

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 10
Date: Sept 7, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details (Respondent)

Sex: male
Age: 62
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: married
Religion:
Education:
Occupation: sells fruits door to door
Children: one son (died at age 20) and two daughters

Biographical Details (wife)

Sex: female
Age: 56
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: married
Religion:
Education:
Occupation:
Children:

COMMENTS:

The respondent is my father's friend. He lives in my neighbourhood. His wife knows my mother. The interview was conducted on his front patio. When I approached his home for the interview, I saw him working in the garage. He asked me if I wanted to go inside to conduct the interview or if I wanted to sit outside. I allowed him to choose. He chose the front patio. We sat in chairs, practically side by side. We talked. Then, near the end of the interview, his wife came out from inside to say hello. She introduced herself and joined us in the conversation. He asked me if I wanted something to drink. At first I said, "No, thank you," but his wife insisted. She went into the house and brought back a bottle of fruit punch and a glass. When she came back the three of us talked for a while, but before we realized it his wife and I were having our own conversation. He took this opportunity to excuse himself and get back to the work he had left in the garage. He thanked me and left. His wife and I chatted a while longer. She was extremely friendly and talkative. Oddly, our entire conversation was in Italian. I found it odd because she is French Canadian. She speaks fluent Italian with a French Canadian accent. It was strange that we did not even attempt to communicate in English. We simply continued the conversation we were having when her husband was around, and we did not transfer to English (which is her third language). It appears that his wife gave up a great deal of her own culture. She adopted Italian traditions almost grudgingly, but dutifully she continues to try to please her very traditional husband.

I. BACKGROUND

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: I immigrated to Canada in 1952. I left behind a good job in France to come here.

I: Place of origin?

R: I am from Calabria. From the province of Catanzaro.

I: Approximate age?

R: I was 19 years old.

I: Where did you settle?

R: I settled in Northern Quebec first and then moved to Toronto after I got married. I moved to Toronto because I was told that there were more opportunities to find work. The town in Northern Quebec had nothing, not even one factory, just mines. So, we decided to come to Toronto. When we moved here I had a son who was three and a daughter who was 7 months old. Both were born in Quebec.

I: What did you do in Canada?

R: I came here on a work contract. Canadian immigration promised me the same type of work that I was doing in France. In France I worked in a foundry, working with steel. When I got here, they did not have this work for me. There was no work. I had to go work in a mine, in a small town in Northern Quebec, at the age of 19. Two weeks after my arrival to Canada, I started working in the mines. In France it was very warm, so I had on a pair of running shoes. That was the only pair of shoes I owned. When I reached northern Quebec, there was six feet of snow. I had no money to buy shoes, so I had to accept work in the mines. I worked for 15 days before I had any money to buy my shoes, and anything else that I needed. I made 65 cents per hour. It was hard and dangerous work, but in the four years after my wedding, had managed to save \$8,000. With that money, my family and I moved to Toronto. I wanted to use the money to start my own business. I had no experience, so I started my business in a bad area. I opened up a grocery store. In the six months that I had that going, I lost \$4,000, so I pulled out of that. I tried to find work but there was little work to be found. It was when John Deifenbaker was Prime Minister, and it was tough times. Thank God it happened to be apple picking season, so I picked apples for that period. They gave me 25 cents for every bushel of apples that I picked. I made about \$5 per day. But I was determined to start my own business. I looked for another location to open up another grocery store, at College and Dufferin. It actually started going very well. We bought the store itself, and a house. I ran it for 23 years. Slowly, things got better. Another daughter came, so now I have three children and a wife. [Note: his son died at a young age, but he continues to say that he has three children.] And I continue to work today [sells fruit from a van, door to door]. It was not all rosy, especially when, at the age of 19, I had to work 800 feet below ground. It was very, very hard.

I: After 23 years running the store, you retired?

R: Well, we sold the store, and moved up here.

I: Was it too far for you to travel to keep the store going?

R: Actually, (pause), a terrible thing happened. My son died when he was 20. I could not handle working at the store. He had grown up in that place. Every time I went into the basement, I expected to see him there. So, we sold the place and we moved here. Now, I have this little business, selling fruit door to door in my truck. I earn very little, and work two or three days a week. It keeps me happy. What I earn now is enough because I am at that age now where I like to take it easy.

