

# From Rome to Bleecker... a West Village Story

By Armanda Squadrilli

She lived all over the world, through wars and evacuations; worked alongside my father Alex with refugees in Gaza; met people from heads of state to urchins selling perfumed strands of jasmine on the streets of Cairo; created new homes for us from one city to the next – Cairo, Beirut, Gaza, London, Geneva; and raised my sister Beatrice and me with un-failing optimism and grace, and a sense of humor and adventure in our peripatetic childhood.

This indirect route, begun some 80 years before in Rome, brought her to 350 Bleecker, as the West Village so reminded her of her childhood in Italy.

Beautiful, charismatic, elegant... As always, my mother, Renata, quickly made friends in her new community at 350: Lou, who brought her soup during a snow-storm; Dan and Sue, with whom she conversed in Italian; Rifo, with whom she talked about

Italy; and Dia, whom she taught to make pollo alla cacciatore. She spent many hours with Helen and Jack, who organized the roof garden summer potlucks that she so enjoyed. Down the block, I'd stop at Your Neighborhood Office, and Helen Ann would report, "Your mother was just here!" "How is she?" I'd ask, and Helen Ann would reply that she was fine, dressed beautifully as always.

I lived two blocks away then, and often hurried by 350. Looking up at the second-floor window, I could see my mother at her table, writing or observing West Village life below. I'd stop and throw pennies at the window and she'd lean out and we would have a quick chat, half-Italian/half-English. Once, with the Lesbian and Gay Marching Band, we stopped to serenade her under her window.

I didn't realize the impact my mother had had in the neighborhood until after she had died and I moved into her apartment. I sat in



Always a star...

her same spot at the window and got to know David of the clothing store across the street. He told me that he knew my mother, that she would wave to him from the apartment or stop in and try on an item. When I went to Grand's cleaners down the street, Minnie was delighted to learn I was Renata's daughter.

A few weeks after my mother died, I went to the Chelsea Eye Associates to explore laser surgery. "Last name: Squadrilli," I said. As the receptionist pulled up the record, she said, "350 Bleecker, right?" I was startled, and said, "How did you know?" She said, "You are in the system. With Dr Coad. Renata, right?" My mother's record! I had no idea she had gone to that eye doctor but immediately decided that he should be my doctor as well. And for years, when I signed in to vote at PS 3, her familiar signature was right below mine, although at this last election, I noticed it was no longer there.

Moving into the building after her passing, I felt that I was coming home to my mother's village. Neighbors remind me of how they enjoyed hearing her beautiful soprano voice, whether from the hallway or through the kitchen vent, and sometimes at the roof parties. And there is not one person who doesn't recall her style and elegance, always dressed "ready for the opera," even if it was just to pick up the mail. The residents of 350 made her feel at home and gave her a community that she loved and that loved her.



She's never farther from me than this.

Sometimes our doorman Armando wears a familiar tie – one that was my father's that she had given him. And the bench on the roof garden is still there, where she used to hold court during those monthly parties and share the wonderful stories of her life. As I follow in her wake, her memory stays alive through the shared remembrances of the people she touched those years ago. ■

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