

RALPH VILLANI

Warren Grover

Newark's Douglas Hotel was the site of my Bar Mitzvah reception on March 2, 1951. Added to the general excitement of the event was the expected presence of the city's Mayor, Ralph Villani. The Mayor was important to my family, as evinced by my younger brother's middle name, Ralph. A dozen of my eighth grade classmates, although not as impressed as I was by the mayor's imminent arrival, gathered in front of the hotel's reception hall. Villani appeared, and apparently not noticing us, headed straight toward my father. Sometime later he made time to congratulate the Bar Mitzvah boy.

Ralph Villani was born in Elizabeth New Jersey in September 1901 to Italian immigrant parents, the first of their ten children. The family moved to Newark's Ironbound section two years later, where his father opened a butcher shop. Ralph was closely connected to the neighborhood his entire life.

After graduating from East Side High School, his family encouraged him to attend Syracuse University. He earned a law degree, working his way through school, and passed the New Jersey Bar Exam in 1924.

After his graduation from law school Villani became active in Italian neighborhood clubs and associations, some connected to local Italian Catholic churches and others to honor the patron saints of towns and villages from which the Italian community had emigrated. Mutual aid societies were the focus of many of these associations. Over time, many of these organizations became political as well as social.

The leaders of these organizations often gained the recognition and prestige necessary for a political career. One of them was a lawyer, Anthony Minisi, a World War One veteran. A Republican, he was elected Assemblyman in 1924 and served two terms. Five years later he would become the first Italian to gain a seat on Newark's commission.

Ralph Villani was fortunate that Minisi was a neighbor and family friend. Minisi was seven years older than Villani and took the younger man under his wing. Tex Novellino, a well-known Newark journalist, said Minisi "Inspired Villani's entrance into politics." It was Minisi who recommended the organizations that would further his career. These included The Elks, Sons of Italy, 13th Ward Political Club, Nicholas Bibbo Republican Association, and the Royal Order of the Moose. Villani's outgoing and pleasant personality, as well as his natural talent as a networker made him a standout. His efforts to solicit favors for fellow organization members gained him increasing visibility in Italian-American Newark.

These groups were the basis on which Villani built and maintained his political strength. A 1943 newspaper article reported: "He visits many Italian clubs and associations every week during their meetings. He keeps members informed on doings at City Hall and listens carefully to their suggestions and complaints." Very importantly, he took the names of those needing jobs, and when he could, recommended them for open positions. During his re-election campaign in 1945 the *Italian Tribune* cited as one of his notable accomplishments, the appointment of hundreds of jobs that previously had not been available to Italian Americans.

The Great Depression of 1929, marked a turning point in Newark politics. The descendants of the original English settlers, who controlled the politics and economy of Newark, had already begun leaving the city. The Depression accelerated their departure. German Americans, who had challenged the English dominance in the last decades of the Nineteenth Century and until World War One, lost their clout in the fallout of the war. Irish, Italians, and Jews, the three largest ethnic groups other than the Germans were now in the position to gain political power in Newark. The Irish, English speakers, were the first to take advantage of the new political climate. Their churches, parochial schools, and religious organizations dominated the City's municipal positions, particularly in the police and fire departments. Jews and Italians, later arrivals in Newark, and not native English speakers, would soon compete with them.

1933 was the first municipal election during the Depression. Newark Commissioners had struggled along with other elected officials in the country to deal with the new economic conditions. None of the five sitting Commissioners was re-elected. Several Irish had served on the Commission, but until then, no Italian or Jew had been elected. Meyer Ellenstein, a Jew, and Anthony Minisi, an Italian, combined forces and were the first of their religions to gain Newark Commission seats.

Villani was a key supporter of Minisi, working among Newark's Italian American groups to obtain a large majority vote in their neighborhoods, especially in the Ironbound. The Ironbound vote was the key to Minisi's victory. The new commissioner soon returned Villani's support. Each Commissioner was entitled to appoint one Municipal Magistrate. Minisi selected Villani following the election in May. At 31, Villani began his forty one year public career.

