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DOMENICO (MIMMO) PELLE // Le Voci di Antonimina

(The timestamps align with the start of the video)

00;00;00;10 - 00;00;21;26

Dreams? I never had grand or impossible dreams because I am very grounded, with my feet firmly on the ground. I wanted to do what I wanted to do, and I think I have done it. I did not aim for great things. I was content with a peaceful life made up, above all, of things I enjoy—and with doing them consistently and with dignity.

00;00;21;26 - 00;00;27;09

That is the most important thing. Beyond what you do, what matters is how you do it and how you experience it.

00;00;27;14 - 00;00;34;12

My name is Mimmo Pelle—Domenico Pelle officially—and I was born here in Antonimina on May 25, 1963.

00;00;34;19 - 00;00;44;23

I lived continuously here in town until 1990. I attended elementary and middle school in Antonimina, then the classical high school in Locri.

00;00;44;29 - 00;01;00;18

After that, I attended university in Messina. At first I lived there, and later I commuted back and forth. As I said, that continued until 1990. Then I moved away for work. My first stop was Siena. I stayed in Siena...

00;01;00;25 - 00;01;06;11

For more than four years, working on temporary contracts in education.

00;01;06;14 - 00;01;17;17

When opportunities there decreased and other places became more promising, I moved to Bergamo, where there were many openings. I spent another four years teaching there on temporary contracts.

00;01;17;20 - 00;01;29;23

While in Siena, I took the Ministry of Justice competitive examination and won a position as a judicial assistant. Over the years, I became a court clerk and then a judicial officer. I spent about fourteen years in Verona.

00;01;29;27 - 00;01;54;01

When I arrived in Verona, I honestly thought I would stay and never return. In fact, I bought a home there, which I still own and visit occasionally, and I established my official residence in Verona. I thought I would settle there. Then, in 2013, an opportunity arose to work in Locri. There was a position in my field at the office of the Justice of the Peace, and I thought about it.

00;01;54;05 - 00;01;56;28

I thought and thought because I was...

00;01;57;00 - 00;02;13;03

Unsure what to do. I did not immediately tell either my mother or my father because I did not want to involve them. After a sleepless day and night of reflection, I decided to apply for the transfer. Once it was done, it was done.

00;02;13;03 - 00;02;36;20

I told my mother, who could hardly wait—she wanted nothing more than for me to return. In hindsight, coming back had both advantages and disadvantages. I knew that if I stayed there, I would miss things I could never have: my loved ones, my birthplace, the air, the food, and many other things.

00;02;36;23 - 00;03;05;19

At the same time, I knew that if I returned here, I would lose many things I had there—things people here dream of but know they cannot have: functioning public services, job opportunities, and the ability to do many things that unfortunately are unavailable here. In any case, I worked at the Justice of the Peace office in Locri until last March. Since April 1, I have been retired—a rather young retiree, perhaps, but I was convinced it was time to leave.

00;03;05;21 - 00;03;07;02

That is my story in brief.

00;03;07;08 - 00;03;26;04

What drove me to return? When choosing whether to leave or come back, as I said, there are pros and cons. You weigh the two situations. Even if the number of things on each side is equal, some carry greater weight. What weighed most heavily was affection—my loved ones.

00;03;26;05 - 00;03;44;09

My elderly father was here and is still here today. My mother, who is no longer with us, was elderly too. That outweighed everything and was certainly what brought me back. In some ways, it was a leap into the because, in terms of services and work, I found a completely different reality and had to adapt.

00;03;44;09 - 00;04;05;22

It was not easy at first, but other things compensated for those disadvantages, so in the end it went as it was meant to. Now I can live partly here and partly there. That fully realizes what I wanted: when life here is not enough, I can go there, and vice versa—my father’s health permitting.

00;04;05;22 - 00;04;13;22

As long as he is here, especially when he is unwell, he comes first. Everything else takes second place.

00;04;13;24 - 00;04;29;00

Until the last day of her life, my mother kept telling me she was waiting for me to marry. My father still says the same today. Yes, absolutely. They eventually accepted my choice, but they would have liked me to have a family of my own.

00;04;29;02 - 00;04;47;28

Yes, those were their hopes. People here see the family as something that continues through the next generation. There is no doubt about that. But they came to respect my choices. They did not dwell on it too much, though they certainly would have preferred me to have my own family.

00;04;48;00 - 00;05;17;16

I was born here in 1963. I began becoming aware of the world at six or seven, in the 1970s. Compared with today, marriage has not changed enormously since then. It has changed greatly, however, compared with the 1940s and 1950s. That was a completely different world. Between my childhood and today, there has been somewhat more autonomy, somewhat more...

