

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 4
Date: Aug 5, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details (Respondent)

Sex: female
Age: 73
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: married
Religion:
Education:
Occupation:
Children: two sons

Biographical Details (Spouse)

Sex: male
Age: 76
Place of Birth:
Marital Status: married
Religion:
Education:
Occupation: barber
Children: two sons

COMMENTS:

This couple are friends of my grandparents. My grandmother was talking to the wife about the research project when she volunteered to get interviewed. After she volunteered herself to the project, my grandmother told me that the two women sat down at my grandmother's house and talked for hours about their experiences as immigrants.

My grandmother acted as a go-between, arranging an interview time. The first time I spoke to her and her husband was at their home, on the day of the interview. I felt extremely comfortable and at home. They are warm, open and friendly. Both were present for the interview, but she did most of the talking. We sat at a table in a sun room at the rear of their home. He sat across from me and she sat at the end of the table, but beside me.

At one point, however, I felt as if I was being interviewed. It all became clear to me, when they told me that they have an adult son who is single. They spoke of him for a long time, singing his praises and describing him to me. By the end of the interview they asked me to drop by the house any time. He openly said "Maybe you can meet our son. He's a very smart guy." They were more concerned about their son who is not married (but has a career, a large home, and is very independent) than about their other son, who dropped out of dentistry and married an Italian girl.

After the interview I went to my grandmother's house to thank her for setting up the interview and to ask if she had any more friends who were willing to be interviewed. I sat and chatted with her for a while. I told her about how I was invited back to the interviewee's house and I spoke a little about the single son "incident." She confessed to me that on the day when she volunteered to get interviewed they spoke about me and her son. My grandmother told her friend, "You have a wonderful family, and I have a wonderful family but my granddaughter is only 23 years old and your son is almost twice her age. She's too young for him." The conversation between the two women took place even before she met me. This is an indication of a few important things: 1. Parents dislike having unwed children. 2. A family's reputation is still very important in mate selection. That is, without knowing me

personally, she felt that I would make a good wife for his son because my grandparents are good people. 3. Italian parents continue to play a role in mate selection for their children, even if their children are unaware of it. Parents continue to play match-makers without consulting their children. I would have been very concerned if her son had been younger!

I. BACKGROUND

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: I came in 1951 and my husband came in 1950, one year before me. In 1951, I brought two sons with me. One was four years old, and the other was three months old. When we came, we went looking for a flat, a little apartment. But when we knocked on doors, responding to ads for apartments for rent which we saw in newspapers, the first thing they asked us is if we had children. What were we to say? Yes, we had children. They would slam the door closed in our faces. There was no work in those days. My husband worked as a barber. [She worked in a bakery.] He made \$25 a week.

Husband (speaking for the first time): In those days milk was 10 cents a quart and a house cost \$12,000. Now things are different.

R (continuing as if she had not been interrupted): We found a flat near College Street. The owner was a Jewish woman. There was no kitchen, but three bedrooms. We plugged in a stove but there was no kitchen sink. The dishes had to be washed in the bathroom sink, and our clothes had to be washed in the bathtub. We could not afford a washing machine. My eldest liked to go downstairs and play. When we left Italy, we left behind a beautiful home. If the ocean could freeze over, I would have walked back to Italy, but I did not have the money to go back. I wrote to my father to send me money so I could go back to Italy with my whole family. Work here was hard to find. The money my husband made was too little. We had to pay the rent. And we left a house in Italy. Here, we found ourselves in misery. I wanted to go back to Italy. Then, my brother came here at the age of 19. He began working in construction because there was no work. He made some money. He lived with us. He bought a home. Bought. We lived with him for not even a year. We bought a house. Bought. We started working steady and I did not go back to Italy.

I: Why did you come to Canada?

R: We decided to come here because there was no work in Italy. We just had a war. (Turning to her husband) How many years were you prisoner?

Husband: I was a prisoner for two years in Germany, and I was a soldier for four years. It was six years in total. I left in 39 and was back in 45.

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

Husband: I was a barber but I told the immigration people in Rome that I was a farmer so that I would get a one year contract as a farm worker in Canada. In Rome they checked our hands to see if we were really farmers. I had a relative who was in the police force. He came with me and told the people in Rome that his father and my father farmed together, so they let me come.

I: How many relatives in Canada?

R: I have a sister in Ottawa and one in Toronto.

I: How many relatives abroad? Still keep contact?

