

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 2
Date: July 21, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details
Sex: female
Age: almost 70
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: married
Religion:
Education:
Occupation: unwaged domestic work
Children: two sons and one daughter

COMMENTS:

She is my next door neighbour's mother who is visiting from Italy. She is visiting Canada but actually lived in Canada in the 1950's as an immigrant. She was the first woman from her home town to come to "America," but returned to Italy after seven years here. We have spoken a great deal about her experiences in Italy and Canada. Our conversations are not recorded. The taped interview is brief and awkward compared to our conversations. She spoke more after the tape was turned off. Usually we sat and chatted on the front patio but the interview took place inside the house, in the living room. Her grandchildren were running around and trying to get themselves on tape. Daughter-in-law was in the kitchen and able to hear the entire interview. She was nervous and not very open in the formal interview. (She knew the tape recorder was on, even though the tape recorder was at our feet and out of sight). She started telling me a funny story about her wedding day after the tape recorder was off. I asked if I could turn it back on. She replied, "later" but we did not return to it. Tape recorder stayed off and we continued to chat. Our talks became a regular nightly event. Whenever I went over to play with her two year old grandchild, we talked a little more.

I. BACKGROUND

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: My husband came to Canada one year before I came, in 1951. I joined him here a year later with my son, who was two years old. He really had a hard time living away from us. Two of my children were born in Canada, a boy and a girl. We lived here for seven years before my husband decided to take the family back to Italy. His mother was sick. She wanted to see her son, so we went to Italy for a visit. Once back, we decided to stay. [Interviewer: Her husband made the decision]. My husband came back to Canada; we had two houses here so he came back to sell them. Once he joined the family back in Italy, we started building a home there. We built a place with four apartments, one for each of our children and their spouses, and one for us.

I: Did you find that your life changed dramatically with each of your moves?

R: Yes, life was very different but not dramatically different. Let me explain, how I found myself here, I found myself there. [Interviewer: She had no more or no less freedom; her husband seemed to make the decisions]. See I never worked here. My husband did not want me to work. He was a bricklayer, actually he was a contractor. He was given jobs and he had to find others to work. He did this kind of work in Italy too. He had a lot of work. Once in Canada he would hire on people from our hometown in Italy. He would teach them how to be bricklayers, even if they did not have any experience. This is how our life went.

I: What differences do you find between life in Canada and life in Italy?

R: There is more work here. In Italy there is less work. Things are starting to change in Italy too, everyone goes to school now, and everyone wants good jobs. But there are no

industries in the south. The youth all go to school because there is little else.
Grandson speaks: In Italy, with what is going on in Europe, everyone is going to university. There is hope. Everyone finishes high school, at least.

I: Was life harder or easier for you after returning to Italy?

R: Well, it was easier. [financially].

I: Did you work in Italy?

R: No, I have never worked.

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

R: [Most of the following story was not recorded. Paraphrased from memory]. My husband was in the war. After the war, we really wanted to get married but we couldn't because my husband was thinking of going to work in Argentina. There was a law that only single men could go work there. If we got married, he would not be eligible to go. He promised that he would come back and marry me, but my father could not promise him that I would stay single until his return. [Note: At the time most men did not come back to Italy, or even write to family, after immigrating to Argentina. In my hometown in southern Italy, Argentina was known as "la terra di scordati" - The Land of Forgetting.] One day they changed the law. They decided to allow married men to immigrate to Argentina. The next day, my husband and I were married (1949). The day after that he left for Rome where he was to leave for Argentina.

Her husband speaks: When I got to Rome, I realized how bad a deal it was. The work was bad, I would be away for too long and the amount of money I would make was poor. I turned around and came home (back to the little town). Two years later I came to Canada.

I: How many relatives did you have in Canada?

R: I was the first woman from my town to come here. The townsfolk believed that Canada was all forest. They discouraged me from coming, but I said to them, "if my husband came to Canada for our benefit, we would join him for his benefit." After I came here, many, many followed. My son did not even know that I was the first woman from our town to emigrate. [Now, her son and his family live in Toronto. She also has a sister in New Jersey, who she visited last weekend.]

