

# A Biography of **VINCENZO SELLARO, M.D.** (1868-1932)

## **Life in Italy**

Vincenzo Sellaro, founder of the Order Sons of Italy in America, was born April 24, 1868, in Polizzi Generosa in the province of Palermo, Sicily. His parents were Giuseppe Sellaro, a shoemaker, and Serafino Polizzotto. As is customary for the first boy in many southern Italian families, he was named after his paternal grandfather.

He received his medical degree in 1895 from the University of Naples and immigrated to the United States in 1897 where he settled in New York City. The following year, he completed post-graduate courses at the Cornell Medical School and obtained a license to practice medicine in New York State.



## **Life in America**

Vincenzo Sellaro established himself in private practice at 203 Grand Street in the “Little Italy” neighborhood of Manhattan. There he saw many Italian immigrants often placed in life threatening situations in hospitals because of the language barrier between them and their doctors and nurses.

For this reason, he headed an ad hoc committee of physicians who were bilingual in Italian and English to attack the problem. One solution was to create a hospital where Italian was spoken.

With financing raised privately from mutual aid societies in New York City’s large Italian American community, Dr. Sellaro founded the Columbus Italian Hospital. By 1902 the building was complete and he became its chief gynecologist.

He later joined the American Medical Association and conducted research on diabetes and cancer. He also organized a school for midwives under the auspices of the New York City Health Board. This school eventually was merged with others into the famous School at Bellevue.

In September 1903, he married Maria Lignante, from Naples, in a Roman Catholic ceremony. They had three children. Their only son would later describe Dr. Sellaro as a loving father who provided a warm family life. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1904 and sent one-way steamship tickets to his two brothers and two sisters in Italy. His widowed father also came to New York City, but soon returned to Italy.

## Learning from the Mutual Aid Societies

Based upon his experience in founding the Columbus Italian Hospital, Dr. Sellaro realized that for most immigrants to the United States and Canada, mutual aid societies had provided opportunities for them to speak their native languages and keep their “old country” customs alive.

For Italian immigrants, the mutual aid societies were often made up of people from the same town or province in Italy. These mutual aid societies helped the immigrants from small rural towns adjust to living in big, industrialized cities. The societies also helped them get jobs, find housing and learn English. They held social events on weekends and gave financial support to families facing illnesses or the death of a breadwinner.

These mutual aid societies became so widespread in America by the turn of the 20th century that there were about 2,000 such Italian groups in New York City alone.



## Founding the Sons of Italy

In 1904, Dr. Sellaro conceived the idea of uniting all Italian Americans into one large fraternal organization. On **June 7, 1905**, he held an organizational meeting at his home. Present were **Antonio Marzullo**, a lawyer; **Ludovico Ferrari**, a pharmacist; **Giuseppe Carlino**, a sculptor; and **Pietro Viscardi** and **Roberto Merlo**, two barbers. The first formal meeting of the Order was held three weeks later.

At that second meeting, Dr. Sellaro was elected Supreme Venerable (now known as National President) of the Supreme Lodge of the Sons of Italy. The name of the group was soon changed to *L'Ordine Figli d'Italia in America* (the Order Sons of Italy in America or OSIA). A golden lion was adopted as its emblem and “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” was chosen as its motto.

Its stated goals were:

- to reunite in one single family all Italians scattered through the Americas and Canada
- to promote moral, intellectual and material betterment among them
- to be a school of mutual benevolence and humanitarian foresight
- to participate with all its forces in protecting each member
- to keep alive the culture of Italy
- to spread the conviction that participation in American and Canadian political life is a factor of social betterment to provide for the spread of the Italian language
- to help in welfare activities on behalf of Italians
- and to champion all those causes that infuse the conviction that Italians are valuable workers.

Dr. Sellaro wrote the Order's national constitution and outlined the Order's rituals or formal procedures of investiture of officers and other ceremonies. He also founded the first local OSIA lodge, **the Mario Rapisardi Lodge #1**, with 75 to 100 members on August 31, 1905.

Initially, lodges were named after Italian heroes and places. Rapisardi was a poet and a professor of literature. By the end of 1905, there were eight local lodges in New York City and one in nearby Paterson, N.J.

