

Pietro Di Donato reflects on the wisdom of labor

By TOM JOHNSON

On Good Friday, 1923, Pietro Di Donato was a 12-year-old boy who lived in an Abruzzian Italian American community—"the land of the paesanos"—in Hoboken, New Jersey. By the end of the holy weekend, he and his family suffered through a tragedy which would change him forever and give him material for his novel *Christ in Concrete*, a book which remains the premiere Italian American novel to this day.

Di Donato's father, Geremio, a masonry foreman and a number of other bricklayers were horribly crushed when the scaffolding on a job collapsed around them. According to Di Donato, Geremio had complained to the general contractor that the scaffolding was too weak to support the walls; but the boss pushed the workers to finish the job as quickly and cheaply as possible. Geremio acceded to the contractor's commands to hurry—"damn the scaffolding"—he had a mortgage to pay. He and his crew were crushed under tons of masonry, concrete and wooden beams which "snapped like so many toothpicks."

It literally took days to extricate all the bodies from the rubble; when the young Pietro went to the local police station to try to find out about his father, he still had hopes for his survival.

"I went up to the desk sergeant," he remembers. "The station was chaotic, filled with families trying to get information. The cop at the desk, he looks down at me and he says: 'The wop is in the wheel-barrow in the alley.' The wop was the body of my father stuffed in a wheelbarrow with a sheet of cardboard thrown over him, just like he was a piece of garbage."

This scene haunts Di Donato to this day. It

was the image of his dead father which eventually led to *Christ in Concrete*. The book is "simply the truth about my family," he says. "It tells the story of my father who wanted to do his job and take care of his family; that wish was stolen from him with his life."

Di Donato, now 72, guesses that he always would have been an artist of some kind—a movie actor probably. "I'm an anachronism; I was uneducated but always an intuitive intellectual—even as a child. I loved the movies. I ran away four times before I was 10-years-old to go to Hollywood. And my mother beat me because she thought that I went to so many movies that I'd go blind. I wondered what it would be like to be someone else—a different race or class, a different type of person."

"Life then was percolating with a maelstrom of races. It was culture that helped people keep their lives intact. I lived in the matrix of the womb of the Abruzzian clan until I began to realize that there were other people in the world. Other gods. As soon as I was confronted by the reality of differences, I became curious and confused and wanted to know what it would be like to be different. Because, you know, every race that you can think of was dumped through Ellis Island. Life in Hoboken was a bazaar...and bizarre."

"And I was always different from the other Italian kids. I didn't fit into the scheme as well as they did. I was a dreamer and an idealist, even as a child. I lived in a world of compulsive love for my parents—my mother was a heroine, my father a god, Eros. I was fascinated by dualities even then—the peculiar Italian duality of the sacred and the profane."

I was ever the sensualist; I revelled in the sights and sounds and the tastes and smells around me. I still remember a fetus in the jar at

Aioros Drugstore...and my father running a hand up the leg of the Spanish piano teacher...and the smell of garlic and olive oil...and the Turkish woman with a tattoo who smoked a corn cob pipe...the ancient languages—Italian, Hebrew, Greek, Spanish you name it. I was surrounded by mystery and religious rituals of every kind. I was liberal. I absorbed everything that I saw and heard unless it was boring. I pursued it. I lived in the street world, always play-acting and mimicking the life around me. It was a world of dreams...a world of make believe. But with the death of my father, there was only one goal—to keep the family together."

Keeping the family together meant going to work. At the age of 12, the skinny dreamer, Pietro Di Donato, picked up his father's tools and went to work as a mason's apprentice. With the help of his godfather, he left the dreamworld he had played in and entered the work world "with the paesanos and its many facets of tribal brutality."

The boy became a man in the work world. Like his father, he was to become a master mason. Something else happened too. On the job, he found a new outlet for his idealism and imagination. He met workers of another kind; workers who were radicals and activists. Immigrants and children of immigrants who had come to this country with a vision of a better life for working people: "These were the workers who were attempting to right social wrongs—union people. The majority were Jews—working-class Jews. They were glaziers, iron-workers, laborers and dairymen. They were all dreamers and idealists like me..."

