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Italian Women and Girls: Interview with Rose Calandrelli by Carmela Santoro

Rose Calandrelli

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NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Rosa Calandrelli

INTERVIEWER: ____________________________

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 21, 1975

SUBJECTS COVERED:

Life in Italy
Education in Italy
Trip to America
Feelings about being American
First impressions of U.S.
Pros and cons of life in America
Work experiences
Recreation
Q: Tell us a little about your life in Italy.
A: I was from a large family, the oldest of six children.  
I remember wars. We went through three wars. Spain with 
Mussolini and Franco. I remember when Mussolini invaded 
Somalia, 1937 maybe. And World War II.

Q: Where did you live?
A: Right in the city of Naples. During the war we left the city 
to live in a village which was hit by the American bombers 
more than Naples was. Our house was half destroyed. Schools 
were closed for almost a year. I have horrible memories of 
that time. In general life was beautiful despite the war, 
because of the family. I had a wonderful father who emphasized 
the importance of education. We are all educated now. He 
managed to send all six of us to college. I have two sisters who 
are teachers. I have brothers who are educated also.

Q: What did your father do?
A: My father was a dollmaker. He managed. He continued during 
the war, but there was a time when nothing functioned in Italy.

Q: What did your mother do?
A: She stayed home. Italian women didn't work at that time.

Q: What was the name of the village?
A: Courti. When the Americans arrived it was the worst battle 
ever fought in Italy. We were caught in the middle. It was 
towards the end of the war.
Around 1943,44. Italy signed the peace before the Germans. A lot of Italian girls and boys were taken prisoner. In concentration camps. I saw all this. Remember nightmares after the war was over. One day I was shopping with an aunt of mine for food and I was caught between the fascists and the patriots who was before the end of the war. The famous three days in Naples. This was when Naples arose against the fascist government. We were waiting for the Americans. Inside the houses. The Germans would take the men so my father and brother could not go for food. My mother had just had a baby. I was caught in a battle. I saw machine guns. I remember a pregnant women dead in the street. I got home finally, I don't know how. The Germans were in the middle of a bridge fighting. We ran. We escaped. I was in a state of shock. I told my father while I was crying that if I saw another war I would kill myself. It's all over now. When I heard of wars here, like Vietnam, I sympathized with the people. The Americans didn't want the war because of their relatives, boys, fighting. I sympathized with the Vietnamese because I know what it is like to have a war in your own country.

Q: Tell me about your life there.
A: I didn't know any other form of government before that than the one I was born into. I took the dictatorship of Mussolini for granted. On Saturdays we had to wear the uniform.

Q: How many years did you go to school there?
A: Until I finished college. I have a doctorate degree in languages from the U. of Naples. All my education was in Italy. With a limited interruption during the war.
We went to school orderly, like your fire drills, during the raids to get an education.

Q: What did you do for fun?

A: Nothing, there was no television, telephone. For two or three years—not even electricity. We use to go to bed very early in the winter. When we were children we use to play soccer in the streets. No organized recreation like here at school.

Q: You attribute that to the war?

A: Yes, because now it is different.

Naples and the rest took a long time to rebuild. All was destroyed. There was more destruction after the Americans arrived then with the Germans in the north.

Q: When and how did you get to this country?

A: I came in 1953.

Q: Were you married?

A: In 1952 in Naples. Because of the immigration laws he had to come here (my husband) and send for me.

Q: Was he an American citizen then?

A: Yes, in 1953. In 1947 he came to the U.S. We grew up together in Italy. He came with his family. Five years later when he became a citizen, he returned to Naples and married me. Then after 8 months he sent for me. I came alone here. It was so sad to leave Naples. The family.

Q: Did you come by ship?

A: Yes.

Q: Were there lots of others like you on the ship?

A: I was with lots of other passengers.
I remember the whole family waving goodbye.

Q: You are the only one of your family here?
A: Yes, in Naples or Rome. My parents are dead now. My father died suddenly so I couldn't get there. He died 17 years ago. My mother died two years ago. But I had a chance to see her before she died. I have been back five times to Italy. The first time I went back after 8 years. I went back with my two children. I stayed four months. I was happy to go and happy to come back. The trip was good for me. Naples was still home for me until I went back. I realized that my sisters and brothers had married and my home was here. I became more adjusted to here after the trip.

Q: When did you become a citizen?
A: Three years after I got here, 1956. I knew that my life would be in this country. I still feel love for my country. I instill in my children for love of Italy.

Q: When you went back to Italy did your sisters see you as an Italian or as an American?
A: I think as an American because of the years. They told me I was a little different. My ways. I remember the first day when the siesta took place, I had forgotten about it. Life here is so hectic. That was the first change they saw in me.

Q: In terms of seeing yourself how do you?
A: I think as an American. I'm sorry to say this because I love Italy so much. But this is the country where I worked for the first time. The twenty years here are the years of my maturity.

