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Professor Couvares  
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## **Made In America**

“I was sent down to earth, and my feet are in the dirt” – Joseph Semprini

### ***Introduction***

There are some memories that never fade away with the passage of time. Just as if it were yesterday, I remember tugging on my grandmother’s apron begging for her to stop stirring the pasta sauce on the stove to tell me stories of her life on the family farm and stories of my grandfather whom I never met. My grandmother’s tales have left a great impression on me, for they have provided me with a greater understanding of both my family’s history and the history of America. Today, I understand the profound weight that my grandmother’s stories hold, and how my family history fits like a puzzle-piece in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian-Americans.

### ***Story One: The Italian Immigrant- Vito Becce***

In 1900, my great grandfather, Vito Becce who was sixteen at the time, boarded a boat in Tolve, Italy to journey to the promised land of America. Vito left his homeland for reasons similar to the thousands of other immigrants leaving Italy- he had to find a way to pay off his debt to the Church.<sup>1</sup> Vito and his family found themselves drowning in debt following a series of poor harvesting years on their

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, page 81

family farm. Searching for a solution, Vito heard that The United States could solve his economic troubles. Along with the swarms of other immigrants, Vito passed through Ellis Island and began his search for work. Vito followed the path of many other immigrants and began laboring in a Pennsylvania coalmine.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, Vito quit working in the coalmines because “[he] didn’t come to America to be buried under the earth.”<sup>2</sup> As an immigrant without an education, finding a decent, well-paying job was nearly impossible. He eventually found employment setting pins in a New York City bowling alley.<sup>2</sup> However, after visiting some of his immigrant friends in Waterbury, Connecticut and noticing all the job opportunities working in the “Brass Capital”, Vito decided to move to Waterbury and began working in the factories.<sup>2</sup> During this time in American history, the working conditions in factories were extremely dangerous, and Vito noticed many of his immigrant co-workers losing fingers in the heavy machinery. As a result, he refused to work in the dangerous conditions of the factory and quit.

Vito, along with the thousands of other immigrants, learned that many of the job opportunities for immigrants were the less desirable, backbreaking jobs that required little skill. However, these laborious jobs allowed Vito to save enough money to buy a little land around a farm in Waterbury, Connecticut. This land went on to become the historic Becce Family Farm on Chestnut Hill in Waterbury, Connecticut.<sup>2</sup>

Vito’s immigration to America was not easy. He left behind his girlfriend, Lucia Santorsa, who spent her days waiting to hear word from Vito. However, many

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<sup>2</sup> *The Anarchist Bastard*, page 81-82

months went by without hearing from him, and her parents pressured her to move on with her life and marry one of the many other men who asked to marry her.<sup>3</sup> Lucia decided not to give into the burden of loving an immigrant living in America, so she waited for Vito to return to Italy. Eventually, Vito returned to Tolve, married Lucia, and together they had their first daughter, Archangela. However, before Archangela was born, Vito had to return to America to continue paying off his family's debt. Eventually another burden came upon Vito and Lucia's relationship. Vito wanted to stay in Waterbury, Connecticut and Lucia did not want to travel to America. Lucia's mother had to force her on the boat to America to be with her husband, "My mother force me, and my mother-long (in-law) too. They say you don't go to America you lose you husband. Your husband no come back here no more."<sup>3</sup> For Vito and Lucia, immigrating to America was not an easy decision, but they knew that America held the keys to their future.

Thus, Lucia decided to travel to American with her one-year-old daughter and begin their family's journey on the "American Dream". In 1912 they bought "the farm" with Zia Mack and Zi' Pasquale where they raised their five children- Archangela, Rose, Antoinette (Toni), Rocco, and Victoria.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after purchasing the farm, Vito built Connecticut's first slaughterhouse, which was the beginning of his economic success in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Vito had roughly 400 pigs on the farm, which he slaughtered and sold to local delis in Connecticut. For Vito, the farm and

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<sup>3</sup> Lucia Becce. Interview by Joanna Herman.

