

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 1
Date: July 19, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details (Respondent)

Sex: male
Age: 72
Place of Birth: Calabria region, Italy
Marital Status: married
Religion: Catholic
Education:
Occupation: shipper in lumber yard (retired)
Children: daughter, age 46; son, age 44

Biographical Details (Spouse)

Sex: female
Age: 64
Place of Birth: Calabria
Marital Status: married
Religion: Catholic
Education: grade 5
Occupation: dress maker (retired)

Interviewer's Comments:

Interview took place in their home. In the upstairs kitchen (rarely used). His wife was there at the beginning of interview then the phone rang so we spoke alone. They gave me a glass of juice while I interviewed. He sat with his back to the clock, so he was surprised time had gone by so quickly when the interview was over. We both felt more comfortable as the interview progressed. The interview lasted one hour on tape but we spoke for another hour after the tape was shut off. Wife joined us and she especially felt that she could speak more openly without the tape recorder on. I was asked to stay for lunch.

I. BACKGROUND

I: What did the family do before coming to Canada?

R: I worked in the country [farming].

Wife: We were landlords, we worked our own lands [farmland].

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: I came in February 1952. I left behind my parents, my wife and two young children (daughter and a son).

I: Where did you settle?

R: I landed in Halifax, then I came to Toronto. I was all alone in Toronto. I had no relatives here, just a couple of friends, mostly people from the same home town in Italy but I had some "foreign" friends (non-Italian).

I: What did you do in Canada?

R: I was unemployed for three months following my arrival here. After those first three months I found a job. Light work. Then thank God, I found a job with a guy who made concrete barriers. In those days I got \$1.35 per hour, even when unionized workers were only getting \$1.00. I got the job through a friend. An Italian from Montreal. I worked for this company for 9 months, but then they decided to move the company to Montreal. They wanted me to go with them but I did not want to go there. So, I found myself another job here with a small contractor. I used to do repairs for [Canadian meat packing company]. I got \$1.00 an hour. I worked there for 1 year until I found work at a lumber yard. I worked there for 5 years, got my Canadian Citizenship and then went back to Italy because my whole family was there.

I: So your family was in Italy all that time?

R: Yes, I left them there for 15 years. I left behind my wife and two children. On my first visit back to Italy, after getting my Canadian citizenship, I stayed three months. After my 3 month absence from the lumber yard, I returned to find that I still had a job, but at reduced wages, so I looked for other work. I found a job at another lumber yard. I worked there for 27 years. I worked with the shipper, then I became head shipper, then I retired. The owner liked me a lot. He had a lot of faith in me. Now I'm retired.

Wife (interrupts): In those 27 years you got very ill, but you continued to work until he retired. He never once collected unemployment insurance. Late in his work career, the Workman's Compensation Board recognized that his illness had developed on the job. His lungs were "dirty" from the saw dust there. The place lacked proper safety. He was the type of person who enjoyed working. He used the saw a lot. His lungs are still full of the stuff.

I: You were apart from your family for 15 years, did you plan on returning to Italy for good? (Why didn't you just send for your wife to join you in Canada?)

R: I went to Italy three times in those 15 years. No, four times. Each time, I returned to Italy with the intention of staying for good. But after 3 to 4 months, I would return to Canada. I was lucky because each time I returned to work in Canada, the company where I worked was always ready to take me back right away. In those 15 years I lived in boarding-home situations. I would eat alone. I worked long hours. I used to work 96 hours per week (no over-time pay). I liked working.

After 15 years of working in Canada, I went to Italy, and brought my wife and son to Canada with me. You see, I was an only child. And I had my parents in Italy. I did not want to leave them in Italy alone, so I had my wife and children stay with them while I worked in Canada. When my daughter got married in Italy, I brought my wife and son to Canada. My son was 15 or 16 years old. He was born in 1949, he came to Canada in 1965.

I: (asking wife) Was it hard living apart for those 15 years?

Wife: Life was very hard then. The distance was very bad. To be together is much better. It is better to make sacrifices together.

