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Blood of My Blood

The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans.

By Richard Gambino.

350 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$7.95.

A Documentary History Of the Italian Americans

Edited by Wayne Moquin with Charles Van Doren.

448 pp. New York: Praeger Publishers. \$15.

By JERRE MANGIONE

For those of us who worry that the current preoccupation with American ethnicity which seems here to stay, may degenerate into ethnocentricity and further polarize the nation, the spate of good books being published in the field by capable (and readable) scholars is a reassuring sign. In this respect, the Italian Americans have fared especially well in recent years, with a number of excellent studies, notably Joseph Lopreato's "Italian Americans" in 1970 and Alexander De Conde's "Half Bitter, Half Sweet" in 1971.

Now we have two more books on the subject, one written with style and passion by a Queens College professor, who is chairman of Italian-American Studies there, the other a compilation of some one hundred previously published articles and documents, which range in subject matter from "Verrazzano's Description of New York Harbor" to Pietro Di Donato's "Little Italy Seventy Years Later." The two books complement each other nicely, and shed a great deal of necessary light on the major difficulties experienced by Italian Americans in their effort to rec-

onile their Old World culture with a New World environment where, for several decades at least, they were treated with open hostility.

"A Documentary History of the Italian Americans" is particularly useful to students who are already familiar with the main outlines of the Italian American saga. "Blood of My Blood" will interest both the student and the general reader. With greater impact than any other nonfiction book on the subject has achieved to date, it weaves together the history, sociology and psychology of

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*N.Y. Tim. Book
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first, second, and third generation Italian Americans. Its data is presented with scholarly precision; yet the author's personalized style, which he peppers with autobiographical tidbits, makes it immensely readable. Unlike most books written by academics, this one compels the reader to feel as well as to know.

Gambino comes by his feelings naturally; he is an Italian American himself, with a father who was born in Italy. His first 17 years were spent among a host of Sicilian relatives living in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. Now and then one suspects that he has not acquired sufficient distance from his "Little Italy" background to develop enough perspective; but on the whole he has produced a deeply penetrating work that should convince most of its readers that the 20 million or so Italian Americans among us may, indeed, be our most maligned and misunderstood ethnic group.

In studying their identity problem, Gambino asked this question of a group of men and women of non-Italian origin: "What comes to mind when you think of Italian Americans?" With remarkable uniformity, they repeated these standard images: "Mafia, pizza (it used to be spaghetti), food, hard hats, blue collar; emotional, jealous people; dusky, sexy girls; overweight mammas; frightening, tough men; pop singers; law and order; pastel colored houses; racists; nice, quiet people." Next, Gambino asked a group of Italian American college students whether the composite of these images corresponded to their sense of identity. Unanimously and emphatically they replied in the negative. Yet when they were asked what it means to be an Italian American, their replies were confused and uncertain.

One of Gambino's most striking revelations is the psychological dilemma of the third, and even fourth, generation Italian Americans who, he believes, are undergoing an identity crisis of major proportions. Their parents, who still suffer from their childhood conflict of



having to lead a double life (Italian at home, "American" elsewhere), are blamed. Without intending to, they bewilder their children with their seemingly contradictory wishes, urging them to get an education, for example, while warning them not to change. Gambino points out that by expecting their children to maintain the precarious balance of conflicts that has become the life style of the second generation, they are, in effect, accentuating the loneliness and isolation which third generation Italian Americans experience when they try to enter the mainstream of American life.

At the core of Gambino's explanations is the horrendous history of the nearly 5 million Italians who came here with the hope of having a better life than the dreadful one they left behind. Most of them were from the Italian South, "the land that time forgot," and most of them were both illiterate and unskilled. They brought with them little more than a strong sense of tradition and a strict family system by which they had survived for centuries a harsh infliction of invasion, conquest and exploitation. The system, which was based on the conviction that only blood relatives and a few carefully selected friends could be trusted, made the family a sovereign state. All other social institutions," writes Gambino, "were seen within a spectrum of attitudes ranging from indifference to contempt."

The author demonstrates that any threat to the Italian American old style of life, particularly to their family system, has always been firmly resisted whatever its source. In that connection, Gambino disputes the notion that Italian

Americans are reactionary and racist, arguing, at one point, that their confrontations with the blacks arise from cultural differences rather than bigotry.

In some of the meatiest pages of the book the author maintains that "the stubbornness of ethnicity is as strong as human psychology and culture," and pleads for creative ethnicity (ethnic groups learning about themselves and one another in order to interact constructively) as against chauvinistic ethnicity, such as was humorously illustrated by the New York voter who, on being asked whether ethnic factors played a part in her choice, replied with an old joke, "Ethnic, schmethnic, as long as he's Jewish." But Gambino's concern is as much for the whole nation as it is for its ethnic groups. He believes that by achieving "a genuinely pluralistic society" the nation can rid itself of the lassitude and uncertainties plaguing it.

"A Documentary History of the Italian Americans," which starts with Christopher Columbus and ends with Joseph Colombo, particularizes many of the points made in "Blood of My Blood" with a wide variety of viewpoints. Many of the selections evoke the strong sense of immediacy found in good journalism. The editors are to be commended both for salvaging a great many illuminating pieces, which might otherwise be lost in archives, and for providing pithy and informative introductions to the six sections of the book, which cover such general topics as "Making a Living," "Organized Crime," "Patterns of Settlement."

Both this book and "Blood of My Blood" are outstanding contributions toward the goals of creative ethnicity. ■