

# Mario Andretti gets honorary citizenship in Lucca, Italy



Legendary race car driver Mario Andretti displays a newspaper article that reads "One of Us" in Italian. Andretti was honored last week by the town of Lucca, where he and his family lived as refugees for 7-1/2 years after their hometown of Montona was ceded to then-communist Yugoslavia. Andretti also participated in ceremonies to commemorate the Day of Remembrance to honor the victims of the 'foibe' atrocity that happened during and after WWII and to recognize those Italians who became refugees after the war. (PHOTO BY APRIL BARTHOLOMEW / THE MORNING CALL)

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Mario Andretti rose from humble beginnings in a European refugee camp

BUSHKILL TOWNSHIP — If you tour all or part of Villa Montona, the palatial Bushkill Township residence of Mario and Dee Ann Andretti, you'll probably find it difficult to imagine that the home's owner once lived for three years in one large room of an abandoned college dormitory that was shared by 15 families, separated only by blankets.

Or that the Andretti family — father Alvise, mother Rina, twin brother Aldo and older sister Anna Maria, received a slight upgrade and spent four more years in a two-room attic-type section of the same building that had no running water.

At the end of World War II, Andretti's birthplace of Montona, Italy became a part of then-communist Yugoslavia. His dad had lived a comfortable life as an administrator of seven farms. But all of that was suddenly seized by the government, and residents of Montona were left with two choices: succumb to communism or leave their homes.

The Andrettis wound up in Lucca in Italy's Tuscany region, about an hour from Florence.

"We were basically refugees in our own country," Andretti said. "We were stripped of everything because we sacrificed to maintain Italian citizenship. But nobody understood us because nobody talked about it. The press didn't talk about it, and the government was basically ashamed of it in a sense because of the Geneva pact."

The Andrettis' seven-and-a-half-year saga in the refugee camp in Lucca ended after a three-year wait for visas. The family came to the United States in June 1955, sponsored by Rina Andretti's uncle, Tony, who immigrated to America in 1909 and settled in West Virginia then Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

Mario became Americanized in the last 60 years, living the dream to the fullest. He has been successful as a race-car driver, a businessman and an ambassador for his sport. Even as he approaches his 76th birthday (Feb. 28), he is constantly in demand around the world.

But he has never forgotten his roots, and Italy also is proud to claim him as one of its own.

While 16 previous expressions of recognition for his racing achievements have involved the country of Italy or the Italian-American community in the United States, none has had the same personal and emotional impact of being saluted repeatedly as during a two-day celebration of the 2016 Giorno del Ricordo — or day of remembrance.

On the first day he was named an honorary citizen of Lucca at a ceremony in the chambers of the City Council.

"They do that very sparingly for someone they feel represents Lucca with some pride anywhere [in the world]," Andretti said. "It was very ceremonial. The City Council had to approve it unanimously, and they said that's almost an impossibility. They even had to do a criminal background check. Everything had to be up to snuff."

There was a dinner at an elite, all-sports club where the menu featured a cartoon of Andretti "driving" what might be described as a poor man's soap-box racer. The cartoon and lots of other photos are on Andretti's Facebook page.

The climax was a special event in a hall that is part of the building in which the Andretti family was housed. Andretti said that about 220 survivors of those refugee-camp days attended the event — even some of his former grade-school girlfriends.

"There was a play we were in and we wore costumes," Andretti said. "My first girlfriend, Licia, stood up and she said, 'Mario, it's Licia.' Mamma mia! [As a girl], she was a brunette; now she's a blonde. I told Dee Ann there were at least three of them, steady girlfriends, that were there battling [over me]. Can you imagine that? We're all grandparents ... it was kind of cute, actually."

Andretti has made many trips to his homeland over the years. This was different.

There was no unannounced knock on the door of a relative — "I would never let them know in advance that I was coming because they would try to arrange everything ... a big ceremony, a big meal. I just showed up."

