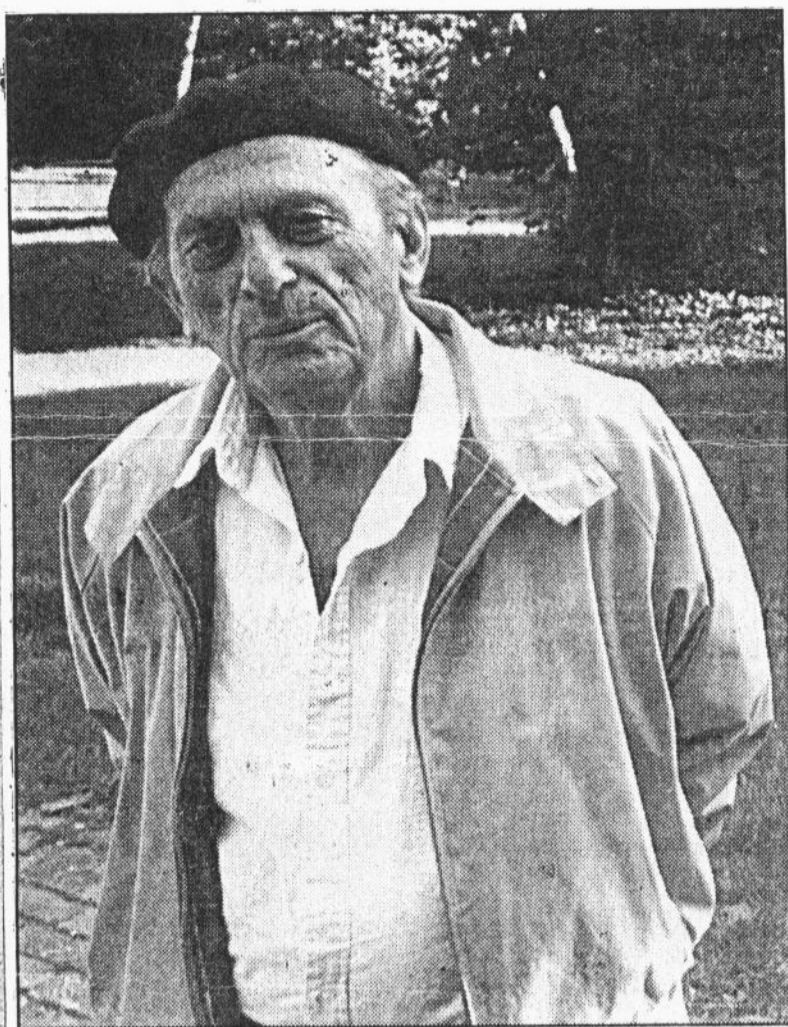
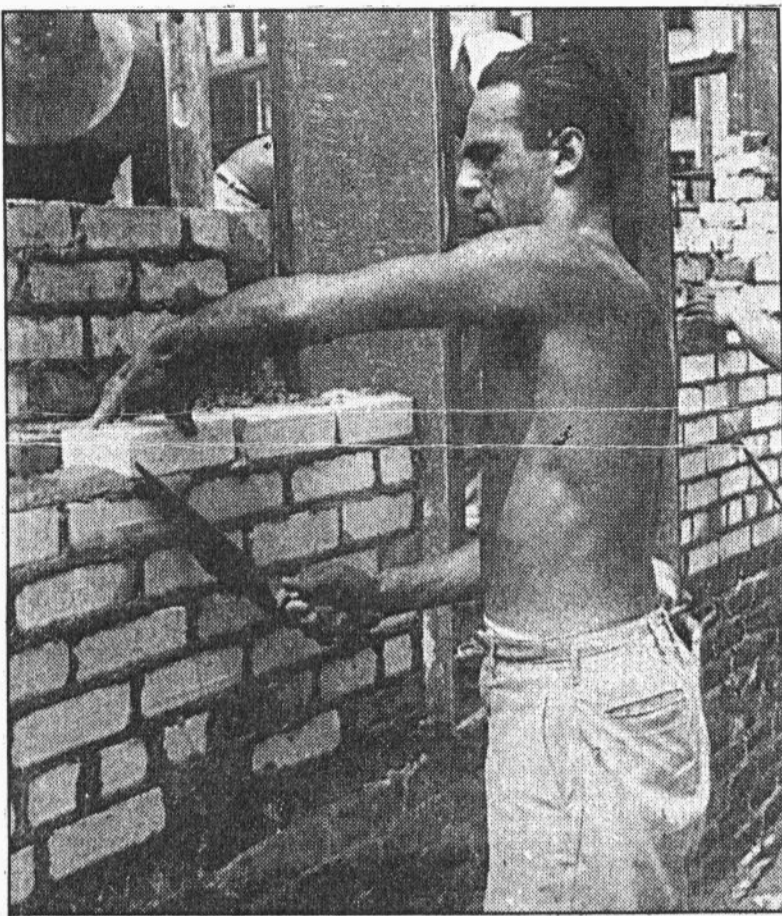


