

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 5
Date: Aug 18, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details

Sex: female
Age: 63
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: widowed
Religion: Catholic
Education: elementary school
Occupation: worked in a leather company
Children: one son, two daughters

COMMENTS:

She is a friend of my grandmother. My grandmother arranged for the interview. I simply had to show up at her home. She lives in a home with her oldest daughter, her son-in-law and her two young grandchildren. It's her house. She is a widow. Her husband died this past spring. The above living arrangement existed prior to the death of her husband.

She was at the door waiting for me as I drove in. I walked into the home from a downstairs entrance guided by her. As I walked into the basement living room I met her daughter and two small boys. One was an infant and the other was 4 years old. I chatted briefly with her daughter and then I was escorted into a basement kitchen where her daughter, she and I sat for the interview. The kitchen was clean and typically 1960's and 1970's "Italian," with Italian wall hangings, a glass-cased cabinet with picture of the family and little statuette "bombonieri" which were given out at weddings. The living room had three large framed wedding pictures of her children. While I was there they served me coffee and home-made cookies. They also pulled out family photos. I felt very comfortable and at home there. We laughed and joked a great deal.

I. BACKGROUND:

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: 1960. I don't remember precisely what month but I think it was in November. I came on my own but my brother was here already. He "called" me here. My brother and his wife came first, right after they got married in Italy. I got married here. I was born in Italy but my children were all born here.

I: City of origin?

R: I am from Lucania. I'm from the same town where Johnny Lombardi's parents came from.

[Johnny Lombardi was born in Toronto in 1915 and became a prominent public figure in broadcasting after opening CHIN Radio on College Street in 1967. The radio station is known for multicultural programming. It serves 30 cultural communities. His family also owned a supermarket on College Street. The street is also known as "Johnny Lombardi Way."]

I: Where did you settle?

R: I settled here but the ship let us off in Quebec.

I: How old were you when you came here?

R: I was 30 when I came. And I got married when I was 31, in 1961 after I "called"

my husband here.

I: You met your husband while you were still in Italy?

R: We were engaged for 8 years before we got married.

I: What did you do in Canada?

R: After a week in Canada I found work in a toy factory. I worked there for a month. It was Christmas time so the toy factory was busy. I was laid off after that. We laughed a lot there because I made so many mistakes with my English. Nobody spoke Italian there. On payday I would just go into the office and say "book cheque." I had been in Canada for 40 days you could imagine how I communicated. I've always worked, even when I was pregnant. I worked into my 7th and 8th month of pregnancy. Then I stayed home for a while because my husband was one of those types who believed a woman should stay home and raise the children. I stayed home until my sister-in-law came here as a tourist. She took care of the kids so I slowly went back to work. Then I worked for the rest of my life. It has been two years since I have worked. For many years I worked with leather. Then the owner sold the business so I found another job. I then worked in a "laundry", doing alterations but then they told me there was no work there so they "kicked me out" (she said this in English). So I did not go back to work because my husband got very sick. Then I fell and cracked my hip. I was in the hospital for a long time.

I: What did you do in Italy before coming to Canada?

R: I was a seamstress in Italy. Most women just worked in the country [farming] or stayed home. Many embroider sheets and stuff.

I: How many relatives in Canada?

R: My brother and his wife were here before me. Then I came. Then I "called" my husband. My sister-in-law came here after us.

I: How many relatives abroad? Still keep contact?

R: I just have an aunt in Italy, and some cousins, and one brother. There were three of us. My brother who sponsored me, then me, then my other brother. I was the only girl. We call each other rather than write to each other. We have gotten too lazy. Long ago phoning was expensive and very few people in the little towns in Italy had a phone. Now everyone has one.

I: When was the last time you were in Italy?

R: Three years ago. But we stayed there very little. We went to the Holy Land and we stopped off in Italy for a week. I was working back then so I couldn't take too much time off. I visited my sister-in-law, and I went to Rome. And I went to Luxembourg to visit a relative.

