

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 6
Date: Aug 18, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: Italian

Biographical Details

Sex: female
Age: 88
Place of Birth: Italy (Foggia)
Marital Status: widowed
Religion:
Education: second grade
Occupation: worked in family owned post office
Children: three girls and three boys

COMMENTS:

She is a friend and neighbour of my grandmother. She is 88 years old but looks and acts years younger than she actually is. She lives with her daughter and son-in-law. The interview was conducted at my grandmother's home, in her kitchen. My grandmother was present throughout the interview. Every answer and bit of information she shared with me was not news to my grandmother. It was obvious that the two women exchanged information about their experiences as immigrants. My grandfather made her and myself some coffee. He was in and out of the kitchen where we were sitting. She was not shy about sharing information with him either. Her focus was not on my questions and me but on her life. On other interviews I felt warmth, deference and a slight nervousness (that they might answer incorrectly) from the people who I interviewed, but she was more confident and less deferential to me. This may have been a reflection of her personality and strength, but it could also have been a response to the surroundings. She did not have to worry about being hospitable to me, nor did she have to worry about what type of impression her home gave off. We were in a neutral surrounding which was comfortable for the both of us. She had obviously been to my grandmother's home often.

I. BACKGROUND

I: When did you first come to Canada?

R: I came to Canada in 1928. I landed in New York. There was a mission there. They took in all the Italians. They gave us food and a place to sleep and the next morning they took us to the train station. They pinned tickets to our lapels to identify us as immigrants, headed for Toronto. At eight o'clock at night they sat us in the train and told us to stay seated until we were told that we had arrived in Toronto. Every little town we stopped at, the entire train would say "Is this Toronto?" When we got here, the train stopped and my husband walked into the train. He had been in Canada since 1924 and I had not seen him since he left Italy. He sponsored me. When I got up to get my suitcase, I spotted him. He grabbed the suitcase and we got off the train.

I: What part of Italy did you emigrate from?

R: I'm from a town the province of Foggia.

I: Approximate age?

R: I was 23 when I came here.

I: Where did your family settle?

R: My husband lived on Clinton Street. When I first saw it I turned to him and said, "Where are you taking me, to a prison?" We owned it. It had two bedrooms, a bath, a front room, a dining room and a kitchen. We had a love seat and a beautiful dining room set, with six chair. My

daughter's son has it now. When I had my first child we moved to Palmerston Avenue. We rented this place from a Jewish woman. She owned 10 houses. Eventually my husband asked her if we could buy the place. The Jewish woman finally gave in and we bought it from her. In 1961 we bought another house. In 1961 City Hall took over 24 homes on our street, and 4 on Grace Street, so they could expand the school on Grace St. My home was one of them. We bought the place for \$9 000 and we sold it for \$16 000. We bought a new house for \$24,000 at Royal York and Bloor. A person from the same town as us owned a house there. I really liked it so we got a contractor to build us one there. I lived there from 1961 to 1975. Then my husband died.

I: What did you do before coming to Canada? Did you work?

R: No, no. Women in our town did not work. Only those who really needed the money had their wives go out and work. Or if they were widows. Otherwise nobody worked outside the home. I had a brother-in-law who was from Abruzzi who used to say that in my hometown, the women were all "eaters of sweets" [did not work]. My husband was a contractor in Italy. He was the boss. He was from the same town as me but he often had to work out of town. They would call him on the phone and tell him that they needed 15 guys for a job in a certain town. [Interviewer's comment: He must have been very well off to have a phone in Italy in the early 1920's.] He had to round them up. When Mussolini came to power, my husband stopped working and joined the party, to be honest with you. They had a place for him in the party but he decided to leave the country. He came here and after four years he "called" me over.

I: What did the family do in Canada?

R: My husband came here to work on a farm [contract]. But he did not even work there for a year. He went illegally into the United States but he decided to move back to Canada so he can "call me" over. The United States had different immigration policy and he would not be able to take me there.