R: To be honest with you, we used to go to Italy a lot. Went back seven times. But now that we are old, we don't go. We had our parents then. Now we both have brothers there, the family grows, and we don't see each other much. Do you know where we like to go in the winter? Cuba. It's clean, beautiful and there are nice people there. All eight of us went to Italy for my niece's wedding five years ago. [That was their last time back.]

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE

I: When did you get married?

R: We got married in 1946, when he came back from the war.

I: Did you know each other before you got married?

R: No.

Husband: Yes. Well, we were from the same town.

I: How old were you at the time?

R: I was 25 years old.

Husband: 19 plus 6 of war, 25.

R: No, 25 plus 3, what's that, 28.

Husband: Yes, 28.

I: Was it common to get married at this age in those days?

R: No, no. Depends, but then, nobody got married like today, young. If you were 25 or 24 a woman could not get married. Because of the war nobody could get married. [So there was no ideal age].

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

R: There was no work. He was a soldier in the war. He said that he was a barber in Italy but most likely, he did not work before the war, and he emigrated after the war because he did not find work. I don't think he worked at all prior to or after marriage in Italy because of the economic situation there.

I: Are Italian marriages today like yours?

R: We went to my niece's wedding in Italy. My entire family went. Even my sons and grandchildren. This girl was like a sister to my sons because I took care of her when my sister-in-law was at work. [This girl is the daughter of the respondent's brother who came to Canada when he was 19. After her brother got married and had children the family moved back to Italy]. Before, let's not even talk about weddings. You just went to church and got married. You had your family around and that was it. Now weddings in Italy are like weddings here. They go to great lengths there too. They even go out of the little town for the reception. When my niece got married we went to a reception on a mountain. There was a reception hall on the mountain. And the flowers in the church were incredible. On April 10 1993, another niece of mine got married. She married a doctor and she is a nurse. Everything's changed in Italy. She sent invitations to some guests, inviting them to a dinner at a certain hour and a certain place. They had this reception at their home. My brother has a large home. They rented tables, chairs, etc. and had a catered dinner for 200 people. Today in Italy, they are going overboard with the weddings. They do more there than here now. Even five years ago they were not as organized with weddings but now, they have more money, or something. But that was not all. For the same wedding there was another set of invitations for another dinner reception for close relatives. They had this reception in a park near Rome. They ate there. There were 50 guests. In the church they had 10 priests. This family was very religious, so the church community wanted an extra special celebration for them. Let me show you the bomboniere [gifts to the guests] that they gave out. (She showed me.)

In Canada the Italian weddings are getting less elaborate and in Italy they are getting more. I have visited Italy seven times. The first few times I went back, we were seen as wealthy people. Italians there saw us immigrants as very well off. The last few times I visited, I noticed that they dressed in designer clothes and were very well off. Everything they buy has a designer name. I felt like a peasant. They make fun of us. We are the ones who are dressed poorly. They are more advanced than us.

Husband: Everything has changed.

R: They do too much [referring to weddings].

Husband: They are better off than we are. In our days we only invited the family to the wedding. Bonboniere? Where were we going to get them? They even have bridesmaids, which we never had. My niece (who got married 5 years ago in Italy) was the first in her home town to have an Italo-Canadian style wedding, with bridesmaids and flowers in the church... [Remember, she was born in Canada and later moved back to Italy with her family]. Now the whole town has those types of weddings. They compete to see who has a better, more spectacular wedding.

I: Do the parents pay for the weddings there?

R: Yes. Both sets of parents pay for the wedding. Half and half. But it all depends on which family has more money. It is like here. Another girl who got married the same year my niece did was also born in America. [Then her family moved back to Italy.] My niece had a limousine at her wedding. Their chauffeur was from Rome. This other girl had to outdo her so she had a horse-drawn carriage take them to the reception.

I: How many people did your son invite to his wedding here in Canada?

R: When he got married we had 450 people at the wedding. But today that does not happen any more. My unmarried son said that if he gets married he will invite only the family and close relatives. You make a good impression on others if you have a small but nice wedding now-a-days.

Husband: Big weddings are not nice any more.

R: Another relative of ours got married on June 26, 1993. She invited 200 people. There were more people at the church than at the reception that night. Read this. (She showed me a programme for the church ceremony). A young man handed these out in Church. It was beautiful. They got married at a church in Woodbridge.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you have children? How old are they?

