



Podcasts

A Memoir

Rosamaria Mancini

Funny, straightforward, and intimate, this 'ex-pat' memoir is a must-read for women, moms, and podcast listeners.

Having the right voice in your ear makes life easier



Rosamaria Mancini

knows she is a big pain and has trouble staying calm.

She worries about everything, including her kids, husband, New York-based family, career, colds and viruses, freak accidents, and world events.

This New Yorker was forced into a type of isolation when she moved from Italy (a beautiful but still strange place) to Germany on the outskirts of a military base in the middle of nowhere for a four-year period. She found the cultural differences to be challenging, as well as highly entertaining, but she found a savior, and his, her, its name was podcast.



SOS PODCASTS

Rosamaria Mancini

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DEDICATION

To my family, in particular my parents Nicola Mancini (1940- 2017) and Silvia Mancini.

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This is me

I'm a big pain. I'm overbearing. I'm a lot to deal with, I know, especially because I'm not great at relaxing, at taking it easy. I can't help but feel torn all the time. I can't stop thinking about my family in New York. I can't stop worrying about my life in Germany with my husband and two kids. I always have a headache. I self-diagnosed some terrible terminal illness but no, thank God; my doctor says my condition is stress induced.

I think anyone would be this way if they were in my situation. I mean my life has been made up of one massive change after another ever since my first move from New York to Italy when I was a single woman with a career in the media. After almost 10 years there I moved on to Germany as a working mom. I never imagined all of this. I'm the youngest of four children brought up in New York by conservative Italian immigrants from Puglia. I grew up in the last two decades of the last century in a tight-knit Roman Catholic family in Brooklyn and Long Island. That's right, on the edge of the Big Apple. I worked hard in school. I wasn't nerdy, really, I wasn't. But I did always want to sit in the front of the classroom. I pushed myself and graduated from college with honors. In work I was ambitious, probably annoyingly so for some people, never satisfied with a job below my expectations. I then surprised everyone when I left everything in New York, including my family, and went to Italy where my parents came from for a job --- nobody ever moves to Italy for work! (For one reason, the country still has one of Europe's highest unemployment rates.¹) Except me. I saw an opportunity I could not refuse. So, for years, I have been an outsider - not quite an Italian, not at all a German, cut off from family. Who could I talk to? More

1. Destatis Statistisches Bundesamt. "June 2022. EU Employment Rate at 6%." Report. Web.

importantly, after an upbringing among Brooklyn parents, uncles, aunts, and an entire vocally opinionated clan with no “off” button, who could I listen to? More on that later.

I met my husband, Marco, an electronics specialist in the Italian Air Force, in Rome. Pretty soon we got married and then I gave birth to my/our first child, a daughter, named after my mother. I had settled in relatively well in Italy and spoke the language nearly like a native because it was the language of family life back home, but I realized now that I wasn’t exactly doing most things the Italian way, even though in New York I had felt so Italian. Living in *Italia* somehow toned down my Italianity. I went from an overly proud *Italo Americano* to a stars-and-stripes, blueberry pie, patriotic American. I even framed a window-sized American flag and hung it in the center of my living room. I longed for big red, white, and blue holidays, like Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving. I returned from visits to New York with my luggage filled with pounds of ground American coffee and boxes of pancake and waffle mix. Taking American coffee to Italy...imagine!

Things got more complicated when my husband was assigned to a four-year post at a NATO base in Germany. I thought, “Please God, is this really happening?” I had, after about 10 years, just about figured out how to navigate Italian bureaucracy and live happily; it was a synthetic type of happiness perhaps, but it was still happiness. If we were going anywhere, I wanted to go back to New York. I had no interest in Germany or its culture. I was scared of that angry, hard-sounding language. I thought of Germany as this weird, annoyingly precise, rule-following place (their rules, not mine, which are perfect) which still had a no speed-limit *Autobahnen* --- rules to suit BMWs! Strange, I told you. I knew the move would change my life the most. My husband would still be a part of the Italian Air Force and work with some of his Italian colleagues. Bravo for him. My daughter was only three years old, and she would adjust easily. But what about me? In Italy, at least I could understand the radio I had playing. But Radio Deutschlandfunk? Now way, Uwe!