Villani's judgeship was in the Third Ward, a Jewish neighborhood with a substantial black minority. He made many new friends among the Jewish residents, who would support him when he became a Commission candidate eight years later. They were grateful for his leniency toward the anti-Nazi fighters who were arrested for attacking bund meetings. Additionally his tenure on the bench made him more empathic vis a vis blacks, whose social and economic inequality became all to real to him.

However, less than a year into his term Villani's career was in jeopardy. In March 1934, Public Safety Director Michael Duffy suspended him on charges of

accepting \$100 for issuing a license to sell flowers one week before Easter. Two eyewitnesses testified that Villani gave the license official \$50 and pocketed the balance.

Outrage over the suspension among Italian Americans followed. Over the next eight months Italian officials and organizations continued a steady barrage against Duffy. In an editorial, *The Italian Tribune*, noted "Citizens of Italian extraction are indignant, some of them are attributing Duffy's action to race antipathy. Villani is only guilty of "a generous desire to be helpful." Another Italian newspaper, *The Liberal*, claimed that Duffy's charges "were motivated by a desire to crucify Judge Villani."

The City Commission held a meeting to rule on the suspension, but couldn't vote since two members were reluctant to be on record and did not attend the session.

After months of delay, the Supreme Court set aside the dismissal, ruling that there was insufficient evidence to prove the charges. The Court said that the conviction was founded on hearsay and formed no basis for the conclusion of corrupt or improper motives. Duffy said he would appeal, but within days reversed himself, under pressure from governmental and political quarters which feared a ruptured city.

Now viewed as a martyr, Villani became even more popular among Italian Americans. An indication was his increasing prominence in the major Italian Holiday of the year, Columbus Day. The highlight of the event was a parade on Broad Street followed by speeches in front of City Hall, Military or Washington Park. In the early 1930s, Villani became one of the parade's directors. In 1937, over fifty Italian-American societies elected him Parade Chairman. That year the event had over 10,000 marchers. The next year Villani was Master of Ceremonies.

1938 was an important time for Italian Americans. World War Two was approaching. The Munich Pact, signed on September 29, was thought to have been instrumental in keeping the peace in Europe. Many in Newark's Italian American Community were proud of Mussolini's role at Munich. On the other hand, only days earlier, he threw in his lot with Hitler and announced Racial Laws, stripping many Jews of Italian Citizenship and barring them from governmental and professional positions, among other restrictions.

Villani found himself in the middle. He needed the support of Jews as well as Italians if he was to run for political office in Newark. At the 1938 Columbus Day Parade, Count Renato Della Chiesi, Newark Italian Vice Counsel praised Mussolini, intoning, "The future is assured in Italy and America and Italy is traveling serenely onward." The crowd listened politely to Della Chiesi and some cheered at Mussolini's mention.

Villani was the next speaker, and despite the positive reception to Della Chiesi and his words of praise for Mussolini, he sensed the correct response. Villani decried the cloud hanging over Jews and Italian Americans because of Mussolini's anti Jewish

decrees. "We are not paying attention to the decrees. We want the Jews as friends and they want us," he told the crowd as it roared its approval.

As the 1941 Municipal Election approached, Villani was being urged to run. He demurred at first, but soon began to solicit support, without publically announcing his intentions. However, Minisi, who had been defeated in 1937, was also preparing to run. Both families were still extremely close, sharing vacations. However, by late July 1939 the situation had changed. A political column in the *Italian Tribune* spoke of an undeclared war between the two men. Both wanted the backing of Italian American groups in the 1941 Commissioner race. Minisi had been unaware of the groundswell of support building for his friend. By the time he learned, it was too late. According to his family, he never spoke to Villani again.

