

# "Talk American!"

M A R I E   C H A Y

MY PIEDMONTESE grandmother was never too fond of American education, mostly because it wasn't about Piedmont, so that a little of it went a long way with her.

She wasn't against education itself, though even that was better taken in moderation for the sake of one's serenity. More than that only caused doubt and rebellion which led to unhappiness.

To her there was only one university in the world, that of Turin, and only one country to learn about, Piedmont, and in a lesser degree its southern colony, Italy.

In the mining camp of Berger's Draw in the southern Colorado Rockies where my grandparents settled, no one except the Piedmontese even knew where Piedmont was, and instead of learning about Piedmont, my mother and her sisters and brother learned about America.

My grandfather was all for this, but my grandmother found it scandalous. Fortunately for her, she only had to go through eight years of this indignity, plus eight more when her grandchildren came along. After that, there would be an end to this harassment.

Instead, my parents disobeyed my grandmother and deliberately added to her *miseria*, as she said, by sending my brother and me to high school.

It was a foolish extravagance for a boy, but a complete waste for a girl and merely showed that my parents had now lost the little good sense they had left after years of living in America.

"Are you planning on making that your career, going to school?" my grandmother asked my brother.

"It's only for four years, *Granda*," my brother tried to explain. "Then. . ."

"*Misericordia!* Only four years," my grandmother said as if he had said half a century. "It'll be time for you to die and you'll still be in school. Not even to have had one job in a whole lifetime. Think of it!"

What was even worse for my grandmother were the courses we were taking, one being Spanish.

Since my parents lived some distance from Berger's Draw on a small mountain ranch near the mining camp of El Ganado which was surrounded by Spanish-American ranchers, my brother and I learned Spanish along with English and Piedmontese. What need after this did we have of a course in Spanish?

"Even I can speak Spanish," my grandmother told us in a condescending tone once, "and there isn't a Spanish-American anywhere around Berger's Draw."

My grandmother spoke only Piedmontese, no English at all, and then the Spanish she said she spoke in dealing with *Mucho Hambre*, an old man who came up to Berger's Draw each month to collect old clothes.

"Luisa could do as well just with Piedmontese," my grandfather said whenever he heard the two of them "talking" together.

For every ten words of Piedmontese, my grandmother used one in Spanish while *Mucho Hambre's* ratio was just the opposite.

"Did I have to go to school twenty years to learn to speak to *Mucho Hambre*?" my

grandmother said to my brother and me in triumph when we were visiting her and heard her incredible mixture of talk with *Mucho Hambre*.

"No, Luisa, not for that," my grandfather said, answering for us.

The trouble with taking Spanish in high school was that my brother and I had to learn to be much more precise in our pronunciation. We also had to learn the Castilian accent, which makes the *z* and most *c* sounds sound somewhat like a *th*. In our zeal and in our mouths, it became ten times more *th* than an American one. Also, now, instead of slurring our words as our neighbors did, we pronounced them so carefully and so distinctly that they sounded foreign.

All this not only brought on my grandmother's disapproval whenever we saw her, which would have been serious enough but infrequent, but it also brought in complaints from our Spanish-American neighbors, and these came in every day.

"What's wrong with those two?" my grandmother asked my mother briskly when she was visiting us once. "Are they beginning to lisp? They're much too old for that. Put a stop to it right away before it gets worse."

My brother and I, though, were adamant in doing things correctly. If our Spanish book and our teacher said a sound had to be produced in a certain way, that's the way we did it and doubly so.

"I can't understand your two *niños* anymore, Don Miguel," an older neighbor complained to my father, and this to us was a jolt. "I speak Spanish just as I always have, as my father and grandfathers did, but what those two are saying these days, I don't know."

My brother and I who at this time were going through a brief period when we were feeling lofty, with charitable feelings for all, especially our transgressors, merely rose above all these annoyances, knowing we

were right and that the unenlightened would be with us always.

