

'My Crazy Italian Family'

Local woman chronicles childhood in tiny San Fior di Sopra



At left, the tarantella is danced during the cocktail hour in the piazza in this image from "La Mia Piazza Famili" illustration.



This is among the images painted by Ma. Loretta in her book.



On the cover of "La Mia Pazza Famiglia" are author Kay Lemke's paternal grandparents, Caterina and Rudolpho Maida.

By **MARILYN MCMAHON**
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Multitalented Kay Lemke is an architect, interior designer and artist. Now she can add author to her resume with the recent publication of her book, "La Mia Pazza Famiglia" or "My Crazy Italian Family" (Kieran Publishing, \$25).

Not that she expects it to be a bestseller, but it's sure to attract numerous readers who will enjoy the true stories about the life, the characters and culture in the tiny village of San Fior di Sopra in northern Italy.

How crazy was her Italian family?

During a phone interview, Ms. Lemke summed up events she writes about in the chapter titled "Aunt Sophia and Uncle Freddie: The Rest of the Story."

"My father's sister, Sophia, who was the youngest of 12 children, married Freddie

when she was in her early 20s. Not long after the wedding, Freddie left her to live in Erie, Penn., and work in the mines. Sophia remained in Italy because, as the youngest, she was expected to take care of her parents until they died.

"For 20 years, the couple never saw each other until Freddie, who had lung cancer, called for Sophia to come to Erie and take care of him. Even though they fought constantly until he died, Sophia dressed all in black for the funeral and wept and wailed and threw herself on his coffin. I remember it vividly because I was 17 at the time.

"Afterward, my father thought he should take care of Sophia and invited her to live with us in Minneapolis. But Sophia insisted that Freddie be dug up so he could have another funeral in Minneapolis. Once again, she did the dramatic widow routine. In fact, she would wear nothing but black — even her pajamas were black, and in her bedroom,

Please see **LEMKE** on **B2**

At left, these are Kay Lemke's cousins on Christmas Eve. At right, So book.

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she had a shrine to Freddie with candles that were lit, one time even starting a little fire.

"Finally, my mother, who was not happy from the beginning, had had enough. Sophia had to go back to Italy, and, of course, there had to be another funeral for Freddie. My father never spoke to Sophia again. Afterward, we joked that Freddie traveled more in death than he ever did in life."

A resident of Santa Barbara since 2003, Ms. Lemke was born and grew up in San Fior di Sopra until the age of 13 when her family moved to Minneapolis.

"My maiden name was Caterina Maida, and my parents were Maria and Rudy Maida. I had a sister Rose and brother Raymond. We moved

to Minneapolis as part of the Italian immigrant community transplanted to the Midwest, but we traveled back to Italy frequently because the hot springs there helped my father, a bricklayer, who had severe gout," she said.

As an artist, Ms. Lemke is primarily an oil painter whose work has been featured in exhibits in Santa Fe, the Minneapolis Art Resources as well as the University of Minnesota. She was also the co-owner of the Pollack Fine Art Gallery in Summerland from 2007 to 2009.

Describing herself as "sort of retired," Ms. Lemke, mother of two adult children, Jeffrey and Kristina, and grandmother of Paloma and Penelope, told the News-Press she was inspired to write the book as a history for her family "so they would

understand how I came from this tiny village of 2,400 and now live in a beautiful place like Santa Barbara.”

She was also encouraged by her good friend Marylove Thralls during daily walks along the beach during the pandemic.

“I would tell her stories about my life in Italy, and Marylove said I should write a book. I also realized that my parents and siblings were dead, and I was the last one to write about our family,” said Ms. Lemke, adding, “While I wrote the stories, they were all mentored by Marylove’s editing, coaching me how to write my stories into a book and reading and re-reading each line, bringing my stories to a ‘readable’ book.”

Included in the 104-page hardcover mini coffee table book are charming paintings

by Ms. Lemke and favorite recipes for “Lobster Spaghetti Milanese,” “Polenta,” “Italian Coffee Zabaione” and “Maria’s Spaghetti et Meatballs.”

There’s also a list of Italian words and phrases found in the book — “Cosi sei matto allora? (So you’re crazy, then?), “Basta! chiudere la bocca” (Enough! Close your mouth) and “Un giorno alla volta” (One day at a time.)

email: mmcmahon@newspress.com

FYI

“La Mia Pazza Famiglia” or “My Crazy Italian Family” by Kay Lemke is available at Chaucer’s Books, 3321 State St. in Loreto Plaza in Santa Barbara. For more information, call 805-682-6787.

