Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Loreta Caputo by Maureen McGarry

Loreta Caputo

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Oral History Interview

with

Loreta Caputo

February 23, 1979
Cranston, R.I.

by Maureen A. McGarry

Interviewer: For my first interview I am interviewing a first generation Italian and I think to start off I'd like you to tell me your name.

Interviewee: Loreta Caputo, now.

Interviewer: What was it before you were married?

Interviewee: Loreta Forte

Interviewer: Loreta? Is it alright if I call you that? Where were you born in Italy?

Interviewee: It's a small town near Rome, the town is Arca its half hour away from Rome, its on the outside of Rome. Its a small town of 11,000 people.

Interviewer: What was it like growing up in that town?

Interviewee: For me at that time it was very beautiful. Very nice town. A small town, but with everything there and I had a lot of friends and we all started school and I had very nice friends. In my family I had two sisters and one brother.
Interviewer: Are you the oldest?

Interviewee: I'm the oldest, and then I have a sister, a brother and another sister and my mother and father. And after school, after I finished school, in the meantime while I was going to school, I was going to school to learn how to sew and at that time to make your own pattern also. You didn't just buy pattern and sew and I got a diploma for that. I was still in high school and then I was teaching girls how to sew. And I would sew for people just when I would feel like sewing, I didn't have to sew at that time. Like Italy is different from here. We owned our own house and the house there, paid, you don't have to pay taxes, no taxes there. So my father work was plenty for us to live comfortable.

Interviewer: What does your father do?

Interviewee: My father was an instructor for when they build highways. They had, they would make plans like where they have to build bridges, build roads, stuff like that, thats what he did.

Interviewer: Sounds like a good job.

Interviewee: Yes, he had a good job. My mother was home, she was always home for us. That was a big difference. Thats about it...I had alot of cousins. Very, Very close, families there are
very close. And cousins are like brothers and sisters there and I had a lot of them. My father was, they were eleven children in his family. My mother was four. Two boys and two girls. And then I was twenty years old. No, I was seventeen years old when my father came here for a visit because he had seven, he had five brothers here and two sisters, so he came for a visit and his brothers and sisters wanted him to bring his family here because they would say here there was more opportunity here. Over there only my father would work and as we would get older it would be harder for him if he brought us here it would be easier for him. We would have job, we would go to work and it would be easier for him. So he was supposed to come home three months and every time it was time to come home he would write to my mother. He wanted my mother to come here and then eventually she had to give in. He was here two years before we came and there was the battle because my mother had the whole family there and we did not want to come here...I didn't want to come here especially.

Interviewer: No, I can imagine that, you must have had all your friends and everybody...

Interviewee: Everybody there. The whole family, my grand-
parents, aunts, uncles everybody and I had and uncle there that was like a second father to me. An uncle that I used to live with him. Also, I could go back and forth. They were well-to-do. They were really millionaire. And I would be with them and travel all over, I went all over with them. In the summer I would go one month to a resort, summer resort and in the winter, not in the winter, in September we would go in the mountain. So that was two months a year that we would go away and I didn't want to give that up.

Interviewer: How come you had to go? Because the rest of the family was going?

Interviewee: Well my father was here and my mother didn't want to come but she had no choice because he said I want you just to try you come here and if somebody doesn't like it, some of the children we will pack up and go back, but I want you to at least try. So after two years my mother said O.K. So it took three years all together. Ya know it took one year after my mother said O.K. to go thru all the channels the papers to come here and I didn't want to come. So I wrote to my father and I told him that I would stay there with my aunt and uncle and he said to my mother, "If Loreta don't
come then nobody will come."

Interviewer: Oh, is that because you were the first born?

Interviewee: The oldest. He wanted the whole family to be here together. He didn't want to break up the family. So I, my brother, my sister, they were much younger they wanted to go. They thought America it was a big thing. So I decided I don't want to be responsible for the whole family. So I said I'd come, then if I don't like I will go back and this is what we did. We came and I didn't like it. I didn't like it for one reason, for many reasons but the worst one was that I couldn't understand no English at all. I couldn't read, I couldn't write. Everything was different from the food to the weather to the people. Everything, the style and it took a lot to... After two months we went to work California Artificial Flowers. Then after awhile I was getting sick because I didn't want to stay here. We decided we'd all go back but at that time my brother, my sister were already going to school and five-six months had already passed and they were starting to understand English. They were starting to make friends here.

Interviewer: How old were they?
Interviewee: My sister was twelve the other was fifteen
and my brother was fourteen.

Interviewer: Yes it would be easier for them.

Interviewee: It was for them and they made friends here, which they left friends and relatives there but it didn't mean that much to them because they could adjust very well. A lot better than I did and so when we decided to go back no one wanted to go back but my mother and me and it was a big burden. Just for you we have to go back and I said I'll go back alone. My father said all, we all go back or none of us.

Interviewer: He wanted to keep you all together.

Interviewee: He wanted to stay together. So I decided I couldn't go back... then I was in the middle I didn't want to leave them and I didn't want to take them with me there, I didn't know what to do, so I ended up staying.