Villani was a powerful candidate in his first run for Newark Commissioner. As Minisi had done in 1933, he made an alliance with Ellenstein, now the Newark Mayor. Overwhelming support in the Italian community and well-earned backing in the Jewish community made his election a certainty. Of the 34 in the field he finished third with over 51,000 votes. Minisi finished 12th with slightly over 20,000 votes. Ellenstein lost finishing 7th because, according to the *Newark News*, many Italians did not support him in this election.

Villani's victory produced a mass demonstration, with an estimated 1,000 accompanying him perched on the shoulders of supporters carrying him from his campaign headquarters on Broad Street across the street to City Hall. From the balcony of City Hall, the new Commissioner thanked his supporters and vowed to be "a credit to the City of Newark."

As a first term Commissioner, Villani was given the least powerful department to manage, becoming Director of Parks and Public Property. This included supervision of the not yet vital Newark Housing Authority. His major responsibilities were street cleaning, garbage collection, swimming, public baths, public buildings, and shade trees. According to Frank D'Asencio, longtime Newark City Clerk, "He took that position and made the most of it. He planted trees that still embellish our city and promoted programs to beautify the City." He was credited with planting more than 30,000 trees during his first two terms, and had plans for 100,000 more prior to the war, in part to beautify the city and keep Newarkers from moving to the suburbs. He also initiated summer concerts in the City's Parks and often selected the programs.

Villani gained more publicity for his "Learn to Swim Campaign" than any other activity he was involved with during his years as commissioner. The goal of the campaign was to teach all Newark children to swim. As Villani entered office in 1941, four pools built with funds provided by the WPA were completed. Yet the program had a rocky start. There were those who insisted the four pools be segregated, with three pools for whites only, while the fourth would be for blacks. Washington, Dayton, and St. Louis had recently dealt with a similar

controversy. They all ultimately decided on segregated pools. Villani said the pools were for the use of all Newarkers and that there would be no discrimination or segregation in their use. After this statement, there were no more attempts to create Jim Crow pools in the city.

Every summer he visited the pools multiple times a week. He sponsored swimming and diving competitions at each pool as well as citywide meets. Red Cross instructors taught Newark youth the foundations of life saving. One year, he hired seventeen Red Cross approved swimming instructors for the City's pools. At the end of each swim season, Villani sponsored a water ballet performance attended by visitors from all over the state.

The success of his swim campaigns was one of the reasons he was endorsed for re-election in 1945 and 1949 by the City's daily newspapers, The Newark News and the Star-Ledger.

Villani's first term ran concurrently with World War Two. One of his major accomplishments during this period was as director of the Victory Gardens campaign – founded during WWI as the “War Garden Movement.” This program, which would be reintroduced during the Second World War, aimed at alleviating the severe food crisis in Europe. Citizens could contribute to the war effort by planting, fertilizing and harvesting their own fruits and vegetables so that more food could be exported to our allies. Gardens were to be set up in backyards, parks, schools, company grounds and available vacant lots.

In the spring of 1942 food rationing began. In February 1943, Villani launched a campaign to develop 3,000 Victory Gardens, using parks, public lands and private gardens. Villani's department provided assistance in developing the gardens and supplied seeds. Initially, the gardens were only for vegetables, eventually adding fruit. Space in front of City Hall was among the first public land that was employed. By April, parts of Military Park were growing tomatoes, cabbages, carrots, beets and Swiss chard.

When I was five, I watched my mother tend a garden on the side of our rented flat. I knew that she considered it important. During the spring and summer, I accompanied her in her garden chores. I'm sure I wasn't much help, but after the first tomato crop was picked and served for dinner, I became a lifelong fan of Jersey tomatoes. Later I learned that the garden was a “Victory Garden.”

When Villani became a commissioner in 1941, Vincent Murphy became the mayor, replacing Ellenstein. Murphy clashed continuously with Villani, particularly over Murphy's spending policies. In 1945 he tried to replace Villani with another Italian candidate.

The municipal election took place in May and Villani again finished third. His re-election platform featured the expansion of housing projects with 15 new locations housing 5,000 families. He envisioned low rent projects to replace Newark's slums. This program, if enacted, would provide an enormous amount of patronage.

