

East Harlem's Little Italy Gets Tinier Each Day

By MICHAEL STERN

A WIZENED 83-year-old woman who had lived her spring years in Italy and her summer and autumn years in the part of Italy that was transplanted to East Harlem, came to say good-by the other day to Sabato Santarpia.

She was moving to her

The Talk
of a
Little Italy

daughter's house in the Bronx, she said, and, fumbling in her battered black handbag for a hand-

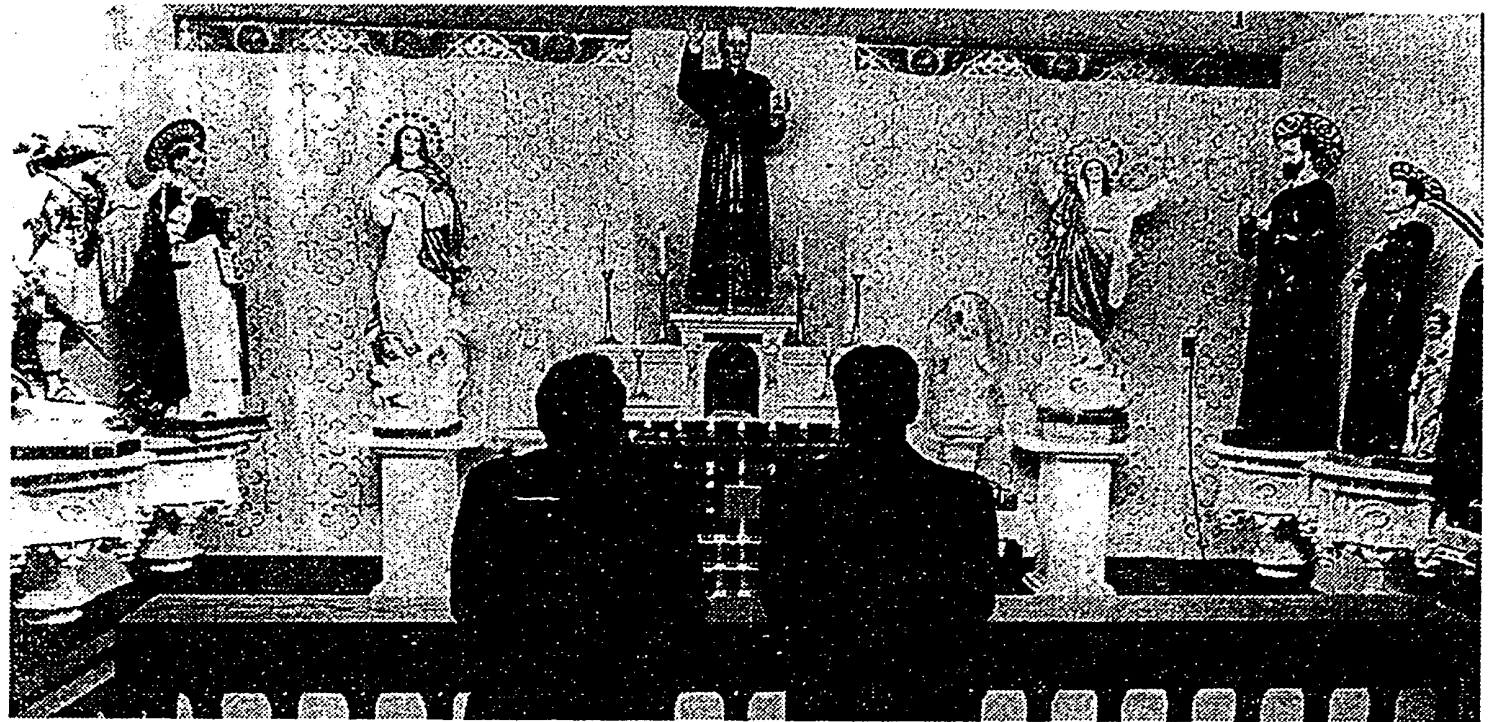
kerchief, she added tearfully: "I am sorry to go for two things—for the church and for the wine store."

The church is Our Lady of Mount Carmel's on 115th Street near Pleasant Avenue. The wine store is Mr. Santarpia's at 2255 First Avenue near 116th Street. With a handful of shops specializing in "veramente Italiani" foods and specialties, six undertaking parlors, a settlement house and the 5,000-family remnant of the 150,000 families that once lived there, the church and the wine store are about all that is left of the once-bustling Little Italy centered at 116th Street and First Avenue.

TOGETHER, they constitute a tight Mediterranean island, what the Rev. Terzio Vinci of the church called "a fortress," surrounded by a rising Negro and Puerto Rican sea.

"One by one, the old families are going," said Mrs. Anthony Madonna as she dropped a precise pound of beans into a bag for a customer in her fruit and vegetable store. "You hear about another one every day. The ones who stay, like us, have businesses here or they would get out, too."

Mrs. Madonna pointed an angry finger across 115th Street from her corner shop at 2239 First Avenue and



The Rev. Eolo Pucci and the Rev. Terzio Vinci in a chapel at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Church. They are pleased that Puerto Ricans are coming to the church in growing numbers, replacing some Italians who have left.

Photographs for The New York Times by DON CHARLES

said, "When they built that, everything changed."

"That" is Jefferson Houses, a vast low-income city housing project that in 1959 put 1,493 new families, most of them Negroes and Puerto Ricans, in the place of six square blocks of tenements bursting with Neapolitans, Sicilians and other southern Italians.

Mrs. Madonna's son Neal, who with two brothers now runs the shop that was established by their grandfather in 1908, said the problem was one of economics. "The old families earned too much money to live in the project, so they couldn't come back," he said. "The new ones are either on welfare or on pensions. They're nice people—we get along fine—but they have no money to spend."