There was no ringing the bell at the Lucca Cathedral to surprise his favorite boyhood camp chaplain — "He'd say, 'Oh, Mario,' and he'd come down and take me by the arm and we'd go have an espresso and talk, and then I'd leave. He was like a saint. I loved the guy. Three years ago, I saw him three days before he died."

On this trip, accompanied by his daughter, Barbie, and her husband, Giuseppe Curto, Mario was the toast of the town. Everything was carte blanche for him. No place was off limits.

He had no idea how big a deal the Italians had planned for him.

The schedule was hectic, but not every hour of the short visit was committed, and Andretti took advantage of the down time.

"Whenever we could just run free, Barbie and Giuseppe and I walked," Andretti said. "Between the two days, we walked about 18 miles. We walked everywhere."

He saw the garage where he and Aldo parked cars and learned to drive. The garage was empty, "but they opened it up," he said. "The press and TV were there, and I reminisced about parking cars, how I used to back the car out into the street and then do a burnout coming in. That's why I don't like to valet my car now; I know what I used to do."

He saw the movie theater that is next to the home in which the noted composer Puccini was born.



Mario and daughter Barbie in front of the movie house

"It's still operating as a movie house," he said. "That's where I saw the movie, 'To Please a Lady', with Clark Gable and Barbara Stanwyk. That was 1951. The title in Italy was 'Indianapolis.'"

Andretti said he didn't understand the title, but he saw race cars on the posters and went to the movie because of that.

"That gave me an idea of what American racing was all about," he said.

The school he and Aldo attended now is a prestigious school. The art institute where his sister studied is still there.

The Andretti family doesn't have to wonder about its history.

In 2008, when Mario was named honorary mayor of Montona, the city in which he was born and which is now in Croatia, not Italy, he took an excursion of 29 family members to Italy, where they also visited Lucca..

"The entire family is aware of what happened, and they have seen it," Mario said. "When we talk about it, they can picture it. When I go back, it's like another life that I lived and seems so far away, almost impossible."

But because of this latest trip, "everybody feels to some degree vindicated; we are legitimate," Andretti said. "It's a life I lived for a while, and it was very

strange. But those were formative years, really. That's where my goals began and everything I pursued in life began there.

"We went from being uninvited guests when I was there as a kid to being right at the top and I can't find the right words to express how much they wanted me to be one of them. It's a very sophisticated town. I love the town. I could live there. It's beautiful."

Andretti's only close relative living in Italy is a first cousin in Florence, but after last week, Italy feels more like home than ever before.

## **ITALY'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH MARIO ANDRETTI**

### **2015**

The America Award — given by Fondazione Italia, USA

Grand Award of Merit — from the American Society of the Italian Legions of Merit

### **2014**

Featured in PrimiDieci 2014 — published by the Italian cultural organization of the same name.

### **2011**

Premio Internazionale Giorno Del Ricordo — presented in Rome. For his contribution to sport.

### **2010**

Lifetime Achievement Award — from Lido Civic Club of Washington, D.C.

## **2008**

Mayor of the Free Municipality of Montana in Exile — presented in the town in which he was born.

## **2006**

Part of the American delegation at the closing ceremonies of the Winter Games in Torino, Italy.

Commendatore — prestigious title, similar to a knighthood, given by the Republic of Italy in recognition of his racing career and his epic life story as an immigrant who made good in America.

Lifetime Achievement Award — National Italian American Foundation.

## **2004**

Grand Marshal of the New York City Columbus Day Parade.

Listed among the Top 300 Italians in America by Primo Magazine.

## **2000**

National Education & Leadership Award — Sons of Italy Foundation, Washington, D.C.

## **1999**

Lifetime Achievement in Sports award — from Coalition of Italo-American Associations

## **1991**

Gala Italia Man of the Year

**1990**

Lifetime Achievement Award — from Pittsburgh Chapter of the National Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame.

**1977**

Driver of the Year — Motor Magazine of Rome

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