I prayed on it. I’m a practicing Catholic despite living in such a non-Catholic age. I even worked for several years at the Holy See, the Vatican. The job was in Communications, among many things I

helped manage relations with the English-speaking press at the Vatican's pilgrimage office. After praying, I typed up a lengthy Germany pro-and-con list. I talked to my folks back home, who basically said, "Germany bad, but marriage good." What help was that? None of this eased my anxiety and I practically developed a stomach ulcer. I had major stomach pain all the time. But it was "husband good" so that was it. I was moving to Geilenkirchen, GK as it was called for short, which turned out to be a small town in the most western part of Germany. It was no New York, no Rome, actually not even armpit New Jersey. It was in the middle of fricking nowhere. Nowhere being the borderlands of Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. So not even Bonn or Berlin. Gradually it sank in that I had agreed to move to an anonymousville, where there were more cows and sheep than people. I consoled myself with the thought that this was only for four years, not forever. I could survive. I would be okay. The base did have an American contingent (yes, wave that flag), but I wasn't the one in the military. I was just a wife, who wasn't tuned in. And, as it turned out, a soon-to-be pregnant mamma or, as I would have to learn to say, *Mutter*.

Yes, after a year at GK my daughter was joined by a baby brother. Please understand I'm completely devoted to them. But the stress! I'm always worrying about what they could and should be doing. Control freak? Damn right. It seems everyone around me doesn't care whether their kids have washed their hands after playing in the dirt, or what they're wearing in the cold, rainy weather, or what they're eating for a healthy snack. Am I the only one who is preoccupied by all this stuff? Am I a bad mother? Oh, those sins of commission and omission. Mommy, sister, anyone ... tell me I'm okay. I need your voice in my ear.

How do I cope? Well, I have a lot of self-made rituals and rules that I follow (all mine, not the made-in-Germany kind!), and honestly, it's exhausting to keep up with them, even for me. For example, I overdress my kids, I know I do. I can't let them out of the house without safety layers: waterproofs, hats, gloves, or scarves. In Germany, the weather is windy, wet, and rarely not freezing, but in my husband's opinion, I dress the kids according to how cold *I* feel. And I'm always cold. (I know he doesn't go for my oversized fleece

polka dot pajamas but that's another story.) What really stinks is when all my effort and hard work doesn't pay off. I learned during a surprise visit to school that my daughter immediately takes off a layer as soon as she walks into the building. I'm disappointed when I pick up my son from daycare and he's brought outside to me without his arctic gear on. I want to say something. I don't understand why they can't put his jacket on. But I hold back. I try not to complain about these kinds of things. After all, I want them to treat my son well. So I quietly and quickly get him into the car. No time for kisses and hugs - he doesn't have a warm coat on.

Ok, ok, I know, I'm overprotective and underconfident. Like I said before, I'm a big pain. But until I moved to Germany, I didn't realize that I'm also a lonely, isolated big pain. So, what happens is, I look inwards at myself and the kids. And what I want is perfection. Need, not want. It's a must-have. And since I can't have it, I need something, or someone, to tell me my imperfections are acceptable. Kooky, yes. Crazy, maybe. But fun. Please?

So where can I find an opinion which says it's understandable that I adore white, cotton undershirts? I make sure my kids wear one every day, all year long. As a kid, I always wore what my mother called the *maglietta della salute* (translation: health shirt) and I still do. In the winter they work well as an extra layer of warmth, and in the summer they are a great sweat barrier. I don't want my kids walking around in sweat-soaked shirts, that's gross. I also want to protect their skin from synthetic fabrics. When my husband dresses them he sometimes passes on the undershirts and then my daughter teases me and says "na, na nah na, I don't have an undershirt on." I am annoyed by that, it's not funny. And it's not my fault that my son was surprised to see what he called his "naked" knees when my husband put a pair of shorts on him. If it's always cold out, I can't put the kid in shorts, come on, now.