<sup>4</sup> Herman, Joanna. "Joanna Clapps Herman - The Farm." Joanna Clapps Herman - Other Stories - The Farm. <http://joannaclappsherman.com/writing-farm.html> (accessed May 8, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Semprini, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli. Via telephone on 5/6/2014

slaughterhouse served as a gateway for future economic prosperity. With the profit from the slaughterhouse, Vito purchased a gas station in downtown Waterbury, which proved to be a great investment.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, Vito accumulated enough wealth to move to Arizona and buy a ranch. In this regard, Vito truly lived the “American Dream”. Vito recognized the economic opportunities that America offered immigrants and embraced the process. He came over as a poor immigrant sending money back to his family in Italy and ended up finding his way in America, eventually owning two properties and accumulating enough wealth to provide for his family in the United States.

Although Vito found the upward economic mobility that America offered, he ran into conflicts regarding his political views. As many other Italian males believed, Vito “believed that every form of regulation or government is immoral and that the restraint of one person by another is a form of evil that must be destroyed.”<sup>7</sup> For Vito, America offered him the ability to voice his political opinion freely. To expand his political influence, Vito created relationships with Waterbury’s most powerful authorities, such as the mayor and town aldermen, “he stopped by the mayor’s office to talk to him whenever he went down to City Hall. Everybody knew [him]. He was always talking to somebody.”<sup>8</sup> Eventually, Vito became a part in the voice of the Anarchist party in America. His farm in Waterbury served as the Anarchist meeting location where, according to Joanna Hermon, “the big wigs would come from New

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<sup>3</sup> Lucia Becce. Interview by Joanna Herman.

<sup>7</sup> *The Anarchist Bastard*, page 78

<sup>2</sup> *The Anarchist Bastard*, page 81-82



York to attend the meetings.”<sup>9</sup> The anarchist meetings at the farm ended abruptly during the 1950’s when the fear of communism was at its peak. Following McCarthy’s attack on communism, there was speculation that Vito was being investigated for his involvement in the Anarchist party.<sup>9</sup> Vito’s experience of living as an anarchist in America demonstrates the difficulty that some immigrants faced in assimilation into the American political lifestyle. Many immigrants left their homeland to escape the restrictions placed upon them by their past government, only to find themselves fighting against some of those same restrictions in America.

Most immigrants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dreamed of living the life that Vito Becce made for himself and for his family. Vito’s life embodied the experience of the Italian immigrant coming to America for a new beginning. Vito experienced everything from poverty, to working in coalmines and factories, to buying land and finding economic and social prosperity. He came to America with nothing besides for the shoes on his feet, the shirt on his back, and a large debt back in Italy. Upon his death on August 13, 1961, Vito left his two estates and his inheritance to his wife and children to continue the legacy of the family farm.

Vito’s son Rocco upheld the legacy of the Becce Family Farm until it’s closing in 2012. It was the last fully functioning farm in Waterbury, Connecticut.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Joanna Herman, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli. Via e-mail on 4/19/2014

<sup>10</sup> Herman, Joanna. "Joanna Clapps Herman - The Farm." Joanna Clapps Herman - Other Stories - The Farm. <http://joannaclappsherman.com/writing-farm.html> (accessed May 8, 2014).

***Story Two: The First Generation Italian American- Giuseppe Francesco Semprini***

My grandfather, Giuseppe (Joseph) Semprini, was a first generation Italian American born to Italian immigrants from Northern Italy. He was born in Waterbury, Connecticut on February 22, 1919 and grew up with his three brothers, Vincenzo, Columbo, and Fulvio, and his younger sister Gianna.<sup>11</sup> Like many other first generation immigrants, Joseph's childhood in America was difficult. His family was burdened with extremely tough economic conditions. In fact, they were so economically challenged that when Joseph and his brothers helped his father build their home, they were only able to build half of it because they could not afford to build the whole thing. His father, Luigi, worked in the one of the many factories in Waterbury, Connecticut, but lost his job during the Great Depression. This forced his mother, Concetta, to find work in a factory three miles from their home. Joseph hated watching his mother walk to work every day only to be faced with the dangerous factory labor; so instead of attending school, Joseph worked multiple jobs to help support his family. Growing up during the Great Depression instilled the values of hard work and altruism into Joe and he carried these values throughout his life.