Di Donato became enveloped in the wave of social reform which washed up against the xenophobia and "red-scare" hysteria of the

Roaring Twenties. At the age of 16, he became active in the effort to free Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchist Italian immigrant shoemakers who were executed because of their political beliefs. Though the effort to free Sacco and Vanzetti failed, it helped to create in the young mason a social consciousness which became an important ingredient in his later work.

By the age of 25, Di Donato had moved his family to Long Island. Though the country was in the depths of the Great Depression, "I'd always worked. I was a master mason with a decade of experience, so I could always find work." But by 1936, because of a strike, he too was unemployed. A seeming setback, the strike would pay off for Pietro.

"I had the time, so I went to the library. I discovered books. I read voraciously—a book a day. I read all the great classics. It was like being Rip Van Winkle. I awoke."

Some of the truths that he learned on the job began to take on greater meaning.

"Like Walt Whitman, I always felt that the strength of our nation is in the people. In the sense that they produce, they break their backs, they sweat, they put up buildings, they dig coal, they die in accidents, they fight wars and they pay for all the charlatans and prostitutes—all the evil people who run things..." He discovered that ideas which were called "foreign and subversive" when proposed by immigrant laborers were at the heart of some of America's greatest literature.

Eventually he got a job with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Another accident. Another dream to fulfill. "They made a friend of mine and me the heads of a theatre. Hell, I never read a play or saw one performed;

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now I had my own theatre. It was my chance to play at being other people. We started an improv (improvisational) theatre. We did what you'd call psychodrama. We did whatever came to us, whatever worked. We had a great time. Oh, we were broke; it was the Depression. You were always broke. But we'd sneak into farmers' fields and 'organize' vegetables and we'd go down to the Sound and we'd dig for clams and oysters."

During this time, Di Donato was shown the play "Awake and Sing" by Clifford Odets. "I said, 'you call this shit writing? I'll show you writing.'"

Never having written a word, he decided to write his father's story. He called it "Christ in Concrete." He decided to send the story to *Esquire* magazine because he had seen one in a drugstore, though he hadn't read it. He enclosed a cover letter that said "fuck you, this is real, not that shit you publish" and challenged the magazine to print his story. *Esquire* not only published the story, but they reprinted it in a hardbound edition and it was picked up for Best Short Stories of 1938. He expanded the story into a book that was published under the same title in 1939. The book was chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection. (Ironically, one of the novels which was refused for the Book of the Month Club was *Wait Until Spring Bandini* by John Fante. (Fante's *Bandini* was also based on the life of his father—a brick mason).

Di Donato became a celebrity at the age of 28. The book received rave reviews. "No one would believe that I'd been a bricklayer for ten years," he says now; but the reviews of the time say otherwise. Nearly every one mentions the power of his writing and his literary skill.

But at least one reviewer wrote: "Only a man whose muscles and stomach have felt the fatigue of hard manual labor and hunger can paint characters with such blunt, convincing strokes." His editor, Lambert Davis wrote: "Only an Italian writing of poor Italian workmen and their families, could achieve the simple humanity of *Christ in Concrete*... he is at the same time an American, writing of Americans...His language captures in English the emphatic rhythms of spoken Italian..."

When World War II broke out, the mason/writer declared conscientious objector status and went to work in a service camp in Cooperstown, New York. There, he met a widow, Helen Dean, an actress from Chicago. They were married by Fiorello La Guardia, the famed mayor of New York City, in 1943.

The couple returned to Long Island, where Di Donato alternately worked as a building contractor and played at being a celebrity. He also spent much of the 1950's drinking heavily.

"I didn't know what else to write. And I've always been a sensualist. I was always a slave to passions and feelings. I figure that we have to pay for living by dying, so I went all-out...I'm a mercurial, volatile, changing entity."

In 1958 he wrote the novel *This Woman* which also became a play (still in progress). The book describes the difficulty he had marrying a woman who was not a virgin. The book sold poorly, was banned and went out of print.