I flush out their tiny noses using a nasal spray made with Italian thermal water almost every morning. I know they hate the smell of sulfur, but they don't have a choice. I learned all about the benefits of thermal nasal rinsing from my daughter's pediatrician in Italy who told me they help to remove snot and boogers. I was impressed. I tried an adult version myself and it reduced my sinusitis, which I had

chronically suffered from in the past. I'm now a daily nasal rinses.

Also, I don't allow my kids to drink cold water. Room temperature only, please. And any beverage with ice is an absolute no-no. Cold water could interfere with their digestive process and might even trigger a vasoconstriction that could cause decompensation, even organ failure. I visited a high school friend in New York, and she offered everyone ice water, which made my kids, who have basically never been in contact with ice, very excited. My son kept screaming to his sister: "look, ice, ice, ice." I swallowed hard as I watched them raise their plastic cups and drink the cold water but as soon as they went back to play (and no one was watching), I removed all the cubes from their cups. I'm kind of okay with ice cream, but I make them wait a few minutes before I let them start licking away.

Cold air is also a curse, whether it comes from mother nature or man-made. In Rome, almost every Italian I spoke with was obsessed with the horrifying danger of the *colpo d'aria*, basically a blast of cold air on your head, neck, or throat. I was repeatedly told to "watch out" because it could lead to a cold, rheumatism, heart failure, you name it. So I hate air conditioning now. It's pure evil, which shows how un-American I have become in at least one thing. In New York, everywhere is air-conditioned. If I go out, I don't sit just anywhere. I strategize. I scan the ceilings and walls of restaurants or even people's homes for HVAC grilles. I must look like some kind of building inspector. When I ask a waiter if the air conditioning can be lowered I almost always get "let me see what I can do," which basically means nope. To survive the ice age, I reach into my bag and pull out my indispensable summer scarf, you know one that's cotton, lightweight, not too hot but provides just enough warmth and protection. For my kids, I bring zip-up sweatshirts. Layers, always. I know all this is weird. I know. I know.

In Germany, I don't share these terrors of the cold and dirty world with others. (I am, though, coming clean with you as I put it all down here during my stay in *Deutschland*). Sure, I do get lots of attention, more like stares, when I'm hovering over the kids, but it's who I am. I'm good with me, really, that is what I tell myself. I don't want to change. I have my husband (who I think still loves me), and my kids. My family in New York who I'm very close to even though they live

thousands of miles away. They get me; they understand what I'm all about. They do, honestly. Now that my father has passed my mother gets all my attention. I call her every single day, early in the morning, usually around 6:00 a.m. her time. That way I get a few uninterrupted minutes with her. I don't think she minds; she always tells me she's up. She's an early riser. Well, she is now.

I have an equally great relationship with my sister, who has always been intricately involved in my life. I share almost everything with her, including our many, many ailments. I know it's odd, but if I have pain in my neck, she understands because she says her neck is sore too. If she feels like she can't breathe, I'm with her because I feel that heaviness in my chest as well. Sometimes we even have menstrual synchrony. The theory is that when you spend time with another person who menstruates, your pheromones influence each other so that eventually, your monthly cycles line up (Where did I hear that? I'll explain later.) We share "that time of the month" and we don't even live near/close to each other, that's how in sync we are.