Interviewer: Can you describe the town that you lived in in Italy a little bit? Houses, gardens things like that.

Interviewee: Yes, the house we had, had twelve rooms, a twelve room house which was my grandparents, my grandparents, it was my grandfathers, my fathers parents home. It was very modern, those days, But then with the time my father had remodeled the house. Which, over there
the house different than here. They made all brick and the floor, all ceraso floors mostly marble. Very, very big rooms and was a beautiful, beautiful house a big house...alot of land. We had alot of land, acres and acres of land which my father, when he came here he gave to some people to work the land. Because my father never worked the land, hey had all trees, all fruits, all kinds. I guess something like California. We had all kinds of pears, apples, grapes all that. So it was a really beautiful place. It still is. We still have it. That was the big thing too. The difference of the homes over there and over here.
The town was a very quiet town but like I say, we had everything. Everybody knew everybody and everybody liked everybody, that how it is in a small town. The big city is similar to here. But small town the people are closer and the relative...when it comes to third forth cousin in Italy they still consider themself like first cousin. See, family never ends in Italy you just walking the street and say, "Thats my cousin" and people say thats your brothers, sisters... No thats my fourth, fifth cousin. Uncles and aunts, theres no end for that.
Interviewer: Did one town have their own church?

Interviewee: We had a beautiful church. In fact our church is the same church as, what would you say, replica?, of St. Peter in Rome and the churches name is St. Peter Paul, right in the city of Arca. The bib, big square, its beautiful with antique inside and all the chandeliers and everything. Its really beautiful the church and then we had three big high school, that we used to have other people come there, like other little towns. They would come to our city to come to our school. We had a court... we had a jail. Which alot of small town in Italy wouldn't have, like you say here, this is Cranston, this is a town but they don't have their own court their own jail, like we had that. The town is quite beautiful.

Interviewer: It sounds like its beautiful.

Interviewee: It is. We had alot of schools. We had three elementary schools and we had three big high schools, three floors.

Interviewer: So, you said you went to school to become a seamstress to sew. Does everyone go to school to learn...

Interviewee: That was separate, not in the same school. See, you just go, thats a trade. After school you go to this other place, its like a trade
to learn. That's like you want to be an interior decorator. That's separate. That's not just in the school. In Italy 8-3 is just school.

Interviewer: Is that math, reading...?

Interviewee: Math, reading, no cooking, no nothing that is separate. Anything you want to do, that's separate.

Interviewer: I see. Were you required to go to school right through high school?

Interviewee: You could start, to stop school when your elementary.

Interviewer: That's different than here.

Interviewee: That's right, it is. Most of the kids, this is what they do. They always have some place to go, something to do. Because after the school they would go to a shop, boys they could go to a tailor shop, and they would have ten boys there to learn. They start with sweeping the floor. Gradually they would, or they want to be a hairdresser, they would start to go when they were eight.

Mrs Lisi: In other words, they wouldn't have to go to school until they were sixteen like a regular high school. They weren't obliged to go?

Interviewee: In Italy you finish school when you are twelve.

Mrs Lisi: Oh when your twelve.
Interviewer: Over here, sixteen.

Mrs. Lisi: So if they want to leave school at twelve they could go to a trade school?

Interviewee: Right. Twelve in Italy is equal to High school here. Because when we came over from Italy we took a test. My sister, she was in the fifth grade and that was equal to high school here. What is that twelve? See they put her in that grade. See, anybody that comes from Europe, they will give a test and then whatever your score is, they will put you. That's how they put you in the school. When I came I was twenty. I went to night school here.

Interviewer: For sewing?

Interviewee: No just to learn to read English. If I wanted to teach sewing I could but you have to have a special... a few months you had to go, because that's what I wanted to do but I couldn't talk English, couldn't read, couldn't write I couldn't.

Interviewer: When you came here where did your family live in Providence?

Interviewee: Gesler Street.

Interviewer: Is that what is considered Federal Hill?

Interviewee: Right.

Interviewer: Were the people on Federal Hill, did they speak Italian?
Interviewer: Where did you work?

Interviewee: Cal Art and we would take a bus. Take a bus one year. Two buses, one Atwells Ave. downtown. Downtown, take another bus that would take us right in front of the shop. For one year, then I got a ride from someone that work there, with the car. That was better, alot better. I couldn't get used to the weather. My town is warm. The south. Sometimes in November-December you still go out with jacket or sweater, no coat and we would get a beautiful new coat for Christmas. But we couldn't wear because it was too warm. So that was a big difference. No snow, no rain...

Interviewer: Especially New England weather.

Interviewee: Uhhhh, I'm still not used to it. The most different part was the understanding and the talking, speaking part. That was hard, it still is.

Interviewer: Did you find any prejudices from the other people?

Interviewee: No they were wonderful, really wonderful. The place that we work, it was three floors and some of the girls, which there were Italian, French, all mixed, all nationality. They were wonderful to me and my sister. They would
came to the third floor from the first to see these two Italian girls. They wanted to see what they look like. They heard so much about us and the breakfast...when the coffee man came we didn't move. We didn't know what to do, they would bring us coffee and pastry. They would never take the money. Twelve o'clock the bell ring. We didn't know what that was all about and they would come there and tell us to stop. The owner...when we came '58 it was a bad time. Not much work. We went to the office to get a job, they wouldn't hire because they told us they were laying off their girls.