I: How many relatives in Canada?

R: I was alone. I had nobody here. No brothers and no sisters here. I was very alone. Eventually, I "called" [sponsored] my parents, my brothers... We are all together as a family, now. My entire family is here now. We are 4 brothers and one sister. I "called" all of them. My father, mother, brothers,... all of them. We don't see each other often. Everyone has married children and grandchildren. Everyone has grandchildren. We all have our own obligations. One has a grocery store and lives far away. We see each other every once-in-a-while, for a celebration of some sort, but not often. We used to see each other more regularly when we all lived in the same general area. Now one lives there (pointing off in the distance), one lives there (pointing in the other direction). One is 70 km away from me and another is 30 km away.

I: How many relatives abroad?

R: I have cousins and uncles there but not close relatives.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE:

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married in 1973. (I questioned this.) Oh no, 1953.

I: How old were you at the time?

R: I was born in 1931, got married in 1953, so I was 22 years old. My wife was 16. She was very young.

I: Did her parents approve of her getting married so young?

R: Her parents did not approve of the wedding because I was Italian, and my parents did not approve of it either. Nobody did. My parents did not want me to marry a French woman. [They communicated their disapproval through mail because they were still in Italy.] It was really difficult at first, but we went through with it. We had a small wedding, which was common at the time. We had 70 or 80 guests. All my friends came. My parents and relatives did not come because they were in Italy and none of her relatives showed up because they disapproved of the wedding. Actually, her sister and one of her aunts showed up. They were not happy. But my wife and I always got along well. Her parents are dead now. One year after we got married, they came to see us at our home for the first time. Things started getting a little better. They liked me, but I could not get over the whole thing. They did not accept me at first, so I never forgave them. They realized that of all the sisters [all got married], my wife had the best marriage. Of the three sisters, the only one who owns a house is my wife. The others own nothing. My wife and I have worked very hard. She worked too much, yes, too much.

I: How well did you know each other when you got married?

R: After one year of working in the mines, I met my wife. She was French Canadian. I got married in Quebec, and we had a child there too. I came from France. I spoke French already. I was young when we met. I liked to go dancing. I went to a dance hall. I saw her. I liked her. I asked her if she would go to the movies with me, and from there, slowly, slowly from a friendship we came to know each other better. We dated for a year and a half.

I: What was your occupation before marriage? After marriage?

R: I continued working in the mines for 4 years after I got married.

I: What was your spouse's occupation before marriage? After marriage?

R: What kind of work could she do at the age of 14? She had school. After we got married she was a housewife and homemaker. It was hard at first, her cooking that is. She was not used to cooking Italian food. She did not understand Italian at first either. At times, if I had an Italian friend over, and we spoke in Italian, she felt as if we were talking about her. She would go over to our Italian friends' homes and watch them cook. Slowly, she learned...

IV. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ETHNIC GROUP NORMS

I: What is the most valued thing in and to your family?

R: Unity. Staying together. If you don't have this "unity" you will never see each other. We are very close with my children and grandchildren. A few weeks ago, my grandchildren came over and took me out to lunch. They said that they wanted to take me to a restaurant before school started because after school begins, they will be very busy and will not be able to see me as often.

I: Would you consider visiting Italy again?

R: I really don't think that I will be going back. I don't have anyone there, so I'm not really interested in going.

Wife: My husband has cousins there so if he feels like visiting them, he can go but I don't think that I would go. I've been there once. It is beautiful but I would like to go somewhere else on my next vacation. I would like to see Canada. I was born in Canada but I have not seen any of it. I have never even been to Montreal. My mother lived there for five years and I did not have the chance to see it. When she lived in Northern Quebec, I visited her a few times when she was sick, but I had the store then, so I could not stay away for very long. She visited me here a few times, but I have never been to Montreal. My sisters live just outside Montreal. They don't like the city, so they live outside of it. But I still have not had the chance. This past summer I could not go because my sister-in-law went to Italy for the summer and my mother-in-law lives with her. My mother-in-law is not well, so my other sister-in-law and I had to help out with the housework and cook for her while my sister-in-law was away. My husband did not want to leave his parents alone, afraid that something may happen to them if they were alone. Our nieces and nephews live in the house with my in-laws but they are kids. On week-ends they like to go out, and my in-laws would be home alone.

