

Ethnic Group: Italian
Interview Number: 11
Date: Sept 8, 1993
Place: Toronto
Language of Interview: English

Biographical Details (Respondent, second generation Italian)

Sex: male
Age: 25
Place of Birth: Italy
Marital Status: unmarried
Religion: Catholic
Education:
Occupation: Accountant
Children: none

COMMENTS:

The respondent is a friend of mine. I decided to interview him because I had not yet interviewed a second generation Italian. I was interested in knowing how second generation Italians perceived their family and future as Italians. More importantly, I was interested in proving to my self that second generation Italians are somehow "losing" their culture. To my surprise, he knew a great deal about his family history. He knew details which I did not expect a second generation Italian to know. I am convinced, however, that he is not typical of second generation Italians. As the "man of the family" (his father passed away a few years ago), he appears to be more responsible than most men his age (25). He is committed to his nuclear family, grandparents, uncles and cousins. They seem very close.

The interview was conducted in a local bar/restaurant. We decided to go there for some coffee and dessert, expecting that it would not be very loud, since it was a weekday. We sat at a booth in a corner, but five minutes after we sat down, a baseball team come into the establishment. It was loud. We had already ordered dessert so we decided to proceed with the interviewing. In a strange way, the noise helped in that it assured us that nobody was paying attention to us. Had we been in a quiet place, we would perhaps feel more self-conscious of what we were doing, expecting that others would be curious.

I. BACKGROUND:

I: When did your parents come to Canada?

R: My dad came here in 1954 and my mother came in 1949, and she was 9, no, 8 years old, sorry. She came by boat, with her younger brother and my grandparents. My father came by plane. Basically, with his paesani (people from the same town). It was a propeller plane. It went from Italy to Iceland, to Greenland, to Newfoundland, where he saw snow falling and said, "Where the hell am I?" From there it stopped in Montreal. They were not sure if they were going to stay in Montreal but there was little for them there so they went to Toronto. They stayed in the airport in Toronto for a day but they got kicked out. They had the address of a guy so basically they stayed with this guy for a couple of weeks until my dad found his uncle. My mother came here as a child. That is why she speaks perfect English. She even went to high school here. That's why she doesn't have an accent. They settled in "Little Italy," in the Dufferin and Dupont area, a place she still owns, my grandmother owns, that is.

I: Your mother came with her family, but your father left his entire family back in Italy?

R: Yes, he was the oldest of 13 kids, although there were only 11 when he left. They needed money because after the war things had changed in Italy. Everybody had a

chance to buy land. They had to send money back to pay off the land, like my grandparents were doing. My dad's cousin, along with a couple of my dad's brothers left. Not everybody had to send money back but my dad got stuck with that, just as his cousin did. My uncle did not have to because by the time he came here, my dad was already getting married, things had settled down. My uncle has always been a party-er.

I: Eventually, did your dad's whole family come to Canada?

R: No, my dad had two younger brothers who came over and one sister but she moved back in 1983. The three oldest males came here, the rest are all in Italy. They still live in the same region in Veneto [Northern Italy].

I: Have you ever visited these relatives?

R: Yes, about half a dozen times since I was a kid. I have half a dozen cousins there who speak English very well. Most of them are very intelligent. They have very good instruction there. They get teachers from England. They speak it very well. My mother's family, all of them are here. She has two younger brothers. One of them was born here, one or two years after they arrived. They settled in Toronto right away.

I: What did they do before they came here?

R: My dad, primarily farming. He had a lot of carpentry skills, which he developed while farming, and that is what he did here when he came. When he was 21 he had an accident. A buzz saw cut his thigh open. He had to get that stitched up and he wasn't supposed to do carpentry any more. He was one of the few people who received some government benefits at that time. It was tough, being a young guy in a new country and you don't know what you are doing. You're away from your mother, can't ask your father for advice. You're stuck in the hospital. It was a tough start. He ended up learning English very fast, out of necessity. He took night courses, wrote a series of exams. He was gifted in mathematics. So he got accepted into George Brown College for dental technology. He ended up becoming a dental technician. He ended up working for one company for 30 or 35 years while he was running his own business on the side. It had a good cash market. A lot of people did not have dental insurance, and still don't--it costs a lot of money. He also had a 10% share of a lab that my uncle owns, which we still have.