After surviving the Great Depression, a second major shock came to Joseph's life- the beginning of World War II. Joseph was drafted as a Private into the United States Military on February 19, 1941, two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was forced to leave behind his hometown of Waterbury and his

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<sup>11</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

girlfriend, Victoria Becce, and travel to Fort Moultrie, North Carolina where he served in the Motor Pool division as a mechanic. During his time at Fort Moultrie, Joseph's girlfriend, Victoria Becce, could not stand being apart from Joe, so she left Waterbury, Connecticut and joined him in North Carolina. Eventually, Joe took a furlough and went back to Waterbury to marry, Victoria. Joseph and Victoria were married in 1943. Shortly after their wedding, Joe was required to return Fort Moultrie to finish his duty.<sup>12</sup> However, he was never able to finish his service to the military because he suffered a major knee injury while playing a volleyball game on base, and was medically discharged before deployment.

Upon Joe's return to civilian life, he had to find a way to provide for his new family. Joseph lacked a college education, so white-collar work was not for him. Instead, Joe partnered with his brother in running a car part business in Waterbury where they scrapped, fixed, and sold cars.<sup>13</sup> However, their partnership soon dissolved and the two brothers went their separate ways.<sup>14</sup> Again, Joe needed to find a new way to provide for his wife and children- Linda, Joseph, Lewis, and Victoria. Joe found work in Vickers factory where he built pumps, transmissions, and parts for submarines and anti-aircraft guns.<sup>15</sup> During his time working in the factory, Joe experienced first hand the labor movement that swept across the United States. Joseph took part in a major strike against Vickers where he picketed outside the

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<sup>12</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Semprini, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/8/2014

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Semprini, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/8/2014

<sup>15</sup> "Teamsters Insist Vickers Cannot Leave Waterbury." *The Norwalk Hour* [Norwalk Connecticut] 6/25/1966. Page 10

factory for eight months.<sup>16</sup> With the fear of not being able to support his family looming over his head, Joe went to the picketing lines each and every day with the hopes that the union workers resolved their dispute with Vickers so he could return to work. However, Joe's work at Vickers eventually came to an end and he found his true calling as an ironworker for Waterbury Ironworkers. Although Joseph lacked a high school education, he taught himself how to read blueprints and eventually "rose to the position of a pusher... he ran the show, so to speak".<sup>17</sup> Eventually, Joseph joined the Ironworkers Union in the late 1960's and became an avid member, often traveling to the meetings held in New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>18</sup> His daughter Victoria recalls, "my father never left Waterbury at night. He liked being close to home, so when he left after dark to go to the union meetings in New Haven, I knew that he was doing something very important."<sup>19</sup>

The Ironworkers Union remained an important part of Joseph's life even after his death. His wife, Victoria, still receives his ironworking pension, even eighteen years after his passing, and when she takes her grandchildren out to lunch, she is known to "let Joe pay" when she uses his Ironworkers Union credit card. Joseph was an extremely hard-working man, who spent laborious hours in the scorching heat and freezing cold to earn enough money to provide for his family.

The Great Depression taught Joe the importance of providing for a family. Since Joe grew up in an extremely tough economic situation, he felt as if he needed

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<sup>16</sup> "Teamsters Insist Vickers Cannot Leave Waterbury." *The Norwalk Hour* [Norwalk Connecticut] 6/25/1966. Page 10

<sup>17</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>18</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>19</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/10/2014