I: Do you still keep in contact with your relatives abroad?

R: My son is here [in Toronto] with his family. I see him every year. He even comes to our town for a few days when he is on business. [He's a travel agent]. He brings the family in the summer, or we come here. I also have a sister in New Jersey. We went to visit her last weekend, but she has her own family there. My son and his family may go visit her in the wintertime.

I: How much contact do you have with other Italians? Non-Italians?

R: Now in Canada it is much better than when we came. There was few Italians back then. We really had to struggle. Now you have storeowners, doctors,... who speak Italian. When I lived here, nobody understood us. Worst of all I had a great fear of the police. I wanted nothing to do with police.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE:

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married after the war.

I: How old were you at the time?

R: I was 27.

I: Was it common to get married at that age?

R: I was a little older but with the war, and the hard times that followed there really was no common age to get married. We waited three years before getting married because my

husband wanted to build a home for us. That took time and money. And after the war there was no work. We had just lost the war you know.

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

R: We had known each other three years before we got married. We were from the same town.

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

R: I have never worked.

I: How about housework?

R: Sure I did it. I've done that all my life.

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

R: He was in the war. He farmed before that.

I: Is your marriage like that of your parents? How? Are the differences better or worse?

R: Things were different in those days. Sure, my marriage was like that of my parents but it isn't like marriages today. There is less respect for one another now a days. [Her husband seems to have made all the decisions and she followed his lead. Today many women make decisions, have careers etc.]

[One night her husband was talking to my father, I overheard: Women today are out of control. Men were respected back then. Women should stay home and take care of the children, then there wouldn't be so many problems with these kids. Things have really gotten out of hand with women working.]

I: Are you obligated to take care of your parents in old age? Do you expect to be taken care of by your children in your old age?

R: Sure, look at the situation with my mother-in-law. She wanted her son around. So we came back. I don't want to be a burden to anyone but it is nice that we live near each other.

V. RELATIONS TO OTHER RELATIVES

I: Do you have brothers or sisters? Where do they live? How often do you see them? Do you call them?

R: My sister lives in New Jersey. We went to see her last weekend. It was nice to visit but it is rare that we see each other. Sure we write to each other, she's my sister.

I: Which of your relatives have you seen in the past day? Week? Month?

R: In Italy I see everyone every day at some point. They have their own apartment but we are all together. Now that I'm here, I think of them often.

VI. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ETHNIC GROUP NORMS

I: Would you consider moving back to Canada?

R: Here? Me? No. Once one gets to a certain age it is better for that person to stay in their own town. Hopefully God will give us the good health so that we can come here to visit but that's it.

I: When was the last time you visited Canada before this time?

R: We came two or three years ago. (Daughter-in-law yells from the kitchen: "No, 1988.") Oh, I don't remember exactly but she says 1988. She remembers better than I do.

I: Do you think that your son has any intention of moving back to Italy? R: No, he has a family now. He won't return.

I: Does life in Canada now seem like life in Canada when you first came here in the 1950's?

R: No, there is more progress here. It was almost the same but there are differences. There are many Italians now, almost like Italy. We lived near College Street back then, and at the time, there were few Italians. In 1952 there were few Italian stores. It was difficult. We couldn't explain ourselves to others. We were too old to go to school. My husband spoke English well because he was a prisoner in England during the war, but I had to take the children to the doctor...and I was afraid that they would not understand me.

I: In your opinion what is the most important thing to the Italian family?

R: Unity. Having a united family is the most important thing. (She lowers her voice, perhaps so that the daughter-in-law, who is in the kitchen, would not hear.) Once a son leaves or a daughter leaves, an Italian family really does not like that. The unity of a family is a beautiful thing. Well, when they get married they grow apart from us, that is certain. [Note: remember that in Italy her married son and her married daughter both live under the same roof as she and her husband, each in their own separate apartments.]

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

R: I'm Italian. I always have been.

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

R: I don't know. But there sure are more Italian speaking people around today than when I first came here. You have Italian stores, TV shows, and many Italian services. It is much more Italian now than it was in the 1950's.