An Immigrant's Pain in Concrete



Maxine Hicks for The New York Times



Pietro Di Donato in his yard in Setauket last week, left, and working as a bricklayer in Queens in 1939, above.

By CAROL STRICKLAND

I DIDN'T plan to be a writer," said Pietro Di Donato, the author of 50 short stories and 6 books, including the 1939 best seller "Christ in Concrete."

"One day I wandered into the library and met my true friends — Zola, Balzac, Turgenev — and said: 'This is where I belong. I can do this, too.'"

Soon after, using a borrowed typewriter, Mr. Di Donato pounded out the story of the gruesome death of his father, a man buried alive in liquid concrete in a construction accident on Good Friday in 1923.

"The book was hailed as a masterpiece, not just of ethnic literature, but of English literature," said Mario Mignone, chairman of the French and Italian department at the State University at Stony Brook.

The overnight sensation created by

the autobiographical novel, a Book-of-the-Month Club Main Selection, transported Mr. Di Donato, a bricklayer working on the 1939-40 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens, "to another world," he said, "a world of sugar kings, movie actresses, multimillionaires, Popes and presidents."

The author took to international celebrity like a child to chocolate.

"Strangely enough, I fit in everywhere," the writer, 79 years old, said in an interview at his home in Setauket. "I guess I was just born author material."

On Thursday at 8 P.M., as part of an Italian-American film festival, the New Community Cinema in Huntington will show the 1949 film based on Mr. Di Donato's novel. Its name is also "Christ in Concrete."

After the screening, the writer will discuss both his life and work.

Although it won the Grand Masterpiece Award at the 1949 Venice Film Festival and the Paris Press Prize

for direction, the film is not well known in this country.

Its director, Edward Dmytryk, who was one of the "Hollywood 10," was blacklisted for refusing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Although the film was not shown in the United States, its message is far from subversive.

First Chapter Is Dramatized

The movie dramatizes the first chapter of the novel, lyrically transforming the immigrant experience from stereotypic to stereophonic as it hits all the notes from beauty to pain in working-class life.

In the film, the lead character, Geremio, a bricklayer like Mr. Di Donato's father, is corrupted by greed and forsakes his Old World morality and pride in workmanship. Realizing his error, Geremio makes peace with his conscience and his friends, announcing:

"Man does not live for himself alone."

In the powerful conclusion, Geremio dies when a building's shoddily constructed walls collapse.

The novel itself is "the premiere work for the Italian-American immigrant experience," said Anthony De Franco, professor of English at Suffolk County Community College. Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, an ardent fan of the book, keeps it on his desk in Albany, next to the Bible.

Explaining the significance of the title, Mr. Di Donato spoke of the time he addressed mental patients at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Northport and was asked, "What do you mean by Christ in concrete?"

"Before I could marshal my palaver," Mr. Di Donato recalled, "a patient answered, 'Don't you realize that any good man is a concrete Christ?'"

"That was it. There's lots of bull about religion. Give me a good man or a good woman, someone we can smell, taste, kiss, embrace, hear and see. The spirit is within us."

Stomachs Become Wounds

The book's lyrical style matches the elevated view of the dignity and divinity of the common man. The poetic prose is completely dissimilar, however, from the vernacular of other Depression-era novels of blue-collar life.

"In the home of Geremio, stomachs have become wounds," Mr. Di Donato wrote. "In the home of Geremio, hearts have become swollen vessels and eyes ceaseless falls."

The author of "Christ in Concrete" also differed from other "proletarian" novelists like John Steinbeck and John Dos Passos in his consistent concern for the poor. Whereas the youthful idealism of those two writers gave way to conservatism, Mr. Di Donato retained his sense of outrage at economic inequality.

"They never broke stone," he said of once-fiercely radicals who lost their fervor. "They all have women's fingers."

Far from mellowing, Mr. Di Donato said:

"The older you get, the more you must become a dangerous element in society. My mind is never at rest."