I: When I came here, my husband worked in an Italian Bank. One man owned the entire building, bank and all. Since all us new Italians couldn't understand a thing, he had a lot of power. Until the depression hit. He lost everything. He declared bankruptcy. Everyone lost their money. He sold everything. Everyone lost everything. My husband practically had to beg, but that was the worst thing that he could ever do. For all Italians, begging is shameful and the worst thing possible. In 1940, the bank trustees who took over the bank after it went bankrupt really trusted my husband. They gave him some money to open an Italian bookstore, which served all of Canada. He was the first Italian to do this. He sold trinkets too. One day another immigrant from the same home town asked my husband to open a post office in the same store, to service Italian immigrants. My husband applied. An inspector came on Good Friday. He gave us permission to open a post office on the premises on the condition that we built a special office for it. We sold stamps, made money orders, out of one ticket window and we had another for people to come pay their bills. This was a service that he set up himself. People came up to him and asked if they could pay a bill for them while he was downtown. He would collect everyone's payments and he took them downtown for them. They paid him 5 cents for this. The company that the bill was for took 3 cents and he kept 2 cents for every transaction. For every hundred bills he took downtown, he made \$2.00. After 25 years of running our own post office, my husband was recognized by the big post office downtown. They gave him a pin--I still have it--in appreciation of his hard work, and 25 years of service to the Italian community. It was a big honour. He did so much. We had quite a life. There were hard times. Some women were forced to beg. They would put a black handkerchief over their heads and knock on your door for money. I'll never forget this story. I had a quarter in my pocket. A lady came knocking at the door asking for money. I had that quarter, but I thought to myself "tomorrow I have to buy bread for my own children." I told my daughter to tell the lady to come back another day. But then I regretted what I did. I still feel bad to this day. (Her voice was low, remorseful.) Remember, charity is important. Everyone says that you have

to think about yourself first, but you should think of others first. I tell my son-in-law after our meals. We've just had another meal "Thank God" (she said "Thank God" in English).

I: How many relatives abroad? Still keep contact?

R: My entire family stayed back home. I had sisters in Italy but they did not want to come. I was the only one who came here. My husband left his family there too. He had a sister too, but he could not "call" his family over because of the immigration laws here. It was only later that they changed the law so that other relatives could come, this was after the war. My husband's sister and eventually his mother too ended up immigrating to Australia. At first my husband's mother stayed in Italy with a niece. Then my husband "called" her here. My son, who was big by then, went to Rome. He brought his grandmother to Canada with him even though she did not want to come here. When she came here and lived with us, she was not happy. She ended up going to Australia to live with my sister-in-law. Life was hard then.

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

R: In those days, nobody called you before they visited your home. They just knocked at your door. They just dropped in and had a coffee, we did not pull out cakes or anything. Everyone was so friendly. I knew very few people from my own town. Only two other women left our town for here in those days. I met all my friends here, and they were all Italian. We lived in the same area. I lived there a whole lifetime, from 1929 to 1961.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married in 1922. We got married two years before my husband came to Canada. I was alone for three and a half years after that.

I: How old were you at the time?

R: I was 17 when I got married. I was 23 when I came here. All my children were born here. Actually one was born in Italy but died in Italy at the age of one. My husband was 20 when we got married.

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

R: We knew each other for six months, and then we got married.

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

R: I did not work before I got married. Once the war broke out, Italy was fighting against Canada you know, my husband said that I should get a job. At that time he was working at a place that made automobile engines. He made blueprints. They made a car a day there. I worked at the post office too eventually. Everyday of my life, I woke up at six a.m. I went to church, then come home and wash and get the kids ready for school. My husband used to get up at 9 a.m. I would bring him coffee in bed, and then he would get up. I made my husband's lunch in the morning. He did not want me to make his lunch at night and leave it in the fridge. I made his lunch and his morning coffee. He would come downstairs, grabbed his "suitcase" and leave for work in his car. My day ended at midnight or one in the morning. My husband had a car since 1929. There were very few cars back then. He took four men to work with him. They each give him a dollar a week for gas. On Sundays, I would wake up early in the morning, cook, pack the lunch, and we went on a picnic every Sunday in the summer. There were 7 or 8 families who did this together with us. We all brought food and we all ate together. Those were good times. It does not happen that way any more.

I: Did you go to school before you got married?

R: I finished the second grade but I did not finish third grade, to be honest with you. My husband finished third grade. When he came here, he went to school to learn English. He needed to know English with the type of services that he provided for

the Italian community. He was very active. He worked 16 years as secretary for the "Italian Canadian Mutual Aid Society." He was president of that for two years, and then he stopped doing that when the post office was approved. He used to help out with immigration cases. It was too much work.

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

R: Oh, it was the same as that of our parents. We had to go to City Hall three days before the church ceremony. Then we had a reception at home, with 30 or 40 people present. There was a person playing the guitar, and there were 30 of us.

I: Are Italian marriages today like yours?

R: Now people go to a huge wedding, and they have to have an even bigger one for their kids. They get married for "love" (she said this in English) but then it's over. It's not like it was in the old days.

I: So in the old days people did not marry for love?

R: Sure it was love but it was different. Everyone gets married but then they fight for little things. The woman wants to control her husband. A man wants everything. If the husband gives in a bit, okay, but if he insists on telling a woman what to do, there will be no peace in a house. I have sons. I see that they help out at home. It's no use trying to hide it any more. They have to help and respect each other.

I: How do you feel about divorce?