R: I have two sons, one 45 years old and the other 40 years old. Our oldest went to high school here. He finished high school and had to go to university when he decided to study in Rome for a year. He was there for a year. He thought he may want to move back to Italy, and if he had, we all would have moved back to Italy. By then, we had sent money to Italy and we built a few apartments there. But after one year he decided to come back. He got accepted to go to university here [in Toronto]. He completed five years of university. Now he is a high school teacher. Last year they gave him a new job. I don't know what it is called but he finds students work [Co-operative education].

Husband: He finds them work and then he must go see how they are on the job.

R: When he started doing this type of work, he did not like it. He was alone. And he found it hard. He had his own office, but he's the kind of person that likes to be with other people. Now he likes it. He won't leave it now.

R: My other son completed three years of university here. After three years he went to London, Ontario to study to become a dentist. He was to leave for London in September. He found himself a place to stay. But before going to London we were invited to a wedding. He came. There was a girl from our home town there. She introduced my son to a girl from London, Ontario. She was also from our home town. They exchanged addresses and when he went to London to start school, he started dating this girl. When he came home, he said, "Mom, I like this girl." I told him, "First you finish school then you do what you want." But the girl's father was really strict. Her mother was okay but her father wanted her to get married. They got married and he never finished school. He now has three kids, two boys and a girl. The first is 16 years old. See how things end up. Now they have their own business. She is really nice but it was all her father's doing. He said he would finish school after he got married but he didn't. After he got married he came back to Toronto. He lived ten years in London before they got tired of it. They moved to Toronto, bought a house in Mississauga and started their business there. They are going well. But she

knows how things go. But the other one is doing well. He is very intelligent. The only thing is, he is not married. He thinks he has to find the perfect woman. He fears divorce.

I: You want him to get married?

Husband: As parents, before we die we want to see them married.

R: We fight. Back then there were few teaching jobs. He applied to teach at St. Mike's and in Port Credit. He got both jobs but accepted the one in Port Credit, but it was too far for him to travel every day. He taught a year in Port Credit. He wanted us to sell this house and move to Port Credit but my husband didn't want to move. So, he wanted to rent an apartment there. We lent him some money and we convinced him to buy a house. At least it was not a flat. [Because of their past history as tenants most Italian parents don't want their children to rent a home. Most parents encourage their children to buy a home of their own. Most parents financially assist their children to do so.] He bought himself a nice house there. But after that they gave him a job around here. He wanted to buy a home in Toronto but we told him he could come live with us again. He refused. So he bought himself a home at Avenue Road and Eglinton. That home costs a million dollars.

Husband: See all this work (pointing to his sun room). He did all this. He studied art.

R: He is really intelligent only he's not married.

Husband: He said he will find himself a girl, but when?

R: On Monday he was over for Lunch. I told him that a girl was coming over [referring to me]. He said, "What's her name?"

Husband: Now he is on vacation in England with the school.

R: He wants a girl who is perfect. He has to close his eyes a bit [meaning 'nobody's perfect']. He wants everything to be perfect. He won't find her today. You should see his house. He does everything for himself. He only hates ironing... He cooks... The woman who he gets will be able to go into that house and keep her hands in her pockets [not have to do house work]. He has good furniture... When we go to his house it is spotless.

I: Is he going to find a woman?

R: No... [They both talked at length about their son's merits as a potential husband and speculating about why he has not married.] If he finds a woman, he will go as far as to serve her dinner...

Husband: He sees his co-workers getting divorced and he fears this.

R: He wants a good woman and you know how Canadian woman are, wishy-washy. He wants an Italian woman (she laughs). I tell him, today it is a stew.

(They both begin asking me questions).

R: Where did you learn to speak Italian so well?

Husband: What part of Italy are you from?

R: So, you were born in Italy? Even your brothers? How many brothers? Do your brothers work? What does your younger brother study? What would you like to drink? (She did not give me an option. She prepared glasses with Campari and ice, an Italian alcoholic beverage).

I: What are the main things you want for (from) your children?

R: Before we die we want to see our son married.

I: Do your children follow traditional Italian customs?

R: Our sons speak Italian. They like to keep with Italian traditions.

Husband: Honestly, our grandchildren do not speak Italian like us. They understand us when we speak to them in Italian but they answer us in English. But our sons, they have maintained their Italian heritage. Both sons.

IV. RELATION TO PARENTS

I: Are your parents living?

R: Both our parents are dead now. We used to go visit them in Italy. After they died we had no reason to go back. All our other relatives in Italy have their own lives to worry about, so we all went our separate ways really.

