngster, expelled from a dozen Roman Catholic schools. In 1962 she worked with Federico Fellini as assistant director on "8-1/2". In 1985 she was awarded the Women in Film prize for her role in boosting women's role in the entertainment industry. Her first film, of 24, was "The Lizards" (1963), her most recent, "Too Much Romance, It's Time for Stuffed Peppers" (2004). She is the widow of art designer Enrico Job, who died in 2008.



Maria Teresa Salvemini Ristuccia, now retired, was born near Bari and rose to become a professor of economics at the University of Rome La Sapienza, advisor to the Treasury Ministry, president of one of Italy's largest banks, and, from 1986-1989, president of the Istituto di Studi per la Programmazione Economica, a research institute for economic planning. With her late husband Sergio Ristuccia, general secretary of the Adriano Olivetti Foundation, she has three children, one of whom is now a Cambridge don who teaches economics.

In Part II: Stylist, Internet guru, manager, author and more outstanding Italian women.

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