II. PARENT'S MARRIAGE:

I: How did your parents meet?

R: They met in the hospital when my dad cut his leg with the saw. My dad was 21, my mother was turning 16. He was in a hospital room with a man who had the same name, Sebastiano. This man's wife lived in a flat that my grandparents owned. She [the wife of the sick man] did not speak English well so my mother went to the hospital with this woman, as an escort and translator. So my parents met in the hospital. They really just saw each other. When my dad was all healed, he went to visit the other Sebastiano at my grandmother's flat. When he knocked on the door, my mother answered. She showed him to the upstairs flat. My father told the married Sebastiano that there was a nice girl living downstairs. Married Sebastiano said, "Yes she is a nice girl, you should get to know her." And my dad ended up finding out where she worked, and he went to see her. The rest is history.

I: How old were they when they got married?

R: My mother was 20, and my dad was 26. They dated for five years. I don't know how much was known [they kept the relationship quiet] in the first year. My dad had to pay up a lot of money to my mother's younger brothers to keep their mouths shut. My grandmother was okay, she thought it was great, but my grandfather, he was typical Italian. He was not bad compared to some others but the first year he was tough. After that there weren't any problems, but there are stories. At first when my dad called and my grandfather picked up the phone, my grandfather would hang up on him. After that, it was okay.

I: So your mother worked before she got married?

R: Oh yeah, she went to high school with a couple of other paesani kids [people from the same town in Italy]. She went to "Secretary College" and got a diploma. She took courses after that, too. She worked for the ministry of housing I believe. Then she got married, had a couple of jobs so she could buy furniture for the house. My grandmother [mother's mother] was a seamstress. She worked in Yorkville for a long time.

My grandfather [mother's father] was a wood carver. He made furniture and art. He was a very talented individual but he was not the easiest person to get along with. I personally never got along with him. I was nice to him but when it came to politics and the war, I was never proud of what he did. He never killed anyone or anything like that but he had a very bad attitude, very right wing, Nazi attitude. He supported Mussolini. He had a lot of prejudices. He did not like British people because of the war. He did not like Americans because of the war... He did not like people from Turin because he said they were all pacifists there. He said stuff about the Romans, about the Sicilians. He did not like Jews. God forbid that my father was Jewish. Actually, my father's grandmother was Jewish, my dad's father's mother. There were a lot of Jews in Veneto. If you read the Merchant of Venice, there were many. The family is Catholic now... (talked about family involvement in WW II). When the war ended my father was eight years old.

My father spoke English well because he worked with Hungarians and Germans, and later Filipinos, and people from the former Yugoslavia, Greeks too. My dad had an accent though.

I: Do you speak Italian at home?

R: A few words in dialect, mostly to my dad. But otherwise I speak English. My mother and I speak 98 or 99% English now. When my grandparents [grandmother, his grandfather passed away on Christmas day] come around I speak Italian but even they understand English. I can have a whole conversation with my grandmother in English and it would not be a problem.

I: You were never forced to speak Italian? [Note: he speaks Italian, well.]

R: No, No. Maybe with my grandparents a bit, and going back to Italy a few times, and in school. My parents spoke Italian amongst each other. But they had to speak English outside the home. They had friends from different ethnic groups. They went to a lot of different weddings. They went to a Japanese wedding once, where they [the Japanese guests] wore kimonos. My dad was fascinated by the culture. My dad was one of the first Italians in Honey Harbour [cottage area]. Since then it got very popular but there are still few Italians. My parents were never part of the Woodbridge crowd or the Wasaga crowd [typical Italian]. My mother, too, has friends from all over. She played with a lot of Italian kids. But when you come to Canada when you are eight years old, you have your accent for the first few years but then you are more Canadian than Italian. A lot of people say that she does not look Italian [tall, light hair, blue eyes] but she does, because it depends on what part of Italy you are from. Italian is always Italian. My mother's mother had an Austrian last name. That part of the family came from Austria. We are a little bit mixed up. I'm six feet, and my cousin is 5'9" tall. We are the shortest. The male children are all over 6 feet. The young kids are 5'10", 5'11", and still growing.