I: How much contact do you have with other Italians? Non-Italians? R: Before, when I was younger and my husband was still alive we would go out more to visit our friends. Now we are old, and we all have our own families. Most of the jobs I held, I got through friends. I had one Sicilian friend who was so close to my family that she baptized my son. I'm the type of person who makes friends very easily. If I am respected I respect others. I make friends with everyone. Many however happen to be Italian.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE:

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married in 1962 after I "called" my husband here. No, no, it was 1961 because in 1962 my daughter was born.

I: How old were you at the time?

R: I was 31 years old. My husband was 38. (She laughed with embarrassment).

I: What do you feel is the perfect age to get married?

R: 22 or 23 is a beautiful age. I got engaged at that age. I had problems with his parents. It took two years before my future mother-in-law accepted me, then I got my papers to come to America, and then the "sauce was watered down" [meaning: time passed].

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

R: We were engaged for 8 years. We got married in 1961, so we met in 1953.

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

R: I worked in the toy factory here before I got married.

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

R: He was an electrician in Italy. He also was a plumber. When he came here he got his license. So he was an electrician here too. But in the beginning, when he first came here he did not work as an electrician. Then there was a building boom, but there were always periods where there was no work. He worked in the winter too. Daughter: There were days when he came home in the winter. His hands were blue from the cold.

R: He went to school to learn English and then he got his license to practice in Canada. He was an electrician in the construction business.

My husband was well educated but I was not. I did not have an education. He could have become a teacher there. I just finished elementary school. I'm not very smart.

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

R: Well my parents got married in Italy and I got married here. It was nice I prepared everything for the hall (on College and Clinton). Before, weddings were not as big as they are today. There was a buffet table, and all my friends were there. And my brothers' friends mostly. Everything was cooked at home and then taken to the hall. My husband arrived one week before the wedding. Everything was ready by the time he got here. In Italy, in our days, weddings were very different. You had people over to the house for a drink. You danced...Now in Italy it is like it is over here. I did not go on a honeymoon. I really did not have much money and I couldn't speak English. It was like being illiterate.

I: Would your marriage be different if you still lived in Italy?

R: I think that it would be the same in terms of our love for each other. We married for love and we had a good life. That is the most important thing.

I: So you married for love, your parents had little to do with arranging the marriage?

R: Yes, love. But I actually had problems with his parents. I was not rich, and his family was better off. They had more money and were better educated. He came from a good family. So, I had a lot of problems, especially with my mother-in-law. She did not come to my house [did not recognize her as a potential spouse for her son]. But my husband fought them on this. We loved each other and wanted to be together. Eventually they liked me a lot.

I: Did they move to Canada, too?

R: No. My in-laws did not come. They always said that they wanted to come but they did not. Then they died. My father-in-law was afraid to travel.

I: Did your parents come to Canada?

R: Yes, they eventually moved to Canada. They lived with me when they came here, but we rented a place. We did not own a home then. Later we bought a home. This was the first home we ever bought. Our friends thought we were crazy to buy a house up here [in Etobicoke]. It was so far away. They would say that we moved to the end of the earth. Down town homes cost 12, 13, 14 thousand dollars. I paid 28 [thousand] in 1966 for this one. It was a big step for us but I made good money because I did piece work in leather business. It was hard to cut leather. My husband

also made good money as an electrician. They were just building homes in this area, and there were farms up here. Lots of empty lots. There was really nothing up here. There were a few buses that came up this way.

I: You recently lost your husband?

R: He suffered a great deal. He was a diabetic and he had high cholesterol. Then there was something wrong with his blood, then his heart. He was in the hospital for 8 months after a bypass in his leg, to improve his circulation. Things got worse. He was operated in March, and then in April they amputated his leg. He had no strength left in him. He got really depressed because he could not walk. A nurse would have to come to the house. Then he got bronchitis in March. On April of this year he died. But we had a wonderful life together. He gave me anything I asked for. He only ever said no to me once in my life, when I asked if we could put ceramic tiles in the living room in there. He refused because he said that once grandchildren "arrive" they would want to play on the floor. He knew. He was a sweet guy. All my nieces and nephews loved him.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you have children?

R: I have three children. My daughter (who was sitting with us at the table) is the oldest. My son was born in '65 and my daughter in '67.

I: Are they married?