The shop now does 60 per

cent of its business with restaurants or with former residents who stop on their way to new homes in the Bronx, Queens and Westchester. They come back, Mr. Madonna said, for the fruits and vegetables they cannot get elsewhere, like a form of watercress known as rugalo, prickly pears, cling peaches, fava beans, fennel, fresh chestnuts, dandelion greens and a special type of shallot that is milder than an onion but stronger than the ordinary shallot grown in Morocco, exported to Italy and then shipped to New York.

East Harlem's Little Italy is one of several in the city. The name, sooner or later, is attached to any neighborhood where large numbers of Italians settle with their sunny way of life. New York's original Little Italy is

the still-thriving Lower East Side community centered on Mulberry Street, and another Little Italy is in the West Village around Bleecker Street.

Many of the Italian families who settled in East Harlem were graduates of the Mulberry Street slums. With its wider streets and better housing, East Harlem was considered a step up in the world 70 and 80 years ago.

Vincent T. DeVita, manager of the First National City Bank branch at 116th Street and First Avenue, can recall when both sides of First Avenue all the way from 104th to 116th Street were lined with pushcart businesses.

"That was the first step for many immigrants," he said. "The ones that prospered opened stores, and the

stores supported whole families."

Others recall the good days of their youth, when every block had its own stickball team that would play neighboring streets with World Series fervor; when every street had a cafe or two where fathers and grandfathers sipped many cups of espresso and played many games of cards, and when young people did not have to go to movies on 86th Street for weekend fun but could dance every Friday and Saturday night at the Laurel or the Lexington Casino, both on 116th Street.

But the old days were not uniformly good. Assemblyman Frank G. Rossetti, who represents the neighborhood in the Legislature and also serves as Manhattan Democratic leader, recalls that a single block of 112th Street between First and Second Avenues once housed more than 5,000 families and was thought to be the most overcrowded in the city.

And the neighborhood also housed a thriving colony of Mafiosi, including the late Thomas Gaetano Luchese, known to the police as Three-Finger Brown.

An East Harlem old-timer said most of the Mafia dons had moved to better neighborhoods, as did others who prospered. But he said a few still remained, living in their unpretentious three-story brownstones that give no hint to a casual passer-by of the luxury and rich appointments inside.

FEW people express anything but friendliness to the new Puerto Rican and Negro residents of the neighborhood, but there is an undercurrent of uneasiness.

A prominent businessman who lives on 117th Street said, "We just don't go out at night anymore. I make sure to get home by dark. We have dinner and then we watch TV. That's the way it is now."

At La Guardia House, a settlement house at 311 East 116th Street that was founded in 1896, the Older Adult Group last week drew up a petition to Mayor Lindsay



The Older Adult Group at La Guardia House, 311 East 116th Street, has asked the Police Department for more protection

Little Italy in East Harlem Gets Smaller and Smaller Each Day

Continued From Page 49

appealing for more policemen on the East Harlem streets to protect the aged from muggers and drug addicts.

"They had a police officer here to address them," said the group leader, Mrs. Maria Polimeni, "but they still felt so strongly that they needed more protection that they drew up the petition anyway. More than 200 people signed it."

At Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Father Vinci was slightly embarrassed when he showed a visitor out the back door of the church, onto 116th Street. "We keep the front doors on 115th Street locked now," he said, "because most people prefer to come through 116th. It is busier and it seems safer."

But Father Vinci added: "We are no worse off here than any other neighborhood. Where in the city is any one safe from robbers and drug addicts?"

BOTH Father Vinci and his fellow curate, the Rev. Eolo Pucci, are pleased that Puerto Rican Catholics are beginning to come to their church. "Every week we get a few more," Father Pucci said, "and we now often get requests for marriages and baptisms in Spanish." All five priests at the church can speak Spanish.

The feeling in the rectory is that the parish has a future. Its Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel still draws more than 50,000 visitors each July and fills the surrounding streets with booths, tantalizing food smells and boisterous fun. An appeal for funds to repaint the church interior earlier this year quickly brought in \$20,000 to do the job.

And four years ago, the church built a new school for its 360 pupils that cost almost \$1-million and now represents its major indebtedness.

"What we need here is some good middle-income housing," Father Vinci said. "If we had that we could keep the remaining families

and bring back some of the old ones."

THE same hope was expressed by Joseph J. Verdicchio, chairman of Community Planning Board 11, which advises the Borough President's Office on public projects in the area from 96th to 142d Street, from Fifth Avenue to the East River.

"The mistake they made in this neighborhood was building only one kind of housing, for the poor," Mr. Verdicchio said. "What we need is a mix, low-cost housing, middle-class housing and even some luxury housing."

Mr. Verdicchio, who lives on East 116th Street and has been a trustee of the church for more than 30 years, said he was encouraged by plans for the East River Urban Renewal Project. This will provide 1,250 apartments on a site bounded by 107th and 111th Streets, First Avenue and East River Drive. Seventy per cent of the new apartments will be for middle-income families.

But others in the neighborhood think the old Italian families will come back to East Harlem to visit their friends, to buy a bottle of Burgundy Scelto at Santarpia's, to venerate their saints at the church, to bury their dead from the funeral parlors that have served them for two generations, but not to live.

"You can't turn back the clock," said Assemblyman Rossetti.

He recalled that 50 per cent of the 1,635 apartments in the Franklin Plaza cooperative at 108th Street and First Avenue were reserved for white families when the project opened in 1961 in the hope of making it an integrated community. After a year, he said, the apartments had to be sold to Negroes because too few whites wanted to live there.

"I have been living in the neighborhood 56 years," he said. I still live there. I was married in the church, and so were my children. What's happened is sad, but I know we can't change it."