00;05;17;16 - 00;05;58;04

Freedom, but nothing extraordinary, either in how marriage is understood or in how it is lived day to day. Compared with then, there are more separations today. Separation and divorce were rare or nearly nonexistent, but that does not prove families were more stable. People might not separate formally, yet live in a forced coexistence. Relationships probably lasted about the same length of time; the breakup simply was not made official. Before the 1970s, in the 1940s and 1950s, the situation was entirely different.

00;05;58;05 - 00;06;41;24

Marriage had a sanctity and sacredness then, and people believed it was permanent. Above all, strict rules and codes of behavior governed everything leading up to marriage. They involved other people—not only the parents, especially the parents, but also those close to them. These people played a role even in choosing a partner. An engagement did not begin as it normally does today, with someone approaching the young woman and introducing himself to her parents. There was always an intermediary, usually a family friend, who...

00;06;41;24 - 00;07;21;03

Approached the other family, made the proposal, waited for an answer, and carried it back to the first family. If possible, the arrangement was then finalized. I would not say choices were entirely forced or predetermined, but they were certainly not completely free. We are speaking of an earlier period. As for the wedding itself—the formalities and practical arrangements—not very much has changed. Today there may be greater expense, more elaborate staging, and more videos and photographs—you know that because you work in the field—but it is more or less the same.

00;07;21;04 - 00;07;44;21

When we were children, other people's weddings were a celebration for us. As the newlyweds left the church, they threw not only rice but coins into the square. We children raced and chased one another to collect as many as possible. I do not think that happens now. I have not attended many weddings recently, but I believe the custom is gone. These are small things; fundamentally, not much has changed.

00;07;44;23 - 00;07;51;01

Memories of those events? Yes, but they are people's lived stories. I would not know what particular story to tell.

00;07;51;04 - 00;07;59;00

We would gather in the square for that reason, or watch from balconies as the wedding procession continued toward the square.

00;07;59;00 - 00;08;38;01

Then the cars sounded their horns. Another custom that has faded was accompanying the newlyweds from the church to the square and beyond with the singing of the Ave Maria. That no longer happens either. You feel people's presence less during weddings now. I experienced my brother's wedding closely because it took place here at home. I remember my mother's emotion. In the photographs, you can see that she regarded it almost as a separation: her son was leaving and creating a new family. But nothing particularly unusual happened, partly because they remained here.

00;08;38;01 - 00;09;01;04

In small towns, weddings are fairly conventional. In a city, perhaps an elderly man marries a young woman and captures people's imagination. In towns, weddings are routine, so there is little unusual about them. A few people may have married foreigners or people from elsewhere,

but even that is rare. I cannot identify anything especially different from other places.

00;09;01;11 - 00;09;07;02

From that point of view, I noticed changes when I returned. I had always come back during the summer or at Christmas, but when...

00;09;07;02 - 00;09;34;08

I returned permanently, I noticed many more changes. I found a profoundly transformed town, first of all architecturally. The houses are completely different: more modern, renovated, often larger, and more comfortable. You no longer see donkeys carrying goods through the streets or shepherds walking with their animals. Instead, you see small tractors and many new cars.

00;09;34;08 - 00;10;01;06

In that respect, the town has changed for the better. But every coin has two sides. Economic growth—and this applies almost everywhere—has brought changes. Life was once simpler and the sense of community stronger. Economic growth has brought benefits, but its disadvantage has been excessive individualism.

00;10;01;07 - 00;10;35;17

People close in on themselves, tend their own l ittle garden, and pursue personal ambitions at the expense of relationships. Like many places, the town has become somewhat frayed, marked by envy and divisions. I feel that. My hope is that the younger generation, through new groups and initiatives, will bring a completely different attitude and make the town truly united—not merely make it appear united—because the town urgently needs that.

00;10;35;17 - 00;10;45;26

We face many difficulties: inadequate infrastructure and economic crises. How personal relationships are handled plays a fundamental role in people’s lives. Certainly.

00;10;46;00 - 00;10;53;26

I have a very shy personality. That is one of my limitations, although, up to a point, it can also be an advantage, like anything else.

00;10;53;26 - 00;11;12;19

But when shyness prevents you from doing things, it becomes a limitation. Living away, meeting

different people, and moving through different environments helped me. I gained courage in dealing with the public, speaking in public, and making everyday life decisions.