R: It is too easy. People just don't try hard enough. They have to try to get along better and respect each other more.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: How many children do you have?

R: Six. Three boys and three girls. My first died in Italy. My daughter was my first-born here. She was born in 1929. She is the same age as your grandmother. I'm old. So, she is 54. My second was born in 1931. My son was born in '34, then the next son in '36 and another son in '37. Three sons. My last child was a girl. She was born in 1940. Three girls and three boys, a big family. But I had nobody when I came here. I was so shy. I had English speaking neighbours on either side of me. I could not even understand the man who delivered our bread. He would say "good morning" and I could not understand what he was saying. He told my husband that I should learn English. Right away, my husband bought me an English grammar text book. But when you are alone you don't learn much. You have to practice a language to learn it. That's my life. I'm old now.

I: You look great.

R: They are those who say that hard work kills a person, it's not true. Hard work gives you strength. And having children gives you strength. There are those who get married and decide not to have children, they lose their health at an early age. This is life, and this is how I view things. Maybe I'm "old fashioned" (she said this in English).

I: How old were your children when they got married?

R: My oldest was 17. [She worked at a personal finance company until she had her first child, at age of 24. She worked before and after she got married.] She had 150 people at her wedding. My second oldest finished high school when she was 16. She went to work in a library. The boss gave her a job because she was so young. He figured that she would work for quite a few years before she got married and quit the job. My husband needed help with his business so he asked her if she would like to work for him. She spoke to her employer explaining the situation. The employer said, I hired you hoping you would stay with us for a few years but I have one thing to say, if you do leave us "here father and daughter are like son and spirit, the same

(Holy Trinity), so they argue. If you need us, our door is always open." She worked for her father until she got married. She was 24 years old when she got married. There were 200 people at her wedding. Her husband is from Le Marche. His parents used to make little statuettes for a living. They are dead now. His parents died, and so did his sister. The family was destroyed.

I: Do you have many grandchildren?

R: And I think I have about 17 or 18 grandchildren. I have 7 great grandchildren, too. When you are alone here [widowed], your family is all you have. Strangers [non-family] are important up to a certain point but blood is what counts. My youngest lives in Malton but he comes to visit me often. And I have three daughters-in-law who respect me, "Thank God" (said Thank God in English). But I work to gain their affection. They come pick me up and take me places.

I: Did your children marry Italians?

R: Not all of them. The oldest married an Italian. Second married an Italian. My son an English woman [English probably means non-Italian]. Second son an English woman. Third an English woman. All my boys married English women. All my kids are married. We paid for half and their spouses' families paid for the other half, for both my sons and my daughters. My youngest daughter married an Italian man. But they are all good people. When my second daughter got married she received a great deal of money for her wedding, from her guests. Her husband's parents were dead so he did not have any financial assistance from them. After they got married they lived with us for two years, until the two children came. After their two children came, my husband did not like to hear all the noise so I told her. "Please, find yourself a nice house to live in." They are doing well now.

I: Were your grand children's weddings like those of your children?

R: They were beautiful weddings. Each side paid for half. My granddaughter too, had a nice wedding. They had about 150 people there too. My grandson married a Portuguese woman. I had never seen a wedding like it in all the Italian weddings I have ever been. They had another buffet at midnight, after a big dinner. It was incredible. They had everything.

I: And your grandchildren?

R: Just one of my grandchildren married an Italian. The others are all English [non-Italians]. Their language is therefore not Italian. They all speak English. Our language is Italian just like their language is English. It is this way for those born here.

I: You now live with your daughter?

R: Yes with my oldest. When my husband died they all [all the daughters] came to me. The youngest, the second oldest, all wanted me to live with them. I said no, no, it's close [close to her old home] so I will go with the oldest.

I: Why there?

R: Because I have the church close by. It's a five-minute walk to church from here.

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

R: I wish them a life like mine. I had a wonderful life with my husband. I was loved and I loved. He took me everywhere. We went to Italy three or four times together. We went to Australia three times together. I even went alone to Australia after my husband died.

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

R: Yes, my oldest studied Italian in school for two years. My second oldest, yes. The third oldest, yes. Sure. They speak it but not perfectly.

I: And your grandchildren?

R: Yes and no, to be honest with you. [Which means that they probably do not speak

Italian.] They make up the third generation. My daughter's daughter married an Italian man. He speaks it a little but the others do not.

[There seems to be the tendency for grandparents to feel they have little control over whom their grandchildren marry, although they may not approve of the choice. They expect that parents are the ones responsible for swaying their children's decisions.]

R: The kids today say that they go to Italian school [Saturdays, at elementary school level]. But they learn very little. They are embarrassed and do not like to make mistakes.

I: Do your children follow traditional Italian customs?