Q: To you what is it to be Italian/American?
A: My way of thinking, the habits of working, getting up early
in the morning. American life is hectic. There are two different phases in my life. I was happy as a girl growing up in Italy. As a woman I am happy here. I think I will remain an Italian all my life, perhaps the values of my parents. I feel American because I work in an American environment.

Q: Is Italian spoken at home?
A: Yes. I speak Italian to my children. They are quite fluent in Italian. Our conversation is bilingual. We speak grammatical Italian.

Q: What were your impressions of the U.S.?
A: I thought N.Y. was beautiful. But when we arrived in was in November, foggy, ugly buildings. I was disappointed. Now I love to visit N.Y. I wouldn't live there, but I love it. The first impression was horrible. I would have loved to see a port like Naples, with Mt. Vesuvius. Instead I saw an ugly port. It was cold. I love the sun of Italy. Here it was already cold. I was very unhappy to be here.

Q: Was your husband in Providence?
A: Yes. He met me in N.Y. We drove back to Providence.

Q: What was your impression of Providence?
A: Do you want to know the truth? It was awful. I was used to Naples. I felt confined in Providence. I used to go the theatre a lot during the war. Even when times were bad. Here there was no cultural things here. The only thing I liked was the department stores. Big. One thing I noticed was a lot of food in the houses. Here meat every day. Otherwise very ugly. Providence is still ugly. No culture. You have to go to Boston or N.Y.
I live in Cranston now. At the beginning it seemed so quiet. I felt so isolated. No traffic. I was used to the enormous traffic of Naples. Now I go back and I'm scared.

Q: What do you find most gratifying of the U.S.?
A: The chance we have to work. This is not possible in Italy. Even if a college graduate is overqualified here he can still find work. Then the freedom. I grew up under a form of government where we could not speak freely. I remember only a little of the republic. Everything you read was under control. You can say anything you want. You don't get arrested for what you say here. I grew up seeing famous writers sent into exile for what they wrote or said. I try to instill in my students this thing.

Q: Is there anything that you've been disappointed in?
A: Just the limited cultural life in Providence. And the adjustment of not knowing the language was more so than I had thought it would be. The language I studied in school was Spanish. I didn't have friends. I didn't understand the radio. I didn't understand the newspaper. Especially the headlines. I had trouble with the dictionary. The biggest disappointment was with Italians here. They were so different. I was used to a friend. All educated. We used to hold interesting conversations. I couldn't even understand, they spoke in their own dialect. Even those from Naples, we had nothing to talk about. I was boring to them as they were boring to me. They were interested in other things. I was so disappointed. I was not a snob. A lot of people were from villages and didn't go to school there or here.
I probably would never have associated with them in Naples. This was a time when I needed the most help from my people and they didn't even know the help was needed. Also many of the people had relatives here. I was alone.

Q: How did you learn English?
A: I decided the only way to learn it was to go to school. I could learn the rules of grammar but never the fluency alone. I went to Central. They had a special program for foreigners. A wonderful teacher, Mary Reynolds. She taught me a lot of things about the U.S. I was not enrolled in any grade. I had to keep the same hours as the other students. I had no children then. At first I was afraid to go alone to Providence. Then I told her and I wanted to work. Through Central I found a job at a library. I walked to Brown from Central. I remember that the person wrote she understands me, but can't speak too fluently. It was only six months since I had been there. They asked me to start immediately. I went home and told my husband that I had quit school and got a job. Then I started loving this country, the moment I started working. Then I asked the people working there to correct my mistakes. They helped me a lot. I took some courses there. I saw another aspect of this country, the intellectual aspect that I was starving. It was in a different language, but it was still there. Now I have a library card from Brown. That was a turning point. Another turning point was after three years, my children were born, I always wanted to be a teacher. I quit my job. I took educational courses at R.I.C. with Ray Houghton. I did the student teaching here.
Q: How long have you been teaching here?
A: For ten years. I wanted to teach all my life. Finally I am teaching here in a foreign country. I did my student teaching in Latin and Greek because Italian was not offered.

Q: How many classes do you teach now?
A: Five. I tried Providence College evenings teaching, but I like to be with teenagers.

Q: Are you interested in politics?
A: Not really, but I like to read about it. Informed but not active.

Q: Do you consider yourself a member of a political party?
A: Oh yes, a democrat.

Q: How do you feel about labor unions?
A: I think it is important, a part of democracy. It is one way the working class can be helped. We have to be organized.

Q: Would you like to hold a political office?
A: Definitely not.

Q: Are you both of the same faith?
A: Yes.

Q: Are you a churchgoer?
A: Until last year. Now only on holidays. There are many issues that I don't agree with, but basically I'm Catholic. The sermons are out of the practical problems of life. I raise my children as Catholic.

Q: What do you do for recreation now?
A: Sometimes to Boston for concerts.
I like to read. My husband is in business, so we entertain his clients a lot.

Q: Would you still come to the U.S. if you had it to do again?
A: I don't think so because of my family. I feel like an orphan and miss my sisters. I never know if I'll see them again. It's too much suffering to leave your country. I'm well-adjusted now, but I don't think I would do it again.