This fact was not lost on Mayor Murphy, who longed for full control over the city and its housing authority. Murphy's re-election and that of his two allies, Brady and Keenan, gave the mayor his opportunity. Although Villani again finished third while his ally, Ellenstein, made a comeback and finished fifth, Murphy stripped Villani of the Newark Housing Authority and Ellenstein of the powerful city Law Department.

In June, a long-brewing controversy came to a head. City Hospital, Newark's public hospital, barred black physicians from practicing there. Civil rights groups, including the NAACP and the Urban League, had protested this policy for months. Villani, took the lead and urged hiring of "competent Negro physicians to the City Hospital staff. The Negro is entitled to representation and participation in our way of life. Opposition is a direct contradiction to this American principle." Soon after, the hospital began hiring black physicians.

As the 1949 municipal election approached, postwar prosperity was at its peak; Newark's two major newspapers, the *Newark News* and the *Star Ledger* predicted all five Commissioners would be reelected. Villani and Ellenstein decided otherwise. They would replace one of the three Irish majority commissioners with one of their choice. Villani would become Mayor and Ellenstein would lead the City's powerful Revenue and Finance Department (then run by Murphy). When Villani announced he was seeking the mayoralty, most politicians gave him little or no chance.

Villani and Ellenstein had one factor in their favor-- Abner "Longie" Zwillman, Newark's undisputed crime boss and an ally of the two men.

Initially, the two commissioners were unsuccessful in finding an Irish candidate to fill out their ticket. Murphy and his team were well entrenched and had been successful for the past three elections. Zwillman stepped in. He had good connections with many Newark labor unions and unofficially ran two of them, the projectionists and the retail clerks. He was also a "behind the scenes" political operative and had gang associates in both political and governmental positions. After some weeks, he succeeded in persuading Stephen Moran, Executive Secretary of the New Jersey CIO and director of its affiliate, the New Jersey Political Action Committee, to join the ticket. Villani and Ellenstein would back Moran. In return, Zwillman would name his associates to important political positions Moran was entitled to as Commissioner.

Villani opened his campaign in March 1949, in his usual locale, the Ironbound. He ran on a platform to improve housing conditions and eliminate slums; help veterans; provide good education and clean sports, and help small homeowners.

On May 8, Villani and Ellenstein prevailed while Leo Carlin and Stephen Moran defeated Mayor Vincent Murphy and Commissioner John Brady.

A few days later, the five newly sworn in commissioners met and Villani was named Mayor, Ellenstein Commissioner of Revenue and Finance, and Moran Commissioner of Public Affairs. Soon after, Moran appointed his choices for the zoning and planning boards, both associates of Zwillman. Moran's most important appointment

was Ira Goodman as his deputy Commissioner. Goodman was Zwillman's chairman in the heavy voting predominantly Jewish Ninth Ward.

According to the *Italian Tribune*, "the largest crowds in the history of the City were at the inauguration." Villani opened his speech "I was raised in the "Down Neck" section of our City and, in fact, I am still a "Down Necker. Throughout all these years I have tried to stay close to the people and to understand their problems. I have succeeded because their problems have been my problems."

Villani served as mayor until 1954, when the voters chose to reorganize the city's government into the present Mayor-Council form. In 1953 he was indicted for taking kickbacks from department employees for jobs and promotions. He was never convicted, nor were several other commissioners accused of similar crimes. However, the majority of Newarkers understood that the charges signaled deep corruption. That's why they voted for a change of government.

Nine years later, in 1962, Newark voters seem to have forgiven him. He won an at-large seat on the City Council. Villani was reelected in 1966 and 1970. During his last term, he resigned for health reasons and died in 1974 at the age of 72.

Fifteen years later, he was still popular among Italian Americans, and in 1989 a new Police Department Headquarters was named for him. Sharpe James remembered him as a man "who beautified the city."