Mrs. Lisi: How did you happen to go there, Loreta? Did someone...

Interviewee: We were going to school this guy met us and said why don't you try Cal. Art? And we did. Try a few, couple of more months because we have our own girls, they work here long time.

Mrs. Lisi: You were able to speak some English by then?

Interviewee: No, this was true this guy "omenic..."

Mrs. Lisi: So you went there not really knowing how to speak...

Interviewee: No this guy.

Mrs. Lisi: Did he go with you?

Interviewee: Yes he took us there cause he worked there
and he was told to bring us back two months because their own girls were out. I was amazed with the place, it was beautiful. That was the first thing I fell in love with that shop so beautiful. I said, can I walk around and look. He said sure. As I was walking around there was an artificial fireplace and I'm looking, that fireplace reminded me of the one I had in Italy because we had no fireplace, nothing here. It was a very cold house. And I started to cry and this man came across and said, I guess, what's the matter? in English. Then the guy that took us there, he came and said to the guy in English that we had just come from Italy and that we were looking for a job. That was the owner, Mr. D., he said "Where you come from?" in Italian. I told him and he said, "Your my neighbor, in Italy, I come from Italy." I didn't know he was the owner. He said, "Would you like to work here?" I said this is beautiful, it reminds me of Italy. He said, "Why you crying?" I said the fireplace reminded me of the one I used to have in Italy, but mine was real. He said "Would you like to work here?" I said I'd love to but they wouldn't give me a job. He said, "Come in Monday morning and you start working and that's how I got the job."
Interviewer: How long did you work there?

Interviewee: I worked there five years and then they had to slow down the work and that's when I went to work an optical place, Universal Optical. That's where I met my husband.

Interviewer: I would like to ask you about your Italian customs, holidays and celebrations. Do you still carry them on?

Interviewee: The holidays we had there we had here. We still carry them on. Christmas was completely different over there; it's more holy. Not as material like here, more novenas, feast with the church and procession we had the whole manger. This is done all in real. All life people. The whole place. We start a month before. The whole month of December. We start December first. This is my town and we would have the whole play, Mary and Joseph, the whole thing with real people. It's really beautiful. Then with the cooking, baking, all that. That's how we celebrate Christmas. The gifts, there's no gifts at Christmas its January sixth. It's called Befanna. This is when Santa comes, January sixth. That's all over Italy not just my town. But it's not as much as here. Its mother, father, the children get a lot of gifts, not as much as here. Not as commercial as here.
Interviewer: How about Christmas Eve?

Interviewer: Christmas Eve is big. Bigger than Christmas. That's when the whole family gets together, no meats.

Interviewer: Is this your cousins, when you say your whole family?

Interviewee: All my cousins. Some of them they live in Rome, Milan. We didn't all live that close and they would all come always. No matter where they live. Even if they were in the army they would get a special permission to come home for Christmas and we always had Christmas at my grandfathers house. My mother and father. We used to be like thirty-five people that was children, grandchildren and some of the close aunts and uncles, that was two day feast. That was beautiful, singing and dancing. For twenty one years I never knew any heartaches. You know some kids... I was very happy. It was a happy time with friends, the families.

Interviewer: Was there any special custom you did on Christmas Eve, a tradition that you did every Christmas Eve?

Interviewee: You mean for food or....?

Interviewer: You can start with food.

Interviewee: The first thing we do is we all go to church.
That was always first, church before...

Interviewer: A special mass?

Interviewee: A special mass, all the neighbors and the families all go to church, then we come home that's when we start the celebration. I remember up to the time I came here we would write a special letter, not cards, they were letters we'd write to the one we loved most. My mother father and to my aunts, the one I like the most. You would write on your own. Write a letter and then you'd get up near the table one by one and read the letter. You'd put it under the plate so when I sat down at that table and after I finish eat I would read my letter, my brother would get up in our own words read how we feel about these people. That was a tradition and for two years we did that here. But then we felt a bit out of place because it was hard it was so different. A lot of the things we did, we didn't ever do here with our own families. That was one of our traditions. I don't know if anyone else did that. Debra did that in school because she has Italian in school. Did you do that letter? To me? I guess they have other places too. I don't know how it started, maybe my mother because we started when we were
very, very young and we kept it up until I was twenty.

Interviewer: Of all the holidays you do celebrate, which one is your favorite?

Interviewee: My favorite is Christmas. There and here it was always Christmas. I love Christmas here. Its one time of the year I am very very happy and I like the traditional way they have. I love to give. I love it all around. I'm very happy at Christmas time.

Interviewer: If you had the chance to do it over again would you come?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: It took alot out of me. Very, very hard, I had to work very hard at first to adjust. I'm not comparing material things, because its more its less what we had.

Interviewer: For my final question, do you consider yourself an American or Italian?

Interviewee: Well I will always be Italian, but after twenty or so years I would consider myself American here and now.