R: Sure, to a certain extent. They like Italian food. Spaghetti two to three times per week. If you don't cook spaghetti or lasagna you don't cook anything Italian. When I was younger I used to cook them Italian meals. Now I am old. I have not made Italian cookies in one whole year. When did I get so lazy? I do however go to Villa Colombo [Italian retirement home]. I go every Tuesday. They take us on trips with their bus. If you want to eat there, you can pay for lunch. I have a membership. I pay \$50. I can go everyday if I want. We go to one place one day and another place the next time, but at 4 o'clock, the bus has to be back at the centre. It leaves at 1:00 o'clock, and we come back at 4:00. You can see the little old people there playing cards.

[She is probably the same age or older than the people she calls "old" but she is in such great shape that she looks as if she is in her 60's. She turned to my grandfather and said "You should go there. It's fun, you can play cards.]

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ETHNIC GROUP NORMS

I: What are Italian's attitudes towards the family?

R: Family is the most important thing to Italians. To have a united family is the most beautiful thing you can find. In many families are great deals of tears shed. I really feel for them. There are children who do not want their parents around. There was one woman who had three children and she was cursing. I said, "God help her." Everyone has their faults but we have to be compassionate. There are old people who try to control their adult children. In my case, with my daughter, what interest is it of mine what she does? I eat, drink, and sleep, clean. She takes me places. If I want to go, I go, if not, I don't. I turn on the TV... I have my own TV in my room. I stay there if I want. If everyone minded their own business, everyone would be so much happier. But not everyone does. We should all shut our mouths and open our eyes more often. It is none of my business if my children argue [with their spouses]. If I interfere, the problem only escalates.

My grandfather interjects: Tell her about the cemetery plots.

(She laughed, almost embarrassed, and then told the story.)

R: When my husband died, actually before he died... You see, sometimes the woman is sneakier than the man. She thinks ahead, while the man does not... My husband used to say, "I'm going to die and I don't know where you are going to throw my body." We went to an office at Mount Hope Cemetery. We bought plots for our kids and ourselves. There are eight places in the ground for us. I made up this thing, which was like a will. I told my kids, whoever wants to come, come. Once you're dead, you're dead. I bought for everyone. I thought to myself that if my children die with nothing [poor] they would have a nice place to rest. I could not just buy one for myself.

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

R: We went to Italy three or four times together. We went to Australia three times together. I even went alone to Australia after my husband died.

I: Would you consider retiring in Italy?

R: I love Toronto, I would not leave it for any place. What we have in Toronto I have

not seen anywhere. I have been to England and France, Australia, Belgium. Nobody from Italy wants to come here today because they live well there but I love it here. The first day I came here, I liked it. I liked the conveniences, the running water in the houses. You could bathe everyday. The little towns did not have this. I love Italy because it is my homeland but the life here, you cannot lead anywhere else. Whoever speaks badly of Canada is sick in the head. There are people of every race here. They have all liked me, and I liked them. If you want people to like you, you have to be likable. If you care for yourself only, it is not good. My door is always open. Your grandfather always tells me to lock my doors or somebody is going to kill me. If they kill me, they kill me, I'm old anyway.

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

R: You see, yes, I am Italian so I respect my homeland, but I live in Canada so I have to respect Canada. I tell people that I am Italian but I like Canada. I have been a Canadian citizen since 1929. I got my citizenship the same time as my husband. My husband said that it was better to get it at the time so that we could travel together. I got my own card and I travelled. I love to travel. And I travelled a lot. My mother, in the old days, used to say that my legs were too long. When you are young, and you have your health, it is good to move around, before the [health] problems come. I don't have a lot of money. I have my pension. I just figure I better enjoy myself because when I die my children are going to argue over my possessions. "This is for me, this is for me," they will say. So I give my children things now, so that when I die there will be no arguments. My kids are good to me. My youngest daughter has a condominium in North Carolina. She takes me there in the winter. I went there two times this year. This year I'll be going to Florida with a friend. Why not! The last time I went to Florida I spent \$900 for airfare and a hotel.

My grandfather asked: When you go who pays--you, or your children?

R: Me. I pay. When I go to Carolina we go by car and we stay at my daughter's place but I like to pay for some groceries and stuff. As long as I have some money, I'm happy.

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

R: That depends on the Italians of the new generation. If a pride in being Italian continues, there will be a future, but if the new generation is split up here and there, there will not be. We can't count on new immigrants because there aren't any. It depends on the children of immigrants. If they don't take the responsibility of making the culture continue, then it will die. But if they join clubs like the Famee Furlane which I see on TV, they really care. They are united and organized. Lets face it, I can't deny that I am Italian but I live in this land. Who gives me food today? It is the Canadian government not the Italian government.