In 1960, he wrote *Three Circles of Light*, which is the story of his family before the Easterime tragedy. Though the book was written 20 years after his masterpiece, it was, of course, compared with it—quite unfavorably. The kindest critics wrote that some of the scenes had the power and life of the original story, but none felt that it had the continuity to make a novel.

Di Donato's next two books were biographies. *Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini* (1960) was well received, but is now out of print and difficult to find. There is some hope that it will be reissued soon. (Recently, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York read a xeroxed copy sent by the author and wrote Di Donato a long and complimentary letter in return).

The Penitent (1962) is the story of Alessandro Serenelli, the murderer of Maria Goretti, a 12-year-Italian peasant girl who was sainted after her death. It is a powerful argument against capital punishment: Serenelli went through a long and serious process of

conversion and redemption. The book also shows how the popular media play a tremendous role in influencing people's actions and the way they view the world. This book, a predecessor to the "new journalism" which became so fashionable in the '60's, is also out of print.

The writer spent the next decade-and-a-half writing short fiction and journalism. He has published in many of the major magazines in the United States and some of the short stories are collected in *Naked Author* (1970). In 1978, he won the prestigious Overseas Press Club award for his article "Christ in Plastic," which was published in *Penthouse* in December, 1978. The story is an account of the kidnapping of President Aldo Moro of Italy. It tells how Moro's own political party, the Christian Democrats, and his clerical allies, sold him out to the Red Brigades, who eventually executed him. It is journalism at its finest.

Presently, Di Donato is working on a major project called "The Gospels." His own gospels are an imaginative retelling of the original biblical sagas. "I've never overcome my Catholicism," he confides. "And you must remember," he says, "that the Bible was not written by professional writers. It was originally told by the Apostles of Christ—working men."

Di Donato's version of the Gospels involves contemporary phenomena like black holes and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, as well as more traditional concerns. "I'm the kind of writer who writes to unburden his passions, his rage," he says. Presently, he rages against the potential destruction of humankind.

Always controversial, this worker/writer remains passionately opinionated. Recently, I had a chance to talk with him at his home in a small town on the north shore of Long Island.

He still lives in a house that he and his brothers built with brick salvaged from an abandoned sanitarium. The conversation lasted throughout a torpid summertime afternoon and evening and was continued some days later as the writer and a neighbor boy raked clams, oysters and scungili from a nearby bay.

We capped our talk with a bottle of Abruzzian zinfandel and fresh oysters served

with lemon slices and Di Donato's "secret sauce." As we looked out over a garden which could easily cover a city lot, the words and memories and ideas bounced around in no particular order, though a number of themes were threaded throughout. Later on the author would show me his study (complete with an obligatory photograph of being drunk with Norman Mailer). Other memorabilia include book jackets in at least seven languages. Di Donato, like a great many United States' artists, is received with greater enthusiasm abroad than he is in his own country.

We talked of writing and work and workers. We bemoaned the state of the world. We laughed. Here's what I remember.

"I don't want to talk about trivia," he warned. "If you're a writer, you have to have something to say. If you don't, you're just a hack and may as well write soap operas."

Speaking of TV: "We have no cultural cohesion in this country because of television, as much as anything else. It makes everybody a lout. 'Duh. Duh. Duh. Look a me. I'm Rocky. Uggha. Uggha.' The potential of people—the potential of our people is being wasted in front of that box. I agonize over the reality of the common people today..."

"And now I look back on those years that I wasted myself. We have so little time to waste. And I look back with bitterness too. I'm bitter, righteously bitter like Lot's wife, Orpheus and Eurydice. First, I'm a celebrity and then I'm ignored like I don't exist. My books are sold throughout the western world, but not in my own homeland. Yet I continue to look back...I always look back. The magic of writing is the catharsis of being able to look back."

"And I look at the present too," he says, pointing to a neighbor fiddling with a speedboat in his driveway. Di Donato shakes his head and a pall falls over his previously animated face.

"He is the present. All through the Viet Nam War, he pretended it didn't exist. And now, he and millions like him, they have no regrets. They have no memory. They have no conscience. It took a decade for us just to begin to recognize what the war meant to our own young people. But we still don't give a damn

about the 3,000,000 Asians who died, or that the entire country is poisoned with Agent Orange...we just don't give a damn..."