The year we took up French was even worse for the French language than Spanish had been for the Spanish one and of course for my grandmother. My brother and I made it a point of looking for French words or expressions in the English language and then pronouncing them as we had been taught to do in our French class.

When we went to Tulipán, the county seat, other people saw the Sante Fe "deepo" and Kit Carson "Boulevard," while we saw the red brick "dehpo" and the wide, curving "boolevar." Downtown window shoppers may have thought they were looking at "lawnjeray," "bowkays," and "jardineers," but what they really saw was "lanjeree," "bookehs," and "jardinières," complete with accent.

The result of all this learning was that we were advised even by our friends to stop putting on airs and to "talk American" so we could be understood. My brother and I paid them no more attention than we had any of our other detractors.

Not long after this, when my brother and I were once again visiting my grandparents in Berger's Draw for a few days, my grandmother had even more proof that American education wasn't of too much use in this world.

In all her years in America, my grandmother had never learned English and she didn't ever intend to. She didn't need to. She always had plenty of emissaries around to go out into enemy territory to run errands for her, so it was rarely necessary for her to go out beyond the Piedmontese compound.

This day, she had just finished knitting a sweater and needed a piece of strong, heavy material to use as a backing to sew on buttons, so she sent me out to get some grosgrain ribbon at the company store.

I discussed with my brother what I

would ask for when I got there. We knew from our French class that it was pronounced "grograin," with the *s* silent, but would the clerk know what I meant if I pronounced it correctly?

My brother and I decided that as a courtesy toward those who weren't as fortunate as we were, it would be better for me to forget school for a moment and just be one of the people so I could be understood.

The girl who waited on me was a Piedmontese girl, much admired by my grandmother because she very sensibly quit school after the eighth grade to go to work in the company store where she was now earning enough money to support herself instead of still being supported by her parents.

"I don't know what you want," Lucy said to me in a tone of weariness at having to put up with what was obviously a foreign language. "I can't understand you."

I repeated what I wanted—a yard of black grosgrain, careful to sound the *s*—but though Lucy frowned and was obviously trying hard to figure out what I meant, she couldn't.

"You little kids never know what you're sent for," she said, shaking her head dolefully.

By now I was so unnerved that I resorted to pointing out what I wanted like any Piedmontese immigrant.

"Oh that," Lucy said with a delicate sigh, relieved that the ordeal was over. "You mean 'gawgrain.' You don't pronounce the *s* and the *o* is like *aw*. It's a French word, you know."

Thoroughly humiliated, I went home with my package. The next morning when my brother and I got up, we found my grandmother moaning and crying.

"Twenty years of going to school," she cried out with her usual exaggeration when she saw me, "and you still don't know anything."

My brother and I looked at each other and waited silently as we always did at such times.

"Lucy has never even seen the inside of a high school and yet she can say anything she wants to in French," my grandmother said furiously.

My grandmother's standing as the head arbiter of the Piedmontese community was given a severe shaking because of this, and by that afternoon everyone knew that the Baldassari girl who quit school at fourteen and was now practically a business executive in the company store knew how to speak French, while my grandmother's granddaughter who did nothing but go to school from one year to the other and was taking a course in French besides couldn't even say one word of French—just a single word so she could be understood, and that word a common, everyday one besides. Everyone knew "gawgrain." At least, they should.

"What a disgrace, what a disgrace," my grandmother kept saying with a hopeless, strangling cry whenever we were around. "And what a waste of time and money."

My brother and I kept out of my grandmother's way and went out to her little summer house which was thickly covered with grape vines. We both agreed that truth was truth and facts were facts, and that if a thing was right it was right in "American," Piedmontese, or Spanish. We wouldn't ever again make any concessions to anyone.

From now on reservoir was "resevoir"; "avoirdupois" was "avwardupwa"; and "lavalrière" was "lavaleear."

Even if we sounded affected, we would at least know we were right according to the French book and our teacher. Our friends might laugh and jeer at us, but not the French. They would be only too grateful at finding two Americans whom they could understand.