00;11;12;19 - 00;11;46;16

That influenced me. Messina did so less because it is a southern city whose way of thinking resembles ours. What changed me profoundly was first Siena, and then even more Bergamo, with Verona confirming it. We experienced a completely different reality, with advantages and disadvantages: relationships were certainly colder, but services functioned better and interactions were clearer. That definitely changed me.

00;11;46;19 - 00;11;57;05

It changed my personality, my personal behavior, and how I see things—but not how I see my town. I have always viewed my town in a particular way, and leaving did not make me see it differently.

00;11;57;05 - 00;12;17;16

I expected to find a different reality elsewhere. I do not think this town can or should become like Bergamo, or vice versa. I understand that. I would like many things to change, but not the town's essential nature. Absolutely not. Everything has its strengths and weaknesses.

00;12;17;23 - 00;12;24;12

In life, you always miss your family, regardless of where you go or why you leave.

00;12;24;15 - 00;12;47;21

During the roughly twenty-five years I lived away, I spoke with my mother every evening. Remember, we did not have mobile phones then, and earlier we did not even have a telephone at home. A neighbor here let us use hers. I would call the neighbor, she would fetch my mother, and my mother would wait there to speak with me.

00;12;47;21 - 00;13;05;19

You always miss your family, regardless of where you go or why. When I left, I knew I was leaving something behind, but I did not believe I was abandoning anyone. I consciously wanted to leave. I went for work, but I also wanted to experience life elsewhere.

00;13;05;20 - 00;13;42;26

It was a desire, not a constraint. Had I stayed, I might perhaps have found work here—I do not

know. But I wanted to encounter different places and realities. I never saw leaving as a betrayal of my mother or carried that burden. Our bond always remained very strong. And it was not only my mother; I maintained strong ties with the town too. I had a friend here, and once mobile phones became available, we spoke every Sunday morning. Whenever we talked, I asked him...

00;13;42;26 - 00;13;57;00

For news about our classmates and the football team—how the boys had played the day before and everything else. You carry these things with you wherever you go, anywhere in the world. There is no doubt about it.

00;13;57;02 - 00;14;06;21

Has the sense of community weakened? Absolutely, yes. It has been lost somewhat—not completely, but partly.

00;14;06;22 - 00;14;46;28

People live more within their own circumstances and families and try to realize their own dreams and ambitions. As I said, that inevitably comes at the expense of interpersonal relationships. In some cases, perhaps it is necessary because people have different needs and ambitions, and pursuing them demands greater personal commitment than before. In other respects, I think it results from economic change. Prosperity encourages a degree of individualism, while need and hardship bring people together to face difficulties...

00;14;46;28 - 00;14;51;06

Together. That has certainly changed.

00;14;51;09 - 00;15;10;25==

Freedom—absolutely. It is the most important thing of all. If someone asked what I would miss most, the first answer would be freedom: not only physical freedom, but freedom of thought. My character is somewhat contradictory. I do not believe in the zodiac, though people say I am a Gemini.

00;15;10;25 - 00;15;34;24

It means nothing to me, but I hear people say Geminis have two sides or live a double reality. I do experience a particular contradiction: I am not very courageous in a physical sense. I cannot easily go into a dangerous place, face someone threatening me, or confront a frightening animal. But I have great courage in my choices. Once I make a decision, I move forward, whatever it may be.

00;15;34;24 - 00;16;13;15

That seems contradictory, but it is a fact. Returning to my town created one concern. I have my own idea of freedom and society, and I do not identify with certain ways of behaving or living here. I lead a rather private, isolated life and do not participate in some activities. That weighs on me somewhat, but I consciously chose this life. I want to live according to my ideas wherever I am, and if I cannot live them...

00;16;13;15 - 00;16;26;05

Within certain social settings, then I live them on my own. I do not claim this is a virtue—certainly not—but it is a conscious choice.

00;16;26;08 - 00;16;37;20

There are many things I would have liked to do but do not do, and that weighs on me somewhat. I have given up certain things.

00;16;37;22 - 00;16;47;17

What did I inherit from my father and mother? Certainly honesty, love for others, and a willingness to help them. There is no doubt about that.

00;16;47;20 - 00;17;15;07

They did not teach me through words. My mother spoke a little more, but my father spoke very little. They taught through the example of their lives. Other people's lives teach you through example: their lack of interest in certain things, their rejection of profit at any cost. That is the quality I am proudest to have acquired from them.

00;17;15;10 - 00;17;44;10

One of my greatest experiences was not simply living away, but traveling. The days I spent in Cuba and Mexico were a great life experience. I saw realities that made me think deeply about how the world is divided between the fortunate and the less fortunate—and how fortune often means simply having been born in certain places.