I: Why did you decide to bring your family here after 15 years?

R: To give my son a future. Small towns were difficult places to live in those days. For us older people, we could work on the farm, but for the younger generation, it was impossible to find work even after going to school. As soon as my daughter got married, we left Italy. We left her the house, and my parents. We had two houses, just across the street from one another. My parents lived in one and my daughter in another. I wanted to give my wife and myself and my son a future. Life was hard in Italy. Money was scarce. We were not rich and we were not poor there. I brought over my wife and son. Eventually I brought my parents over to Canada. I sponsored my daughter and her family in 1975, then I brought over many nephews (sponsored them). I kept them in my house. I did not make them pay a penny. I liked to help immigrants because I remember the life I had as an immigrant. It was hard. I had nobody (relatives) to help me in those days. I used to pay \$3.00 per week for a room to live. I had to make my own food. Life was hard and money was scarce in the first little while, but after I found a job things got a little better. When I had money, I sent it to Italy. I used to go to Oakville to build the Ford plant there. We had to pay 40 cents for bus fare to go and come back. Forty cents was a lot to pay. A lot of us immigrants went there to work. I did not speak English, I had no money.

I: How many relatives abroad? Still keep contact?

R: I have a few relatives left in the same town, and there are a few in northern Italy. I have cousins in northern Italy, but my close relatives are dead.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE:

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married in 1946. We had two children. I spent 5 years with my wife in Italy before I decided to come to Canada.

I: How old were you?

R: I was 26.

Wife: I was very young. I was 17. At the age of 18 I had my daughter. By the age of 20, I had my son. Then my husband came to Canada so we did not have any more children.

I: (asking wife) Is 17 a good age to get married?

Wife: Well, in the little towns, especially in Southern Italy it was common. I was an "orphan" (she lost her father, but her mother was still alive) at the age of 9 months, and we owned some farmland. We had to work. My mother could not afford to send us to high school, she needed our help on the farm. So, I just finished up to grade 5. I worked on the farm. My mother was a good woman. She sent us to the seamstress, so we could learn to sew. All my sisters learned to sew. I sewed for my children, myself and my husband. Even after I was married I took a course on how to cut dresses. I got better and better. When my husband left for Canada, I worked on the farm, but if there were nothing for me to do there, I would sew or knit. When my husband decided to stay in Canada, we hired somebody to work the land for us. I had nothing to do, so I took the course to learn to cut dresses. I sewed for friends and neighbours too.

I: (asking wife) When you had to make a decision in your home town, did you write to your husband about it in Canada?

Wife: Yes, before I did anything, I wrote to him about it. Even though my in-laws were there, I asked my husband about it via the mail. When I started to sew, I did not tell him about it. When he came to Italy to visit us, he found out I was working. At first he asked me why I would do such a thing, but he was also very happy that I was not lazy, or going here and there. When he left for Canada the first time, I did not have a sewing machine, I would go to a neighbour's house to sew there. When he saw me working so hard sewing, he told me to buy myself a sewing machine. He told me to buy the best machine available. I actually bought the first electric sewing machine in that town. I was so nervous with it that at first I just used it on old clothes and to embroider old things. Then I got used to it and I became very good.

I: Can you tell me about the courtship?

R: The "deal" was between me and my wife, and nobody else. I just got back from the war in April. When I left the small town to go to war, my wife was very young (both were from the same town). After six years of war. I came back to the town. When I saw her, I did not even recognize her. I saw her and we fell in love. We got married. My mother wanted me to get married two years after my arrival to the town, so that I could regain my strength after the war. I was really weak. I had been a prisoner in the war. But, I came back from the war in April, and we got married in July.

I: Were your parents happy that you two got married?

R: Yes, yes. Everyone was happy. I asked her to marry me, and she said yes.

I: Did you have to ask for permission from your wife's family to marry her?

R: Oh yes. But to be honest with you, I asked her first, to see if she wanted to marry me. Then I asked her family. My family did not know anything about it.