R: They are all married. My son got married in August 1988. [He was 23]. My oldest daughter got married the same year. [She was 25].

Daughter: My brother married my best friend, and we got married the same year. I was in her bridal party and she was in mine. [Her oldest daughter married a man from Iran].

I: Was it hard to communicate with your son-in-law?

R: It was very difficult.

Daughter: She understands him better than my sister's husband who is Canadian. My husband and my mother both have accents. My brother-in-law mumbles when he talks so she doesn't understand him. His parents are Romanian and Scottish. It is funny when he speaks Italian but he really doesn't speak it at all.

I (to daughter): Is your husband an immigrant? How long has he been in Canada?

Daughter: He's been here 8 years. He arrived in September, and I met him in June. He wasn't sure if he wanted to stay here because at first he found the people very cold. Nobody really made an effort to speak to him. A lot of their customs were the same as ours. They have the same values.

I: Were your children's weddings typical?

[Typical Italian not typical Canadian. Her daughter's wedding had 165 people in attendance.]

R: I only had my side of the family there. His side of the family was in Iran.

Daughter: None of his relatives could make it to the wedding because Iran and Iraq were at war. We tried for a year to get his mother to come but we had no luck. There were periods during our engagement when his mother did not have access to a phone.

R: My other daughter's wedding was a little bit bigger. My son had close to 300 people there because my daughter-in-law's family was big.

I: Montreal Italians?

Daughter: They do everything so differently in Montreal. I went to an Italian wedding there. It was so elaborate. Everyone brings silverware as gifts, and very elaborate gifts and presented in an elaborate way. Things are just overboard. I have three sets of china (received as gifts). When will I use them? What's worse is that they are all different.

R: When I threw my girls bridal showers I got criticized because they were "money showers" because I hated going to showers were the bride received three or four sets of the same thing or even worse, when nothing matched. I got criticized. That is one of the problems with Italians.

I: You have two grandchildren?

R: Yes, two. They live here with me.

I: What are the main things you want for your children and grandchildren?

R: Well, health and peace. I don't wish for them to be rich. I had a wonderful marriage and I was happy, so this I wish for my kids. When I was pregnant, I did not care if it was going to be a boy or a girl but I wished that when they got married they loved each other, the way he loved me.

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

R: My youngest daughter does not speak Italian.

Daughter: We tried, and tried, and tried to get her to speak it. She understands it but does not speak it.

R: The two oldest speak it. I taught them to speak Italian but when they started school they spoke English more often. My parents spoke Italian to them. The youngest always spoke English to me. She just never tried, even in Italy [on family vacation] she did not speak Italian. Daughter: The little ones have been exposed to Italian too. The baby sitter used to speak to my oldest in Italian. He understands it.

I: Do your children follow traditional Italian customs?

R: No, no. They like Italian food but that's about it. They do however want to go to Italy. They have been there but they want to take their spouses.

Daughter: We want to go next year. We want her to go to Jerusalem next year and then we would meet her in Italy. My sister and her husband and my sister-in-law want to go. My brother does not want to go. My sister-in-law was born in Argentina but her parents were Italian.

I: How would you feel if your grandchildren marry somebody who is not Italian?
(All laughed).

R: Oh well, at this point. As long as they love each other. I'm used to it. Religion is very important to me. I would like my grandchildren to feel the same way and just recently, my daughter has been going to church more often. [Her son-in-law is not Catholic. This must have been a big barrier to overcome].

Daughter: We agreed that neither of us would convert, and the children would be raised Catholic. We just baptized my son a few weeks ago.

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

R: I am used to the Canadian way of life. I would not go there to live there. But I will probably visit again, maybe next year, like she said. Things are very different there. They live very well. They have more money than we do. In my time we lacked many things, now they have everything. When we sent them a pair of pants or something, they used to appreciate them, now I don't send anything. Even if you want to send \$50, to them it is nothing. When I first came to Canada I thought that I had found great wealth. There was so little in Italy then. We had tomatoes, cheese, and olives.

I: Would you consider retiring in Italy?

R: Oh, no. My life and my children are here.

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

R: I am Italian but Canada has been good to me. My home is here.

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

R: I don't know. Things are changing.