I will do anything for my family or anyone else that needs real help for that matter. I'm a reliable, supportive person. I go out of my way to assist, only it must be before 8:30 p.m. No night call on this emergency line, sorry. I can't help at night. I need to stick to my sleep schedule. So I put my kids to bed at the same time every day and that way we all can get enough rest. There's no such thing as staying up late in my home - whether there's no school the next day or it's the weekend. And if we go out, I make sure we leave early so that my kids can get to bed as close as possible to their normal time. And while everyone says, "come on, they'll sleep in" tomorrow. They don't, they wake up at the same time, sometimes earlier because their sleep was disturbed. I have woken them up from unscheduled daytime naps scandalizing my Italian mother-in-law who believes in unplanned snoozes. I try to convince Marco to go to bed early too, "it's something we can do together," I say happily, but he insists that he needs time to unwind. Me? I just want everyone in bed asleep. Where they should be. After 8:30 p.m.

Marco says that my bond with my New York family, especially my sister and mother, hasn't allowed me to form true friendships with other people. So now he's a psychologist? I thought I was just bad at

making friends, especially since I have been trying to make them in my 30s and 40s, the so-called “sunken place of friendships.”² I have made a few friends in more than a decade overseas, but only a very few, and these relationships have had their ups and downs. There have been outings with my husband’s colleagues and their wives when I’ve felt him squeeze my knee tightly under the table. He wasn’t being cute: he was trying to break my awkward silence, stop my continuous fake smiling, or get me to realize that I was constantly rubbing my nose, which oddly gets itchy when I’m feeling uncomfortable or out of place.

So that’s me in Germany. A fish so far out of water that I might as well be in the Gobi Desert. To be fair GK does have about 27,000 inhabitants but they manage to stay politely invisible to me. I remain stressed, sleep-obsessed, and friendless. No family voices in my ear, not much radio I can relate to (or even understand). And then by accident of timing (this was 2017) I truly discovered a new savior (I told you I was religious). And his/her/its name was Podcast.

Oh, blessed Podcast! I thank God and all the angels and saints for David Winer and Adam Curry who created podcasts. Through them, I have access to people and content that have become my link to what’s going on in the world, especially in the United States. They have helped me get ideas about the big issues I care about and find a perspective to help me form a view, on topics like femicides, wrongful convictions, student loan debt, anti-vaxxers, immigration, and climate change. And sure, some of it is basic and personal, but now I know how to make a dish with primary ingredients like celeriac and kohlrabi, which before Germany I did not even know existed. Podcasts have even helped me pray and meditate. And they’ve entertained me thanks to the few comedy and fiction shows I’ve accessed. I’ve laughed and gasped; I really have.

It’s a chilly world both outside and inside for me. If it’s not *colpo d’aria*, it’s the damn itchy nose. So, I stick my earbuds in and listen.

2. Furlan, Julia, host. “Accept the awkwardness: How to make friends (and keep them).” *Life Kit*, NPR, 19 Aug. 2019. [npr.org/2019/08/15/751479810/make-new-friends-and-keep-the-old?t=1660807568733](https://www.npr.org/2019/08/15/751479810/make-new-friends-and-keep-the-old?t=1660807568733)

Podcasts help me to settle down. When I worked in journalism I was committed to gathering information, whether through newspapers, watching television, or listening to the radio. But podcasts have offered me easy, free, on-demand access to people and information - in the privacy of my own mind space. Podcasts have kept me almost sane and connected. They help me to unwind, to take the edge off. I don't think they are acting like a sedative impacting my central nervous system, but I do feel like they are a kind of listening therapy. My friends and family in the United States think I have this fascinating European life, but all I've been doing is trying to manage my isolation and better understand my identity and why I am the way I am. And podcasts have become my friends along the way.

The app on my smartphone is like my own giant library that I have easy and free access to. I go in, browse, download, and listen. I stick with the podcasts I enjoy and delete the ones that don't work for me. The fact that they are on demand makes it possible for me to stop during an episode and, say, collect my daughter from the bus stop or take my son to the bathroom when he needs to poop, and then start right where I left off the next free moment. I especially like this control factor because, as you have probably realized, my life is about order and rules. My order, my rules. But oddly with the help of my listening friends, they seem to be more aligned with the calm efficiency of Germany. Who would have guessed?