I: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

R: I have an older sister. She's 30. She was born a year after my parent were married. No, they got married in 1961. She was born in 1963, and I was born in 1968. They planned on have three kids but after me they said "no more." My father was not a fan of big families, with 13 and being the oldest, he did not like it at all. It was a hassle. They had to deal with a lot of jokes. They would say, "Here comes the Liberato clan." They had a long line of kids just going to church or something like that. He was responsible for the younger ones, taking care of them. His sister was getting married and his mother was having another child. His father was in his 50's and his mother in her 40's and she was having another baby. He did not like that [social

pressure]. My grandmother got "told off" by a lot of people in town. They would tell her, "You have a lot of kids and there are people who don't have any, why don't you give a few away." She would tell them, "I have ten fingers which one should I cut off? They are all important, like my children." My father got along with his mother but they had their differences.

My parents wanted to have two girls and a boy. They stopped after they had me. I was sick a lot after I was born. And even after that when I was two and three years old I used to cry a lot at night. With us, my parents were really into a lot of different things. They would drive my sister to ballet classes and I played hockey from when I was five. My dad was a sports fanatic, all kinds of sports but hockey was his favourite. He was a Toronto Maple Leafs fan... My mother worked at a lot of part-time jobs. She likes to read about history and women's struggles in history... My parents got their Canadian citizenship a long time ago. Some keep their old citizenship. My mom has her old passport but she has her Canadian passport now.

I: Do your parents consider themselves Canadian rather than Italian? R: Yes, oh yes. This is their home. They would say, when we traveled back, "we're going home," but I heard my dad tell my grandmother once "this [Canada] is my home. I like it here. I'll go back [to Italy] to visit but I live here." My parents did not find it difficult to adapt to Canada. In terms of weather, Northern Italy is cold too. They like it here. They always say, "you don't know how good you have it here". [At times he speaks about his father as if he was alive today.]

III. SIBLINGS

I: I understand your sister is married. How old was she when she got married?
R: She got married in 1989. I was 21 and she was 27, and my brother-in-law was 28.

I: Is her husband Italian?

R: No, he is half Irish and half Ukrainian. His mother is a second generation Ukrainian from Saskatchewan, and his father is a second generation Irishman. Everything else is very similar in terms of religion and stuff like that, although that was not a consideration. They ended up meeting at a school, when my brother-in-law was student teaching. [His sister is a teacher.]

I: Was it a big "Italian wedding"?

R: There were about 200 people there. I worked at a banquet hall, serving Italian weddings, and there are some really tacky Italians out there. Then there are some, especially from Milan, who are so "snotty." There are some small weddings but there are still those who have their 450, 500 people. I was at one or two this year. But I find a lot have 250 or something like that. It is a 1980's Italian-Canadian thing to invite 500 people. People like to show off, and flash the bucks. You used to hear "love this..." and "love that..." but people are starting to realize that there are a lot of divorces taking place.

IV. ETHNIC GROUP VALUES

I: Did your parents mind that your brother-in-law was not Italian?

R: No, not at all. They did not consider it at all. One of my dad's younger brothers, my uncle, married a woman who was not Italian [from a French Canadian background but lived in Vancouver]. He is divorced now. But he married another lady of French Canadian background. So, for my sister, it was not a consideration. For some of my family members it was. But they did not mention it when my sister was around.

I: Is it important that you marry someone who is Italian?

R: No, hell no. I want to marry Cathy Ireland, the "Sports Illustrated" swimsuit model (joke)... No, I never thought about it.

I: How about Catholic?

R: No, not really. I don't care, as long as they are not fanatics about it. It does not bother me. I find if anything, if it were Christian, like Protestant...it would be less different. I could be ignorant about this but Jehovah's Witnesses, or one of those weird Christian groups that have Bible meetings, it is a little too weird for me. I don't go around praying and carrying a cross. I follow some traditions, on Good Friday I don't eat meat, but I don't do that every Friday.

I: Do you go to church regularly?