Then there is a silence. His face lights up again. "Nothing remains static, though. Eventually, the wisdom of the working people will prevail. The world can't function without working people. These are the people who should be given a voice. Until the working people take responsibility for the world, there's only going to be more stagnation and degeneration."

"Take the state of Italian American culture for example. I'm dismayed. There are few Italian American artists with stature, with soul, with zeal, with fanaticism. Whether it's against the insulting image of us in the media or the silence about the unheard Italian Americans among us; we seem to have lost the fight for renewal. The fight for renewal has always been at the heart of the Italian genius. First, you protest. Then, you have to say: 'If those so-called Italians on TV and in the movies are Italian, then I'm not Italian.' Now is the time. We can have an Italian American culture with an idealistic soul, with a fight in it. Boldness will lead to continual flowering."

Looking back over these words, written some weeks after our conversation, I think of a number of things. I remember Pietro Di Donato's hands more than anything else. They are still large and well-formed. They have lost some of the roughness from his bricklaying days, but they have a weathered and used look about them. They still garden, shuck oysters and write with strength and dexterity. The hands, I think, contain this working man's wisdom. The hands, and of course the heart. Hands and heart speak together: they have been married forever by the sacrifice of labor. Continual, painful, bloody labor. It is this wisdom of labor which we should treasure more than anything else.

Whether it comes from our artists, families, communities—wherever it comes from—the wisdom of labor has become exceedingly rare in our time. It may be a kind of knowledge which can make a future in the nuclear age, a future of "continual flowering," possible.

Tom Johnson is a Chicago writer.

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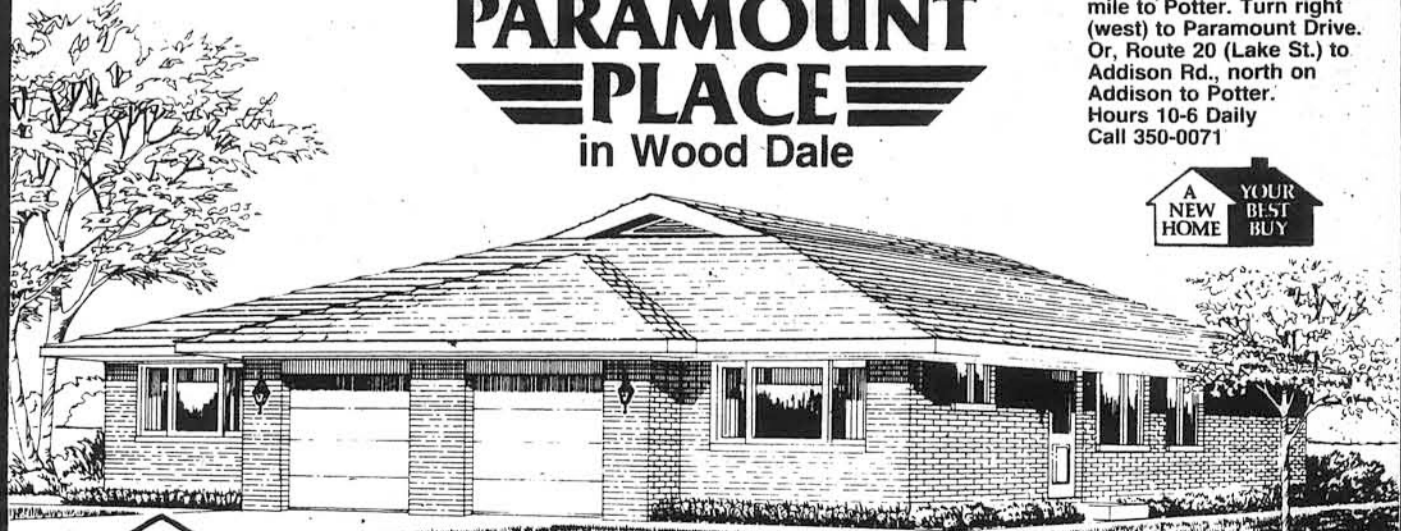
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