I: Are Italians obligated to take care of their parents in old age?

R: Now even in Italy they have old age or retirement homes. Very few elderly Italians live with their adult children. Most live in these homes.

Husband: It's really good because at least, before they die they can enjoy themselves.

R: A long time ago the elderly had to stay with their adult children, like your grandmother and her mother. Now, there [in Italy], no, there are many facilities. Just like long ago, only those with a lot of money bought a mausoleum for when they die. If you didn't have a lot of money you went in the ground. Now in Italy, everyone has a small mausoleum built for when they die. Nobody wants to go underground any more, like here.

Husband: Long ago the elderly did not have a pension. Now everyone has a pension to pay for this stuff.

R: Nobody wants to come to Canada any more. Life in Italy is very good.

Husband: We are prisoners here. We work day and night. Home and work, home and work, every day.

R: This time of year in the towns, you can't even find the cats. Everyone goes to the ocean and to the mountains. Not even the cats stay. We get two weeks off. They get a month off,

I: [Will you go to Cuba this year?]

R: We have to wait and see. This year we spent a lot of money. We spent \$47,000. We bought cemetery plots for me, my husband, my son and my other son.

Husband: I was superstitious. I did not want to buy it.

R: I suggested to my husband to buy one for my son too, because he travels a lot and if something happens... We told him that we were going to get him one too. He said "No way." He was afraid. But we wanted to get it for him anyway. And since we were getting it for one son, we had to get it for the other. My sons are very jealous of each other. What I do for one I must do for the other or else they say "No fair!" We fight about this. The one who is not married says "It's no fair that you give things to his brother's kids".

I: What do children expect from parents? (Financial aid?)

R: When our son [the younger, married son] decided to buy a house, he needed some money. I told him that I would give it to him, and that he could pay me back without interest. He will get that money anyway [as inheritance when the parents die] but I told him he has to pay us back or else he would spend the money on other things.

Every month you give me back whatever you can spare, I told him. He wrote me some cheques. With my luck, my other son who was writing a cheque for us, because we don't know how to write in English, saw the other one's cheques to us. He asked about them. I explained to him what they were about. He said, "I want money, too".

He didn't need the money but he wanted things to be fair between the two sons.

Husband: Half and half he wants.

R: He [the older, unmarried son] is a good guy but what I give to one, I have to give to the 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: I have two brothers in Italy and a sister here. My relatives in Italy have their growing families to worry about so everyone has gone their own separate ways but we keep in touch. Since my parents died, we haven't had a reason to go back to Italy except for my niece's wedding. We like to vacation in Cuba now. We were there two years ago.

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

R: My son came over for lunch on Monday but now he is in England on vacation. We are lucky because if we need anything we can call our sons and they will come over.

I: Are there some members of your family who are responsible for keeping the family together?

[It appears that hers and/or his parents in Italy were the members of the family who kept everyone together. They don't see a need to go back to Italy after both sets of parents died. They have no intention of going back to Italy.]

VI. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ETHNIC GROUP NORMS

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

R: The Italian family is important to us. I'll be honest. If my son married a Canadian girl, well...The first thing and most important is that the girl is Catholic. For him to marry into an Italian family is important too.

Husband: We keep one tradition and Canadians have another.

R: My mother was a great cook. My son remembers her. He mentions her often. That is important. My kids don't forget their father's birthday. My kids don't forget my birthday, or father's day, or mother's day. They remember and respect us at Christmas.

Husband: Some are ashamed to say that they were born in Italy or that they are Italian.

R: Some are embarrassed because they don't speak Italian well. They only speak dialect.

Husband: But most of us speak some kind of dialect. But we understand each other.

R: Now-a-days no matter where you go in Italy, everyone speaks proper Italian even in the smallest of towns way up in the mountains. Husband: Not just that but long ago we did not hear English being spoken in Italy. Now everywhere you go; every restaurant,... They speak English. When we were in Venice, they would wake us in the morning in English.

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

R: Canada is our home. I will never forget my roots but I tell people that I am Canadian. Canada has been good to us.

Husband: I am Italo-Canadian.

R: Life was hard at first but we are doing fine now.

I: Will there be an Italian family in the future?

R: There will always be an Italian family. My children and people like you will keep the culture alive.

Husband: People study the Italian language, they will not forget it.

R: Sure there will be. [Note: They still own property in Italy but they have no intention of moving back there. Their children do not intend on moving back to Italy either, so, they are in the process of looking for a buyer for that property.]