R: I go in the summer, up North, when I'm up there. For a guy my age, I think I go more than the average. Some priests are great to listen to. I feel sorry for some of them because we pick on them a lot. I defend the Catholic Church in many respects but on some things they are wrong. I respect them. I learned this from my father. He had a friend who was a priest. My father always got along with priests. He just disliked the monks. All they did was pray. During and after the war the priests helped us a lot. Of course there are some bad apples. Take the good with the bad but they help people. Praying is good but actions are louder than words. I went to a Catholic, all-boys high school. I learned this stuff there. The priests were really great guys. They were normal people from a variety of backgrounds. Sure, they wanted us to become priests. But the mothers, especially Italian mothers--you go home and tell your mother that you are going to become a priest, your mother would rap you over the head. They'll say, "I did not give birth to you, so you could waste all your knowledge on becoming a priest." That is what a mother would say. "Make something of your life. Find a nice girl and get married." I know my mother would say that. I find that grandchildren are very important. My mother is a modern woman but it is still important to her.

I: Does your mother put pressure on your sister to have children?

R: No. My sister just turned 30 so she has lots of time.

I: How many children would you want to have?

R: Probably around three or whatever, I always think that when I get married. Well, I don't picture myself having any boys. I can't see myself being the father of sons. I can see myself having a nice daughter. You know how people say that they are scared of their own shadow. I don't consider myself a wild guy but if I had a son--no, I don't want a son. My pride or my attitude towards some stuff, it disturbs me.

I: Do you think that raising a daughter would be different?

R: Well, y' know, I know people who say, "when I have a daughter, I'm going to chain her with lock and key." I'm not going to be like that but I do have an intimidating build. I am not going to keep boys away from her, but then again, it depends what they look like, especially if he looks like a drug addict. If I had daughters, I would get them into sports and self defense. I would want them to look like me. Tall, dark hair, and hopefully the same eyes [blue]. I would want them to drive boats...

Some of them [older generation] want you to marry within your own community, from a group of paesan [same town in Italy], but that is ridiculous. Like the Famee Furlan club. They are all from one region. [He is half Friulan. One of his parents is from the region of Friuli and one is from the region Veneto]... That is why I'm not a member of those types of clubs [regional youth social groups] any more. I find they are very political, there is always a power struggle even among the young members. I never became a member of the Friulan club, although I am half Friulan, but I was part of the Trevisan club (from Veneto region)... The older members used to want us to do more cultural things, Italian cultural things. Well, listen, we wanted to do Italian-Canadian cultural things. Society here is different. They fail to see that we are not only in a different country but also in a different time. They don't do that stuff in Italy anymore. I find that in the older generation, in my mother's generation, I'm not saying that they are always wrong but they are not always right either. Maybe we do use vehicles too much, but there are not too many places that you could walk to. I

need a car. Granted there are people who take the car to go to a corner store but I find that there is a power struggle with the younger generation. It is a game. They [older Italian men] want the feeling of control. They can't get it anywhere else so they have to get it over their wives and kids. That is the problem. I personally don't get along with them [older Italian males]. They keep saying how tough they are. Sure, they are used to telling their wife off, but it does not work this way. You grab a lady by the arm, she'll kick you nowadays, and rightly so. Although I'm a big guy, I'm against violence. You can't use violence, and I don't mean just physically, even mentally. I'm not a feminist either. I believe in middle of the road. I don't like extremes...

I: Do you see yourself as a typical Italian today?

R: No. When I meet girls, they say, are you Greek? With my dark hair, people have asked if I am Calabrese (Southern Italian) or Sicilian. No. Not too many guess that I am Italian, but some do. When people ask, what is your name? But today you don't find many Luciano's, and Marco's. Many have non-traditional Italian names. I was born "Pasquale," but they changed my name officially to Patrick...(talks about his family name). Second and third generation Italian, we like to maintain our Italian background. We are very proud. It is big in the States too, and there it is 4th and 5th generation. Just that people try to Anglicize names and stuff. They do this to get into certain industries, because other than in the big construction companies, there are few Italians. I think that there are still some big firms that are dominated by Anglo-Saxons and some Italians have a hard time penetrating these groups. I don't have a problem fitting into non-Italian groups. I don't think that I have that macho Italian attitude. Well, maybe I do when it comes to water sports. No, it's more of a California attitude. I like to water ski. So I guess I'm not a typical Italian kid who has his dad buy him a sports car so I could beat the hell out of it. I purchased my own car. But my parents have spoiled me. I have always had a house to live in [his parents' home] and a vehicle to use, and a cottage. My family is really into that stuff...

