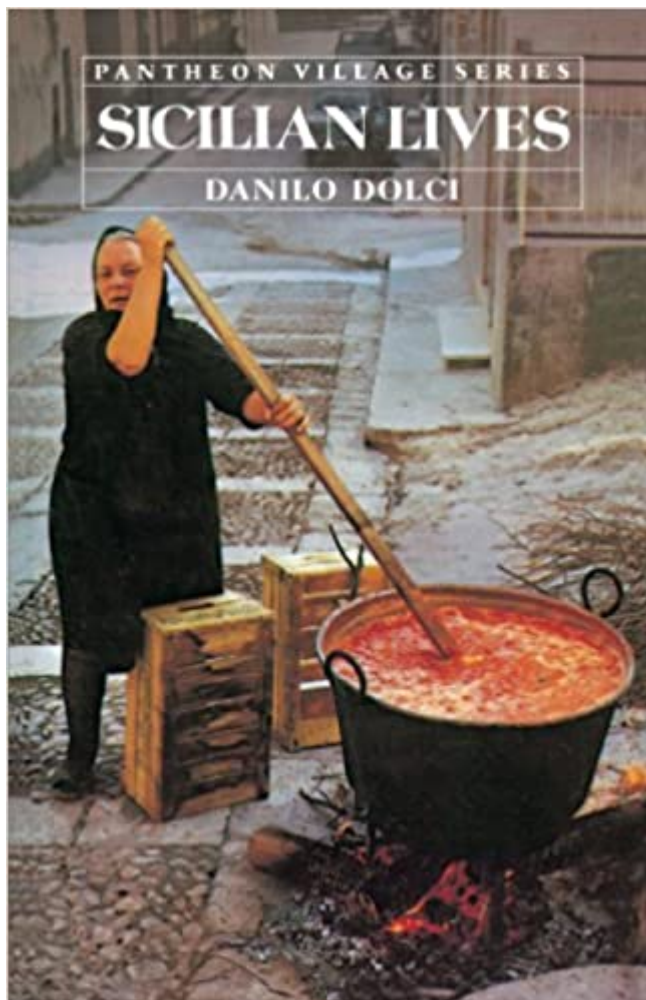


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# Sicilian Lives (Pantheon Village)



## Synopsis

When Danilo Docli, peace worker, organizer, educator, first arrived in 1952 in Trappeto, a village of peasants and fishermen in western Sicily, there were no streets, just mud and dust, not a single drugstore, not even a sewer. (In fact, the local dialect didn't even have a word for sewer.) Like other Sicilians, the villagers, seen by many Italians as "bandits," "dirt-eaters," and "savages," had, in effect, been mute for centuries. Dolci's years of work broke this silence. The result is *Sicilian Lives*, a book which reveals the intimate experiences and perceptions of a wide range of Sicilians, rural and urban, through voices that are sometimes frightening, but always fascinating and unexpected. Danilo Dolci has collected a rich panorama of voices—the eloquent testimony of Sicilians who, at last, are speaking out to penetrate the most profound dilemmas of an impoverished land.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Mr. Dolci also listens, which is why he is called the Oscar Lewis and Studs Terkel of Sicily. For 30 years, he has written down what he hears and read it back to the teller. A story • a connection • is made; lives are rescued from silence. . . . Only the grave robbers know anything of Sicily's ancient history; only Mr. Dolci seems unbroken, nonviolent, among the children, listening, an architect of muscle and tongue. We ought to be grateful." • The New York Times • "Danilo Dolci is a wonderful man, one of those who, in purity of spirit, has cast his lot with the insulted and the injured. He is utterly free of rancor or righteousness; he is better

than a saint – he is a good human being. And it all comes out in his writing. – Irving Howe – “Danilo Dolci, in living a Sicilian life, offers us, in wisdom and innocence, the hearts, minds, and dreams of his neighbors. With their own words he has painted an indelible portrait of a society. – Studs Terkel – “Danilo Dolci is not only the world’s foremost advocate of nonviolent revolution, but also a poet and a sensitive interviewer. He is often called Sicily’s Gandhi, but he has also been Sicily’s Stud Terkel and Oscar Lewis. . . . Beautifully written, Sicilian Lives is a course in the sociology, anthropology, economics, and politics of Sicily, and a moving portrait of its people. – Herbert Gans

Text: English, Italian (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Dolci has not learned from Studs Terkel that "hope dies last". Each interviewee has a pessimistic tale to tell, completely devoid of optimism. They clearly reveal for over 30 years the obstacles put before them in a society controlled by corrupt politicians, mafiosi, and feudal land barons. And in some stories, the ground is literally falling from beneath them. It's a pity that Dolci did not interview Giuseppe Tornatore (Cinema Paradiso and Baaria) for his positive, uplifting views - at least how he projects them on film regarding Sicily. We may not like what we read, but each interviewee is truthful in sharing his life story and his/her life challenges. An excellent translation from Italian to English.