A pacifist who joined the Young Communist League the night "the establishment murdered Sacco and Vanzetti," Mr. Di Donato still fulminates against the "monstrous massacre of the Vietnam War."

He Knew His Subject

In contrast to theorists and intellectuals who described working-class life without experiencing it directly, Mr. Di Donato knew his subject intimately. Only 13 when his father died, he became the sole support of his mother and seven brothers and sisters.

"I knew all about being homeless," Mr. Di Donato said. "I was introduced starkly to the realities that the school or church wouldn't support us. The paesanos were all poor. We had to survive somehow or die."

The family moved from Union City, N.J., where Mr. Di Donato was born, to the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. In 1930, when he was working on

the construction of Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood, he moved to Long Island.

"Northport was really idyllic," Mr. Di Donato recalled of the colony of political radicals, including the late I. F. Stone. "I brought Thornton Wilder out there and said, 'This is our town.'"

With the success of "Christ in Concrete," Mr. Di Donato gave up bricklaying to become a full-time writer. He moved to Setauket after Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia had performed the ceremony in which Mr. Di Donato married Helen Dean, now deceased.

'Mixture of Every Nationality'

The writer's acquaintances included Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, President John F. Kennedy, Ernest Hemingway, Federico Fellini and Popes John XXIII and Paul.

Always he remembered his roots, growing up in a tenement that was "a polyglot mixture of every nationality, so close that you could reach out and touch Ellis Island," Mr. Di Donato said.

"When I was a kid," he recalled, "everything was larger than life. The streets were like tribal city-states,

From a father's accidental death, a writing career.

with one section from Abruzzi, another from Sicily. There wasn't this dependency on television.

"People are becoming sedentary troglodytes today. Back then, you celebrated your own tragedies and your own comedies. Life and death took place right in your own railroad flat."

Mr. Di Donato recalled the frozen underwear, chamber pots under the bed, drying tomato paste on the tenement roof and canvas diapers. Streets turned into carnivals at religious festivals.

Resonance of Urban Life

"Christ in Concrete" resonates not only with these sights, but also the sounds of urban life. As one passage puts it:

"The snoring children, the cats moaning, the milk wagons over cobblestones, the rattling EIs, the whistle-rumble of the river boats."

Mr. Di Donato renders reality without damp-eyed sentiment, unblinkingly portraying the pain of hard labor: "The fine sharp brick dust" that bruised the fingers, "the hot lime mortar" that ate into the hands, the frequent accidents on the job.

"I saw a man go flying through space," he reminisced of a scene the book viscerally depicts of a friend's falling from a 20-story skyscraper, his body exploding on the pavement like "human fruit" into a "brilliant red wet overalled pulp."

"I wrote it as fiction, but it's all history," Mr. Di Donato said.

The author, however, calls himself "more of a missionary than a fictionist."

"I want to impart to another human being the depths beneath the sea," he said. "It's the unwritten duty of the artist to instruct his listeners so that they go away with something."

Mr. Di Donato attributes his empathy with the downtrodden to his early role as family breadwinner.

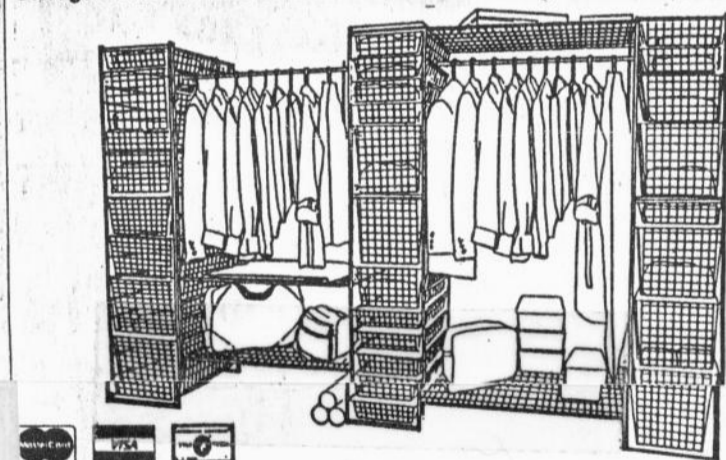
"Being a father, brother and mother to all those kids," he said, "made me extend that compassion to the underdogs of the world as though I were a god who could change injustice.

"That's the strength of my writing. There's no room for trivia or shaming. But the subject matter has to have gravity. It cannot be cotton candy. It has to be good solid bricks." ■

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