I: Your uncle got a divorce. How did the family react to the divorce?

R: It really did not upset many people. It was really not his fault. My aunt left him. This was back in 1984. She was having an affair with a man who worked for my uncle. She ended up getting pregnant and having two kids with the guy after they were separated. He [his uncle] was a wild guy, so I'm not going to put all the blame on my aunt but I have respect for him. My uncle is such a funny guy, always joking, but you can tell he was hurting inside. But he got married again at the age of 49 (in 1989). The wedding came as a surprise to everyone. I respect him. He never hurt anyone...(told stories about his uncle).

I: Are you close to your cousins?

R: Yes, very close, especially on my dad's side. On my mother's side, not really, because her younger brother, well, we don't get along with him very well. My mother's youngest brother (the other brother), my uncle, his oldest kid is 11, I believe, and the youngest is 6 or 7.

I: How often do you see your father's side of the family?

R: Almost every week. My cousin, I see all the time. When we were teenagers, and even after high school, for a few summers, we hung out in nightclubs together all the time, and at the cottage, even with her younger brother. Their father, one of my father's younger brothers [the third oldest] is a character too (talked about his uncles). They are great guys. Even my mother thinks so. With my uncles, they love each other, but from the day they met, they have been like cat and dog. One year on my dad's birthday, my mom baked him a cake. My uncle had never seen a cake so round that he rolled it down the stairs, my mother was crying (jokingly). They cut each other up so much. They have always gotten along well. I remember when my dad passed away, my uncle was probably the one who cried the most. They are all characters. When I'm doing something, my uncle says, "why are you doing it this way, you gotta do it that way."

I: What do you think is an ideal age to get married?

R: Today? It all depends. It is hard to pin point. Assuming the person is all together, you have to finish school, and have all the education you want. You must have the job you want. You have to think of the future. Whoever said that love makes the world go round was wrong. You are asking an accountant, so I'll tell you that money does. Assuming you are financially stable, I would say you must be at least 25. You already hear about divorces among people in their early thirties, and late 20's. I don't see any problem in somebody waiting until their 30's to get married but I don't think that people should wait too long. I see some yuppies having this problem. They had to have their expensive car, so they started having kids in their late 30's. When they are 45 and 50 years old the kids go through stuff. You can't keep up with the kids. It is not like 60 is old anymore but... My cousin got married when he was 23 or 24. He had been working for a while. He was a mechanic, and doing well. In a way, they rushed a little bit. They did not go out much. They met each other, they liked each other, that's it. They never experimented, or even went to nightclubs. I don't want to cut them up but there are a lot of things to do before marriage.

I: What do you think is the most important thing to the Italian family?

R: In 1993, things are different than say 1988 or 87. Things are changing. They want us to get married. Many parents still have kids living at home with them who are 35 and 40. They want to get them married. I don't blame them to a certain extent. People are very, very picky. I know some women who say they have to marry someone with cash. They want us to stick together [as a family], there is no doubt about that. You gotta get married and you gotta get a house. A lot of pressure is placed on us... Most of us young people feel a sense of pride in independence and doing things on our own. There are those young tough Italians who dropped out of school expecting their parents to support them all their lives. They are a dying breed, and my attitude towards them is "too bad." They are unemployed and lack the skills. They had things too easy. They don't appreciate the little things. I have been given a lot by my parents, but anything that belonged to my dad, I take care of. (Complains about the welfare system today: "We have always worked hard"... Dislikes affirmative action, talked about people cheating the system, and a lack of values.)

R: Italians like to save their money. That's one of the differences between the older and younger generations. They don't use credit cards and they don't like loans. They used to save all their money and pay off a house right away. That does not exist anymore. They don't realize that you need a mortgage... You have to have credit cards to get credit. Older generation Italians don't understand that. The economy is not what it used to be.