Interesting in that the book portrays the gritty side of the Sicilian population, there's nothing of Frances Mayes (Under the Tuscan Sun) about the book (Mayes should look below the Tuscan surface to realize the region's character in depth). Sicilian Lives was written when poverty was much more rampant and the stories reflect those hard times. There's still poverty in Sicily, the only difference is that there seems to be more hope about the future.

The answer to that question, in the 1950s, ranged from "not very good" to "awful". Sicily was illiterate, poor, corrupt, and violent. Many people despaired of ever changing the situation. Though I have no knowledge of contemporary conditions, I assume that Italian membership in the EEC brought some long-needed benefits to all of its regions, including Sicily. Whether Palermo can ever be Turino is another question. Danilo Dolci, a famous peaceful-revolutionary or radical reformer on the lines of Paulo Freire in Brazil, worked in Sicily for several decades, meeting with people from all

walks of life, all classes. In this book--yet another of the beautiful Pantheon Village series [see my reviews of "Akenfield", "Amoskeag" and "Longtime Californ"]--Dolci presents a picture of mid-20th century Sicily through a series of interviews with many Sicilians. They speak entirely on their own. His questions and observations are omitted, with only a couple short sentences at the beginning of each interview to define the speaker. The fishermen, farmers, housewives, shepherds, unemployed gatherers of wild greens and snails, union organizers, former pickpockets, bureaucrats, members of the old nobility, politicians and even Mafiosi speak openly, often poetically, of the injustices and family problems in Sicily, of the ways they devised to survive or maintain their position. Most of the interviews seem to have been done in the Fifties, but some do come from as late as the Seventies. We hear of the terrible conditions--disease, filth, murders, revenge killings---and the feudal injustices inflicted on the poor, and wonder how it was possible that Sicily did not undergo a violent revolution as did so many parts of the world after World War II. While this sort of book does not spoonfeed readers---you have to consider for yourself what the implications of the statements are, as Dolci offers no lecture, no guiding commentary--what you do get is a wonderful picture of Sicilian society at that time, and a sense that even though people may be uneducated and unsophisticated, given a chance, they can express their thoughts about their lives as well as anyone and perhaps more poetically than many. You also realize that in a society where nobody trusts anyone else, building institutions which would help lift the people out of their misery is extremely difficult. A gangster-ridden society may take generations to clean itself up. Still, this is an interesting, beautifully-written book for anyone interested in Italy, Sicily, or the human condition in general.

This book is a collection of life stories of Sicilians as told to Danilo Dolci. Dolci, a Northern Italian, arrived in Sicily in 1952. The poverty that he confronted there every day was overwhelming, and he was determined to help the local people improve their lives through political organization and education. As he helped build unions and charity institutions, Dolci talked to the people he was working with. He asked them about their backgrounds, how they came to be poor or rich, what their values were, and their dreams. The stories are organized into groups according to Dolci's view of their role in society: the indigenous, the parasites, vicious circles, plagues, waste, those who endure, and those who resist (exploitation by the capitalists). Many of the stories are simply amazing: the orphan who is trained to be a pickpocket and then grows to be a respectable trained worker, the man who gets his revenge on women by seducing them and purposefully infecting them with syphilis, the healer who specializes in extracting intestinal parasites and other worms. The overall message of the book seems to be how miserable society can become when there is a

complete lack of trust and honesty. Perhaps this was Dolci's goal- -to get people to begin to build a community for themselves by starting with a little trust. The stories of this book will help you understand just how far behind Southern Italy was from Northern Italy and the rest of Europe only a generation or two ago, and perhaps the reasons behind the differences, as well.

This is a pleasant novel by Danilo Dolci, but the English in it is of awkward quality and doesn't do it justice. Like most things Vitiello touches, it sounds convoluted, dull and flat. Perhaps, he's a good scholar, but his own poetry in English is as dull, flat and convoluted as all of his translations. The other translator would do well to stay away from him as he gives her work a bad name. He simply doesn't understand English and its idioms well enough to do a good job of translation. A reader from Paterson Community College

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