00;17;44;14 - 00;18;12;20

We were fortunate to be born where we were. Being born elsewhere can be a misfortune. This made me realize that certain behaviors and circumstances are not determined by us, but by something beyond us. I ask myself: if I had been born there, who would I have become?

Bergamo, Siena, and Verona made me consider different realities and different ways of living.

00;18;12;20 - 00;18;42;16

They showed me that things such as functioning services and opportunities could exist everywhere. People achieved them there, and our regret is that they succeeded while we did not. What hurts even more is that many southern Italians who live there helped make those things work. When I went to teach in Bergamo in the morning, we often spoke dialect because nearly all of us were southerners.

00;18;42;16 - 00;19;06;10

Yet those same southern Italians approached and experienced life there completely differently from how people do here. I have resigned myself to the fact that certain things will not change for my generation. Perhaps they will for the next. But trying to understand why we cannot accomplish certain things here, even though we southern Italians do accomplish them when we leave, makes you think.

00;19;06;12 - 00;19;38;03

Another reassuring thing I can say is this: although I lived away for almost twenty-five years, including in northern Italy—not so much Tuscany as Bergamo—and in the particular environment of the Bergamo valleys, I never experienced racism. I worked and taught in Bergamo and elsewhere, but lived throughout those years in the Brembana Valley, which is a very different reality. Yet in nearly twenty-five years away, I never experienced...

00;19;38;03 - 00;19;58;09

Any incident or hint of racism toward me. No one ever said anything to me merely because I was southern Italian. In the north, people may be somewhat reserved at first, but once they know you and spend time with you, relationships proceed naturally and without difficulty.

00;19;58;12 - 00;20;02;03

Racism may exist, but I personally never, ever experienced it.

00;20;02;06 - 00;20;19;29

When I worked in Verona, one colleague and I went through the entire journey together. At first there were only two of us, though others joined later. We still speak every week, and he will come here in September because he wants to discover our land. It is a completely open friendship: he is from Veneto and I am Calabrian.

00;20;20;02 - 00;20;22;20

Two different realities, two different worlds.

00;20;22;22 - 00;20;29;11

In fact, I still have my home in Verona and go there a couple of times a year. I enjoy returning.

00;20;29;13 - 00;20;34;01

Today, perhaps something might be different, but when people first left, absolutely yes.

00;20;34;03 - 00;20;41;27

Our town could not guarantee an acceptable standard of living for the many people who went away.

00;20;42;01 - 00;20;50;29

Yes, there were employment difficulties. All those people could not possibly have lived here together comfortably.

00;20;51;02 - 00;21;13;14

When I visited the Biella area, home to a large community of emigrants from our town, more than one person told me, “Yes, we live here, but our thoughts are always in Antonimina.” That means leaving was not their choice. It was different for later generations—their children and grandchildren, who were born or raised there—but not for the first generation.

00;21;13;14 - 00;21;22;29

Those who left first were compelled by the need to work, not by choice. Very few people left simply because they wanted to.

00;21;23;01 - 00;21;39;19

Yes, I understand. This also happens when people go abroad. On the trip I mentioned, we also visited New York. One evening, we went to a Neapolitan restaurant, where the owners’ mother was sitting near the entrance.

00;21;39;20 - 00;22;00;21

When she heard us speaking Italian, it seemed like a liberation to her. She began singing “’O

Sole Mio” loudly. She lived in America and her family had succeeded and opened restaurants, yet when she heard Italian, she stood on her chair and sang at the top of her voice. You never forget the place where you were born.

00;22;00;26 - 00;22;41;00

Speaking of that, my great-grandfather—also the great-grandfather of Domenico’s aunt, since we share him as an ancestor—lived in the United States for a time. He made twelve journeys between here and America. He went out of necessity to earn money. Yet his memories of that land were so powerful that, in his final years, when he was old, ill, bedridden, and blind, my father and I visited him and found him angry. I will repeat what he said in dialect, which may express it better.

00;22;41;00 - 00;23;08;25

“Why hasn’t Don Pietro come? He was my traveling companion in the United States and said he would pick me up on his motorcycle, but instead he has left me stranded here.” Even while bedridden, he remembered those times. I told him, “He will come soon. Don’t worry.” That shows how powerful the impact of that completely different world had been.

00;23;08;25 - 00;23;18;09

Imagine someone leaving Antonimina in 1906, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and arriving in New York. You can imagine the reality he encountered.

00;23;18;11 - 00;23;30;25

And consider those twelve journeys. He did not fly as we do now; he traveled by ship, crossing stormy seas for long periods. They were certainly not pleasure trips. Necessity drove my great-grandfather to make them.