I: Was your wedding like weddings today?

R: Oh, it was a lot smaller. First of all, after the war, Italy was in poverty, especially in 1946. Everything was lacking. Food was scarce, clothing was scarce. To find myself a suit to get married in, I had to travel to a city a few hours away. My town had nothing. I had a pair of shoes from my days as a prisoner. I bought the shoes in Alexandria, in Egypt. The party was not like receptions today. We had cookies, liqueur, and sandwiches. We exchanged rings like they do here. We got married in a Catholic church, with a priest. It was not a large ceremony by today's standards but we had about 100

people there. The bride had a white dress. We found her a white dress, and a pair of shoes which my mother gave her. My mother had a brother and a cousin who were shoemakers, so they would give my mother shoes when they visited. Thank God my mother and my wife had the same size foot.

I: And you had two children?

R: It was common to have more than two but we decided to have only two. We had two and then stopped. First of all, I was coming and going to Canada. And we did not want a big family. We wanted them to have a good life.

I: How old were your children when you left for Canada?

R: My son was 2 and my daughter was 5.

I: Both your children are married now?

R: Oh yes, and they have their own children.

I: How old were they when they got married?

R: My daughter was 19 when she got married.

I: Is that a good age to get married?

R: I would have liked her to be more mature (older). If she were over 20 it would have been better. My son got married in 1975. He was 26 years old. That is an ideal age for a man to get married. A woman should be about 22 or 23 years of age. And if she is over 23, that is fine too. In our parts, people would get married even when they did not know what marriage was (they were too young). I would want my grandchildren to get married when they are mature, so that they understand life.

I: Are their spouses Italian?

R: My daughter's husband is Italian, from the same home town in Italy. My son's wife is half Polish and half Italian. Her father was Polish and her mother is from Abruzzi (Italy).

I: What if your son married a non-Italian?

R: Well, I guess I would react somewhat negatively because us Italians as used to being among our own. Italian with Italian, but Polish people tend to be like us, in terms of values. Some don't value family as much as we do. We are very devoted to family.

I: How many grandchildren do you have?

R: We have six grandchildren. My daughter has three and my son has three.

I: What if they married somebody who was not Italian?

R: We really can't do too much. We are then talking of a third generation. I can tell my children to marry an Italian person but I can't tell my grandchildren to marry. If they want to marry an Austrian, or a Polish person, let them.

I: What do you feel is an ideal number of children for your grandchildren to have?

R: I hope they have a lot... (stopped mid-word), no, not too many because too many is hard for a father and a mother. Both in terms of loving them and financially. Only a rich man can maintain many children. They should have three, four maximum. Not two. It is bad to have only two because if one child dies, the family remains isolated (lonely).

I: Would you prefer for the children to be male or female?

R: It makes no difference. Boys or girls, it makes no difference. [Interviewer's note: In spite of this, I believe that he is sad that he does not have a male grandchild to maintain the family name. His daughter had two sons and a daughter but their last name is not the same. And his son had three daughters and no sons. Since he is an only child, and he had only one son, who had no sons of his own, he and his son are the last males to carry the family name.] Here, in Canada, men and women are the same. It's not like the little towns. Were I came from, daughters had to be given more than sons. A father had to buy a daughter a house, and this, and that. Here you don't have this problem.

I: I'm assuming your son got married in Canada. Did you have to help pay for the wedding?

R: My son paid for his own wedding. I gave him a house, though. I owned two homes so I gave him one of them to help him start his own life. For my daughter's wedding, I paid for the whole thing, and she stayed in Italy. I owned a house there, too and some farm land so she could use that [Note: she was not give the property even though she "used" it, rent free.] The Italian system and the Canadian system are very different. Here, we have more expenses than in the towns. To own a home here is the most important thing. Otherwise, if a family does not own a house, they find themselves "devastate" [meaning "ruined" or "in a state of disaster"]. In Italy there was one way of life, and here another. Here there are more worries. In Italy, you worked on the farm and lived off of what you produced on that farm. At the same time, life was hard because there was not much around. There wasn't everything that there is here. In Canada, we have everything, but we also have taxes, and air conditioning and heating costs... In Canada it is necessary to own a home while in Italy, to rent a home was really inexpensive. It was easy to rent there. For a family here, it is hard to find a house to rent for a family. At the same time, it is so expensive to rent.

