

Learning legal Italian

As a young man in Pennsylvania, I never considered myself an international kind of guy. Of course, I kept up with the world news, but, aside from the prospect of nuclear holocaust, foreign events seemed so far away, so ... foreign. And with regard specifically to Italy, my only interests were the gustatory delights of pizza and pasta. I knew, and cared, virtually nothing of the country.

Then, during my second year of law school, I met a charming young lady from Pesaro, who was pursuing a degree in comparative law. My point of view changed drastically. That young lady became my wife, and we relocated to Italy when I was fresh out of law school, right after having taken the Bar Exam.

The move to Italy was one of those “if I don’t do it now, I never will” kinds of things. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t give a great deal of thought to how we would survive, economically speaking, in my wife’s homeland. I knew that I would need an Italian law degree if I wanted to practice law in Italy, but that didn’t overly concern me. Sure, I’d have to learn the Italian language (and my knowledge of the language at the time was equal to zero), but how hard could that be? I figured that someone else must have done the same thing, and if they had done it, then I could do it, too.

As I was to learn later, my reasoning had a series of critical flaws. First, I hadn’t taken the Italian Bar Exam into account. The Italian Bar is excruciating, notoriously difficult to pass even for native Italians. And, second, with the benefit of hindsight, to this day, 27 years after I first moved to Italy, I have yet to meet someone, anyone, who achieved the same goals I had planned for myself. If I had known in 1986 just how hard it would be to become a lawyer in Italy, I seriously doubt whether I would have moved to the “bel paese”.

Foremost among those difficulties, of course, was the language. Lawyering requires superior language skills, which is hard enough in your native tongue, let alone in a language you’ve decided to pick up along the way. I wanted to enrol in an Italian university as soon as possible, so I immediately began taking private Italian lessons. My teacher was a young local poet, Gianni D’Elia. Gianni spoke no English, and I, obviously, spoke no Italian. Our first lessons would have been funny to watch, though to me they passed by in a kind of surreal haze. Gianni talked and talked. I had no idea what he was saying, and he couldn’t understand my questions. I just hoped that some kind of osmotic absorption would take place, allowing me to learn without the benefit of comprehension.

Now, that sounds crazy, but, one way or another, it worked. I learned enough Italian to enrol at the University of Florence. To say that my first exams were rough would be an understatement, but my professors, mostly, took pity on my still rudimentary language skills and, in just over two years, I obtained my degree.

However, as I discovered, my odyssey was just beginning.

Yes, because in Italy, would-be lawyers have to go through a two year apprenticeship known as “praticantato” before they can take the Bar Exam. I was lucky in this respect because my father in law was a lawyer, and I immediately went to work for him. This was the true starting point, not just of my legal education, but also of my education in the Italian language. So far, I had learned enough Italian to get by at the University, but my skills were still woefully lacking for someone who planned on practicing law.

My father in law lost no time in putting me to work, in burying me in work. I absorbed Italian through reading and writing legal briefs. My first attempts were dreadful, but I slowly improved. I honed my speaking ability in court, with colleagues, before judges. And here I have to give a tip of the hat to those same colleagues and judges. Never, not even in beginning when I was still struggling with the language, did I receive any kind of criticism, in court or out of court, for my neophyte Italian. Everyone was very patient, very encouraging.

All this took place years ago. Since then, I've become functionally bilingual: I speak, think and even dream in both English and Italian, often in a mix of the two. Unfortunately, I'll never lose my American accent (which bothers me), but at least people tell me that it sounds charming.

My objective upon coming to Italy was to practice law here. As a result, the Italian I learned was, foremost, legal Italian. My text books were case files, my teachers the colleagues and judges I mentioned. As a result, my legal Italian is excellent: you would never guess from reading my work that I wasn't born and raised in Italy. My social language skills, on the other hand, are perhaps not quite on the same level; when it comes to writing in Italian, I feel more comfortable preparing, say, a demand letter, than a thank you note.

Now, if I could just find the time, I'd like to learn Latin