### **Growing Pains**

As with any rapidly expanding new organization, there were growing pains. In absorbing many mutual aid societies, most rank and file members were in favor of OSIA's uniform system of nonsalaried management while most paid mutual aid society officers opposed it.



Even after a mutual aid society would vote to join OSIA as a new lodge and hold elections, the former officers with vested financial interests would continue to fight the national leadership by filing lawsuits or by engaging in other obstructive activities.

Because of this internal discord, Dr. Sellaro resigned on July 9, 1908, and formed the Independent Order of the Sons of Italy. However, after his successor was expelled in 1909, the new Supreme Venerable, **Achille Sabatino**, initiated reunification talks. In February 1910, after agreeing to small salaries for some national officers and to the creation of intermediate state lodges, Sellaro and the six lodges, which left with him, rejoined OSIA.

### **Strength in Unity**

On January 10, 1911, the first **Grand Lodge** was formed in **New York State** to oversee the local lodges within its boundaries. This tradition of unpaid volunteer workers serving as local lodge officers continues today.

More rapid growth followed with many previously independent mutual aid societies becoming new Sons of Italy lodges. The first **Supreme (National) Convention** was convened in Paterson, N.J., on **April 18 and 19, 1914**. In the following year, a weekly (later monthly) newspaper "Bollettino Ufficiale" (Official Bulletin) was commenced. The name was subsequently changed to "The OSIA News."

When the United States entered World War I in March 1917, Dr. Sellaro was elected president of the Insurance Fund of the Grand Lodge of New York, a position he held for the remaining 15 years of his life.

During the war, approximately **28,000 OSIA members served in the U.S. military**, of whom **more than two thousand were killed or wounded**. The Order gave monthly financial aid in the form of small welfare checks to families of members who were on active duty.

By the time the war ended in 1918, the Order had attracted **125,000 members in 960 lodges throughout 24 states and two Canadian provinces**. The wartime assistance was a primary reason about 20% of these new members joined OSIA.

### **Honors and Legacy**

In 1922, Vincenzo Sellaro was knighted by the Italian government for his aid to the Italian American community and for establishing OSIA. Dr. Sellaro later became interested in the Masons and was elected by the Garibaldi Masonic Lodge as a Grand Master. When questioned about this affiliation, he would later write in "The OSIA News" that he joined "in order to emancipate [Italians] from every prejudice."

In 1928, Governor Alfred E. Smith gave Sellaro the key to New York State in recognition of the medical and social contributions he made to the community.

On September 18, 1932, Sellaro was admitted as a patient to the Columbus Italian Hospital he had founded, suffering from kidney failure, heart disease, diabetes and arteriosclerosis. After 72 days, he lapsed into a coma and died at the age of 64 on November 28, 1932.

Vincenzo Sellaro's greatest contribution remains the founding of OSIA, today the biggest and oldest national organization for men and women of Italian heritage in the United States. Since its founding, OSIA has evolved from a large mutual aid society for Italian immigrants to a social, patriotic and charitable fraternity for second, third and even fourth generation Italian Americans, as well as non-Italian Americans interested in preserving the Italian culture in the United States.

### **Bibliography**

- A brief biography of Vincenzo Sellaro and history of the early years of OSIA were written in Italian by Baldo Aquilano, *L'Ordine Figli d' Italia in America* (Società Tipografica Italiana 1925). For an English version of both subjects see "The Purple Aster" by Ernest L. Biagi (Veritas Press 1961).
- The most complete collection of documents about Vincenzo Sellaro and OSIA is maintained by the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Minnesota. For information about the collection, see **Guide to the Records of OSIA** compiled by John Andreozzi in 1989.
- For the purpose of writing this bibliography, the author obtained a copy of Dr. Sellaro's birth record from the City Hall of Polizzi Generosa in Italy and a copy of his death certificate from the Municipal Archives in the City of New York.
- The only known obituary about Sellaro appears in Italian in the *Il Progresso* (Progress) daily newspaper published in New York City on November 29, 1932.

**– Prepared by Joseph Scafetta, Jr.**