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

R: I farmed the land that my parents owned, and then I went to war. I farmed after I got married and then I decided to work in Canada.

I: How do you feel about divorce? Under what circumstances is it acceptable? Do you know any people who are divorced?

R: I feel that divorce is good and bad. If there are children involved, divorce is bad. If there are no children involved and the two do not get along, I must admit, I think divorce is a very good thing. The children are the ones who suffer the most because of divorce. Nobody really got a divorce in my days. In our days divorces did not take place. If a man drank too much or if he did not like to work, a woman had to stay with him like a sheep. Here it is different.

I: Do you know anyone who has had a divorce?

R: Oh yes, I could list you hundreds.

I: Really, even among people of your generation?

R: Oh yes. They got a divorce after they came here. They get used to Canadian ways, so they do it.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do your children speak Italian? Do your grandchildren?

R: Oh yes, my children speak Italian. My daughter hardly speaks English. She did not come to Canada until after she got married and had her children. My grandchildren speak Italian well. My daughter's children speak it better than my son's children because my daughter's children were born in Italy. They still speak Italian at home, while my son's daughters speak English to their parents. They understand us when we speak Italian, especially my son's youngest daughter who has lunch at my home everyday while she is in school.

I: Do your children follow traditional Italian customs?

R: Yes, both my son and my daughter do. My daughter perhaps more so because she came to Canada as an adult. She cooks Italian food every day, and is very traditional. She does everything the Italian way. My son's family doesn't do as much, but it is still very important to him.

IV. RELATION TO PARENTS

I: Are your parents living? How old are they? Where do they live? How often do you see them?

R: My parents are dead. They died when they were very old. My father was 96 and my mother was 86. They lived with me in Canada. My mother-in-law is still alive. She will be 89 later this year. She lives with us part of the year and with her other daughters for a few months of the year.

V. RELATIONS TO OTHER RELATIVES

I: Do your relatives expect you to help them?

R: When Italians need help they look to everyone. Both family and good friends.

VI. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ETHNIC GROUP NORMS

I: What do Italians do when they retire?

R: Well, I have my garden to keep me busy. It's my hobby. Because of my illness, I really can't go anywhere else. I can have an asthma attack or worse. I can't go on holidays. If I were well, I would take three or four months of the year and go to Florida, or hot places during the winter. It would be ideal, because we have worked a lot, a lot, and we deserve to have our days of rest. But I can't go because of my condition.

I: Are adult children expected to take care of their parents? What about retirement homes?

R: No! Not retirement homes. My parents died when they were really old. My father was 96 and my mother was 86 when they died. I kept them at my house. They absolutely refused to go to a retirement home and I would not want them there either. In a home, they cannot do for them what their own children can.

Wife (interrupts): We did not want their pension money. We let them do whatever they wanted to do with it. They would give their grandchildren and great-grandchildren money for their birthdays or special occasions. They sent money to relatives in Italy on special occasions. They gave us money on our birthdays and Christmas, but they had control of their own money. We would not take any of their money for groceries either. We did not need it. They did not spend any of their pension, especially not on themselves. It was just used for gift giving, to grandchildren, to us, to other relatives...for everyone at Christmas, for birthdays, for Easter...The grandchildren brought them gifts, and they would give the grandchildren money. My mother (wife's mother) set money aside for her funeral.

R: My parents did not. I had to pay for their funerals, but my mother-in-law, who gets a pension from Italy and Canada, is setting money aside for her death. (Note: she is still alive at the age of 88). This is to be admired.

Wife: We already bought a plot for her in a cemetery, but with her own money. We also bought ourselves places for when we die, so that we can all be together, even with my husband's parents.