I: Your husband's parents live with your husband's sister?

Wife: No, they live with my husband's youngest brother.

I: Do you think that there will be an Italian family and Italian culture in the future?

W: I think that it will be difficult to maintain an Italian culture. People intermarry. There are many immigrants from all over. Nobody comes from Italy any more. They live better than we do. They don't want to come here. People may go to Italian restaurants but Italian cuisine in the home is dying out. I notice with my grandchildren. I put tomatoes in jars [very typical Italian tradition]. My grandchildren ask me, "Why do you do this?" They want store bought tomato sauce. We used to say, if we do it ourselves, there will be no preservatives...We preserved in oil. But now, who has high cholesterol, and who has this and that... I used to preserve peaches. It was a lot of work. Now I'm the only one, who eats them. My grandchildren don't like things with too much sugar. I made peach and plum jam. I had them in storage for five years. I just finished the peach jam because I took it to my sister-in-law's place. She makes cookies with it. I still have the plum jam. I will not make it any more. I stood there for hours stirring. Italians do too much. Just too much. When I first came here I was overwhelmed. They preserved everything. Peppers,... everything. Every season is devoted to something. The summer, there are fruits and vegetables, and tomatoes for preserving. The fall is devoted to wine production. Salami is made in the winter months. There is just no end.

I: Did you engage in most of these activities?

W: Yes, I did. I used to make homemade salami until a few years ago but nobody eats it any more. A few years ago we made ten salami. I still have some left. I can't eat it because I have high cholesterol. My children and grandchildren don't want to gain weight, so they won't eat it. They watch what they eat.

I: What do your daughters do for a living? Do they follow these traditions?

W: No, they don't really follow those types of traditions. I have stopped doing a lot of those things myself. Ann, my oldest daughter, works in a bank two days a week. Alison stays home, she has young children. Alison's children go home for lunch. I can't really help her out [with child care]. I have things to do around here. But she tells me not to worry, that I have worked all my life. I have worked since I was 13 years old [Note: her husband did not mention this]. Ann's husband is an electrical mechanic, and Alison's husband works with computers. He works on different contracts. Thank God, as he finishes one contract he starts another. He is working for the Workman's Compensation Board on his current contract. It is scary. My son-in-law says that companies are closing here and moving to the United States. He may have to do the same. But he has a family here. I tell him that it is hard for his children, who go to school, and he owns a home here. Things here are unstable.

I: Your husband said that you had to learn to cook Italian food?

W: I had to learn, yes. I have since forgotten French [Quebecois] cuisine. I used to cook it more often when my children were young, they liked it, but my husband did not like some of it. At times I had to cook two separate meals. Now, it is only me and my husband in this home, and I'm the only one who likes it, so it is not worth preparing a meal for one person. Sometimes I like to try new dishes, like pasta Alfredo. I prepared it for him one night. He came home, tried it and did not like it. He said "don't make this stuff any more, I don't like it." He likes plain pasta. Even when I make lasagna, he does not really like it. He likes cannelloni, but not filled with ricotta cheese. He does not like it because he can't have his glass of wine at dinner with it. He likes chicken and potatoes cooked in the oven, and vegetables. Like tonight, I'm preparing string beans with potatoes. I prepare them and then mash the whole thing and I add some olive oil, garlic powder... This he likes. But not French food. This summer, my granddaughter brought a girlfriend over. We spoke about a French Canadian dish. I invited them over for it the next time I prepared it. I prepared it especially for them. I made it, and invited them over. My husband does not like it. I used to make a lot of French Canadian food, but it's like a language, if you don't use it, you forget it. It is more to keep tradition. It is a little sad. My grandmother used to make tortiere at Christmas time. It used to be a tradition at our house in Quebec. Even at Thanksgiving dinner we had tortiere. Now, the younger generations want turkey at Thanksgiving. One year I told my grandchildren that I would cook a large chicken for Thanksgiving and they said, "No, No, No, it is Turkey day." Things change.