to prevent his family from going through that same experience. In order to prevent his children from experiencing the hardships that he experienced, Joe made sure his children received a formal education, “he was proud of the fact that all four of his children were college graduates. We were never given the option of not go to college, it was expected of us.”<sup>20</sup> The Great Depression also made Joseph understand what it was like to wake up not knowing when or where you were going to get your next meal. As a result, Joe created his famous garden to make sure his family never experienced hunger. “It was important to him that he grew his own vegetables so his family would never be hungry. He grew hundreds of tomatoes and every vegetable you could imagine, but not too many flowers because you couldn’t eat them. Nothing was ever wasted. All the vegetables were frozen or canned for the winter.”<sup>21</sup> Joe also provided for his family by utilizing the skills he learned through his various jobs to fix any problem his family encountered. By doing so, he made sure he did not need to rely on anyone else to help his family, “we never hired a plumber, painter, electrician, carpenter or auto mechanic. He did it all.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, The Great Depression taught Joe never to waste anything because everything could serve a purpose. Joe brought home used cinderblocks that were being tossed out from his jobsites as an ironworker to build a two-story garage next to his garden, and used old windows to create a greenhouse.<sup>23</sup> Joe used the lessons and skills he learned during the Great Depression and World War II to build a better life for his family.

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<sup>20</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>21</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>22</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

<sup>23</sup> Victoria Piscatelli, Interview by Daniel Piscatelli via telephone on 5/7/2014

Joseph Semprini passed away in 1996 from an unknown illness. It is believed that the harmful chemicals he was exposed to during his time working as an ironworker may have caused his premature passing. Joseph Semprini worked through the hardships he faced as a first generation Italian-American, and built a happy and prosperous life for himself and his family.

### ***Conclusion***

Looking back at the stories my grandmother told, I realize that my family history is America's immigrant history. My grandmother's parents traveled through Ellis Island and worked their way up until they found the American Dream that all immigrants wished to discover. Her father assimilated into American society and learned the American way of life. My Grandmother and her husband survived The Great Depression and experienced World War II. Joe labored in factories, joined a union, and participated in strikes, all while supporting his family. As I reflect upon the tales my grandmother told me, I understand that her stories were not stories at all- they were history. As America experienced tribulation and triumph, so did my ancestors. 20<sup>th</sup> century American history molded the way my family lived, and gave them the opportunity to make it in America.

## Vito Becce



Vito Becce and his wife, Lucia



A photograph from the farm. The monkey being held was JoJo, a pet on the farm that was later stuffed



SALOON, CABIN, AND STEERAGE ALIENS MUST BE COMPLETELY MANIFESTED.

**LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor of the United States, under Act of Congress approved February 20, 1907, to be delivered to the Collector of Customs at the port of arrival.

S. S. *Honig* sailing from *Naples* November 11, 1912

No. on List	NAME IN FULL		Age	Sex	Color of Hair	Color of Eyes	Calling or Occupation	Able to read and write	Religiosity (Country of which citizen or subject)	Place or People	Last Permanent Residence		The name and complete address of nearest relative or friend in country whence alien came.	Place of Birth	
	Family Name	Given Name									Country	City or Town		State	City or Town
1	<i>Cinardo</i>	<i>Giuseppe</i>	29	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
2	<i>Milliciano</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	28	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
3	<i>Milliciano</i>	<i>Stefano</i>	33	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
4	<i>Milliciano</i>	<i>Antonio</i>	19	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
5	<i>Milliciano</i>	<i>Antonio</i>	12	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
6	<i>Giuseppe</i>	<i>Erasmus</i>	36	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
7	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	18	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
8	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	14	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
9	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	11	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
10	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	8	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
11	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	5	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
12	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	2	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
13	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
14	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
15	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
16	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
17	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
18	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
19	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
20	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
21	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
22	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
23	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
24	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
25	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
26	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
27	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
28	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
29	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>
30	<i>Carlo</i>	<i>Francesco</i>	1	M	Black	Blue	Farmer	Yes	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>	<i>John Francis</i>	Italy	<i>Salerno</i>

\* An habitual residence of one year shall constitute permanent residence. The last country in which alien resided with the intention of remaining as long as one year shall be the last permanent residence regardless of length of actual residence therein. † Last name will be found on back of this sheet.

Photograph of the manifest of passengers for the ship that Vito Becce took to Ellis Island



Photograph of Vito Becce feeding the pigs on the farm with his son Rocco



## Joseph Semprini



Photograph of Joseph Semprini at a jobsite for Waterbury Ironworks



Photograph of Joseph Semprini and his wife, Victoria Semprini





Photograph of Joseph Semprini in his famous garden



Photograph of Rocco Becce and Joseph Semprini