

## ELISA SPERANZA – EXPLORING ITALIAN CONNECTIONS IN MY ADOPTED NEW ORLEANS HOMETOWN

By Deanne Faucheux ([deanne.faucheux@jacobs.com](mailto:deanne.faucheux@jacobs.com))



Those of us who have had the privilege of working with Elisa Speranza already know of her creative, problem-solving approach to life and work. New challenges inspire and motivate her, no matter how daunting they may seem to the rest of us. Joining CH2M Hill in 2001 as Market Segment Leader for Drinking Water, Elisa was first tasked with building relationships with key clients and leveraging relationships formed during her service in industry leadership positions, including Vice President of the American Water Works Association and Chair of the Water For People board. She later led the Utility Management Solutions team and was selected as the first woman President of Operations Management Inc. (OMI), where she presided over 6 years of profitable growth before joining the C-Suite when Jacque Hinman became CEO. She was elected to the CH2M Hill Board of Directors in 2014 and served as President of the CH2M Hill Foundation until her departure at the end of 2016. A consummate industry professional, Elisa has built a portfolio of consulting, teaching, and board work since leaving the firm. She currently serves on the boards of Harris & Associates and the Northeast Power Coordinating Council, along with local non-profit organizations in New Orleans. The more flexible schedule has allowed Elisa to focus on one of her life's true passions – her love of the written word. Raised north of Boston in an Irish/Italian Catholic family, and educated by nuns, Elisa says she has been a writer and book nerd all her life. Her first paid job was in the children's room of her town's public library, and she was a journalist early in her career, before spending thirty-plus years in the water and critical infrastructure business. On a recent visit with CHAA member Deanne Faucheux, the two talked about how *The Italian Prisoner* came about.

Deanne: Your first novel, congratulations! Was authoring a story like this one always a part of your bucket list?

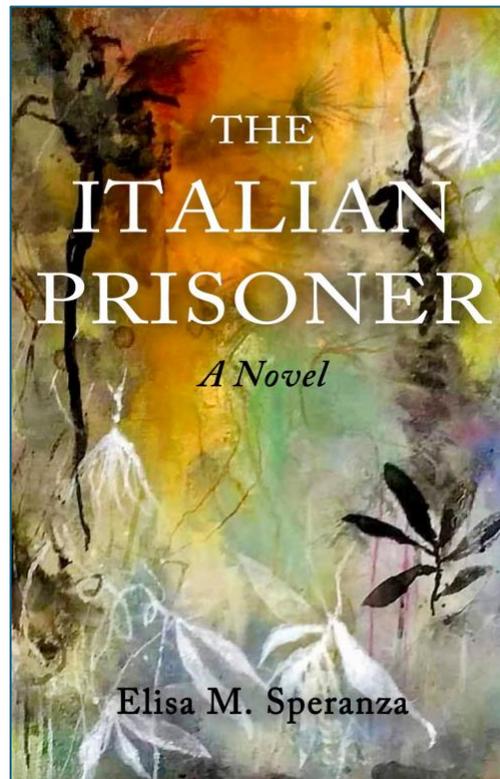
Elisa: In a way, yes. Shortly after I moved from Boston to New Orleans in 2002, I heard a friend's story about his parents: an Italian prisoner of war and a French Quarter Sicilian-American woman who met during World War II in New Orleans. Fascinated by this hidden chapter in history, I wanted to find out more.

Deanne: What kind of research did you do?

Elisa: When I started, it was almost overwhelming. There were some 51,000 Italian POWs held in the US from 1943-1945, 1,000 of whom were held at Jackson Barracks in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. Fortunately, I was able to work with the late, most wonderful Sal Serio, Curator of the American Italian Library, and Linda DiMarzio Massicot, the daughter of one of the Jackson Barracks POWs. They were amazing resources, helping me through what became a treasure hunt for information, artifacts, and people. Together, we were able to identify ten local families who had descended from the Jackson Barracks POWs and the local Sicilian-American women they met and married. I also did a lot of research into the Higgins Shipyard, which employed over 20,000 people in New Orleans during the war. My protagonist Rose works there with her friend Marie. So many women went to work outside the home during those years (and loved it), and I wanted to capture that experience.

Deanne: What brought the prisoners to New Orleans?

Elisa: In 1942, the Allies launched "Operation Torch" in North Africa, a battle they won in May of 1943. The British and American forces divided up the captured fighters and had to put them somewhere. Some 380,000 Germans and 51,000 Italian POWs were brought to the US. When Italy surrendered and switched sides in September of 1943, the Italian POWs were no longer "enemy combatants," but couldn't be sent home either, according to the



Geneva Convention. Given the severe shortage of workers, the US Army offered the Italian POWs a chance to serve in “Italian Service Units” in March of 1944, in exchange for some freedoms. Almost all of them signed up. About 1,000 Italians were housed at Jackson Barracks in New Orleans until they were sent home in December of 1945.

Deanne: And the connection to the New Orleans Sicilian community?

Elisa: Through the efforts of a few Catholic priests and local businessmen, the New Orleans’ Sicilian community adopted the Italian POWs – partly to help support the war effort and prove their patriotism, and partly out of compassion for their countrymen.

Deanne: So, is the rest, as they say, history? Seems like there is a good bit of imagination as well as local charm to the writing.

Elisa: I really had fun pulling pieces from all the stories to create the characters. As *The Italian Prisoner* reveals, the young women of “Little Palermo” found friends and dance partners, and many of them found husbands. So that part of the story was fun to write. Putting it all into the local New Orleans setting was a real pleasure—Jon and I live just a block outside the French Quarter, so that part of the physical research was pretty easy.

Deanne: I could really see the places and people you wrote about. I was born in New Orleans and grew up here in the ‘50s and ‘60s, so the descriptions were very vivid and close to what I remember.

Elisa: That’s just the effect I’d hoped for! I am really grateful for all the local enthusiasm for the book, particularly from the Italian American community. My father’s parents were Italian immigrants, and this is partly their story as well. So many locals had no idea that either the French Quarter at one time was the heart of the Sicilian community or that Italian prisoners had been housed nearby at Jackson Barracks. It has been fun to get the ‘aha’ reaction from readers.

Deanne: So, can we expect a sequel?

Elisa: I can give you an enthusiastic ‘yes’ to that question, though it’s more of a spin-off than a sequel. The main character in the second book is Rose’s

sister, the Army nurse from the first book. I'm deep into nurses' journals and letters home during the war.

Deanne: Can't wait! As always, Elisa, I wish you the best of luck in all you do. Stay in touch!

Elisa serves as Board Chair for the New Orleans Writers Workshop and is a co-founder of the Washashore Writers Collective. Originally from the Boston area, she is an alumna of Boston College and Harvard's Kennedy School. She lives with Jon Kardon in New Orleans and Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. Check out her webpage to learn more about *The Italian Prisoner* Elisa M. Speranza ([elisamariesperanza.com](http://elisamariesperanza.com)) and about the historical inspiration for the book. You can also subscribe to her free Substack newsletter at [elisamariesperanza.substack.com](http://elisamariesperanza.substack.com).