R: If one of us dies, it will be difficult for the one who is still alive to live alone in this house.

Wife: We love our children, and our children love us, but we have no idea what will happen. Together, my husband and I help each other. Our children help too but if one of us is left alone, well, if our children want us, and we feel that we can live with them, then we will. One person alone in a house is not good. But even a retirement home is okay.

R: I would prefer to go to a retirement or nursing home. When I can't take care of myself, I would much rather go to a home. I don't want to be a burden on my children or anyone else. In a home, with my pension, I will be fine. A retirement home is fine. It all depends on if you still have your wits about you. There are people who are not happy in a retirement home or with their children. Then there are those who can live in their own home or in a nursing home. My parents did not want to go there and my mother-in-law does not want to go there.

Wife: I am one of four daughters. One of my sisters wanted to send my mother to a home but myself, my two other sisters and my mother, we were not happy about that. We would much rather have her in our homes with us. My generation is probably better prepared to accept a retirement home. We understand that life there is not so bad. But the generation before us, those who came from Italy in their old age, would not go to a nursing home of their own free will. I honestly would go on my own free will. I would just want a phone call and a visit from my children and grandchildren every once in a while.

I: Do you feel that in Italy attitudes towards retirement and nursing homes have changed?

R: It is really hard for us to say, we have been away for so long.

Wife: I think that people still count on their children to take care of them in their old age. Only adult children who have to work all day might have to admit their elderly parents to a nursing home, especially if they need special medical attention.

I: Do you think that you will ever go back to Italy? When was the last time you've been there?

R: I don't think that I would ever go back. First of all, I really don't have any relatives there (note: earlier he said that he had some relatives there). And because of my illness, with my lungs, it would be difficult for me to go back. I have nothing in Italy. I sold the property (farmland) and the homes that I had there. We could return only to vacation there, but I doubt even for that.

I: Do you think that Italy today is like Italy when you left it?

R: From what I have heard, it is very different there. Just by watching the Italian movies and TV shows, you see Italy today. It is not like it was 50 years ago. It has changed too.

I: When was the last time you were there?

R: The last time I was there was in 1979.

I: Did you notice a difference then?

R: Sure, from when we left it there was a difference, but not like today. Today it is much, much different. In Italy they live better. Not like we lived back then. It is beautiful but it is over-populated. There are too many of us.

I: What do you identify yourself as? (Italian? Canadian?)

R: I would tell people this: I am a Canadian Citizen but I have Italy in my heart.

Wife: I have not forgotten Italy but I am happy that I am in Canada now. I feel Italian and Canadian.

I: Do you suspect that your grandchildren feel the same way?

R: I hope that they would.

I: What do you think that the Italian family will be like in the future? Will there be an Italian family?

R: I think that there will be. There is a percentage of Italians who teach their children not to forget about Italy. There are always those who just do not care about the culture. These people were born here and only know the Canadian way of life.

I: Would you agree that the family is very important to Italians?

R: Oh yes, that is the truth. The majority of Italians are too attached to the family. Yes, too attached to family. There are a few who are not but most are. We sacrifice a lot for the family. Having children is very important. We are very attached to our own blood. And we like to see our family to grow and grow. We want them (our family members) to have children. Not a lot of children, but to have some children.

I: What if one of your grandchildren decides not to get married?

R: For us Italians, if a granddaughter does not get married we are not happy.

I: How about if a grandson does not get married?

R: Does not matter if it's a granddaughter or grandson, if they don't get married we feel bad for them and for ourselves. You really can't have a future. To get married, and to find a nice woman, or man to marry, your future is more beautiful.

I: So to get married is more important than to have a good education?

R: Both are important, to go to school and to get married.

I: Did your children go to school?

R: My son went to school in Italy and here. My daughter just went to school in Italy (she was allowed to finish elementary school only). It is important for our grandchildren to get a good education too. For us, our grandchildren are like children and our children are like grandchildren, all the same.