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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Cleo DeBenedetto by Debbie Rocchio

Cleo DeBenedetto
Emigration

Early years of settlement in America

Employment in America

Return to Italy

Ethnic identity

Comparison of life in Italy and U.S.
SUMMARY

The high points of this interview were in the discussion of Cleo’s transaction of moving from Italy to America. The first major problem that Cleo encountered was the language barrier. Cleo did not understand any English and the people she came in contact with did not understand Italian. Cleo felt that the language problem was the main cause of a difficult adjustment.

Cleo also felt uneasy about walking the streets of America. She felt that because the people here in America were not as friendly toward each other as those in Italy, in case of an accident, no one here in America would help. In Italy, because everyone is friendly and there is always someone around, it is a lot safer to walk the streets in Italy without the fear of being stranded.

Due to the fact that Cleo is not very confident in speaking the English language, her answers to some questions were short and not overly informative. In feeling this insecurity, the questions asked were put in simple form for easy understanding and to provoke a related response. In asking her reaction on politics, Cleo responded negatively. She said she was not interested in them and did not really understand them. It seems that the Italian population, especially the first generation, are anti-political. There are probably many reasons for this negative reaction which is a good area to explore. One possible explanation could be that there was so much political conflict in Italy between the north and the south that when the Italian people emigrated to America, they wanted to be free of political scandal.
Oral History Interview

with

Cleo DiBenedetto INTERVIEWEE

February 10, 1979
Home of Interviewee

by Debbie Rocchio Interviewer

INTERVIEWER: Cleo, could you please tell us what town in Italy you were from?

INTERVIEWEE: Femona, a small town in Rome.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to school out in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How do the schools out in Italy differ from those here in America?

INTERVIEWEE: Out in Italy, you go to school at 9:00am to 1:00pm straight through. We also went to school on Saturdays.

INTERVIEWER: When you got home from school, were there special chores you had to do for your mother?

INTERVIEWEE: When we came home we had to do our homework and housework. We had to help our mother and father.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of housework did you have to do?

INTERVIEWEE: The basic things like iron the clothes, wash the dishes, and other things that had to be done in the house. Sometimes we would even have to go to the store and buy things.
INTERVIEWER: Did you have any time for yourself as far as going out to play?

INTERVIEWEE: We had time after we helped in the house. We could only go out when it was light outside for as soon as it got dark we had to go inside. They did not want you to go out when it was dark.

INTERVIEWER: Were the people who lived in your town very friendly?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes! Because it is a small town, everyone is friendly. You have your cumadre, cupadre, paisans. They ask you if you want to go to their house for coffee. We played together when we were young kids. We are really close like a family.

INTERVIEWER: Did you always live in that town or did you travel from town to town?

INTERVIEWEE: No we stayed in that one town. The only time I moved is when I moved to this country.

INTERVIEWER: How does dating in Italy differ from dating in America?

INTERVIEWEE: Dating is the same there as it is here. If a boy likes you, he asks you to go out. If you like the boy you go out, if you don't you say no. You give him an excuse if you want to say no.

INTERVIEWER: Did your parents have to meet the boy first?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. The parents talk to the boy, see if he is a good boy and comes from a good family with a good occupation. They don't want any trouble in the family, that's why they ask these questions. They got to know where you are going out. You don't just say Ma I'm going out. Out there, everybody knows everybody.
They know the boys family and everyone is friends. If you know them, you don't have so much trouble. You don't have any divorce that way.

INTERVIEWER: When you got married, did you have a big wedding?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, we had a big wedding. We had about 200 people. There are usually about 50-60 people.

INTERVIEWER: Did you invite the people of your town?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. We invite the people in the town, our paisans, cumadre, and cupadre. Just like over here. But over here they are bigger and more expensive. Out there, the cumadres help pay for the wedding.

INTERVIEWER: How do you celebrate the Holidays. For example, Christmas.

INTERVIEWEE: We celebrate Christmas eve. A big meal in the night time. We get all together, my brothers, my father and everybody. It is a big event. Christmas is the same thing.

INTERVIEWER: When was it that you decided to come to America?

INTERVIEWEE: My husband could not find work in Italy. A relative over her in America wrote to my husband and said there was work in America. He said that if you don't find one job, you'll get another one and maybe someday you will find the one you want. So my husband came first. After about 2 yrs. me and my daughter came over, and we decided to stay because there was not much work in Italy, but there was work here. There were too many people in Italy and not enough land to work with.
INTERVIEWER: How did you get here from Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: I came by boat.

INTERVIEWER: How was the boat and the trip?

INTERVIEWEE: It's beautiful in the boat. I really enjoyed it. It was just like a city. It had everything bands, you could see a show, it had everything.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been in America?

INTERVIEWEE: Twenty years on Feb 5. I speak broken English because I went to school over there.

INTERVIEWER: Could you speak any English when you came to America?

INTERVIEWEE: Nothing! I remember when I went in the store I didn't know the money. When he asked me for the money I always gave him a big bill so he had to give me a lot of change. After a little while I learned.

INTERVIEWER: Were the people here patient with you?

INTERVIEWEE: On yes, they were very patient. I had a lot of friends who explained things to me. After a little while we try and understand. If they speak slowly I can understand but when they speak fast I have a problem.

INTERVIEWER: What part of America did you first come to?

INTERVIEWEE: We came right to Rhode Island.

INTERVIEWER: When you came to Rhode Island, did you rent a house or buy one?

INTERVIEWEE: We rented a house we stayed 4 years in the rented house. After the 4 years we bought this house.
INTERVIEWER: Your husband's job must have been a good one.

INTERVIEWEE: Well yes, but me and my husband both work. We saved a little bit of money to put down and now we still pay a mortgage. We don't mind paying this because at least we have a house now.

INTERVIEWER: How are the houses here in America different from those out in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Over here, you have all wood in the house everything is made of wood. Over in Italy you never see the wood in the house. They are all brick and cynder blocks. On the inside you'll find all marble. You'll never find anything like here. The houses in Italy are really beautiful. They are really different from the houses here. I don't understand why America is suppose to have all the money and they build houses like this. The houses out in Italy have a balcony which is very beautiful, with all marble on the floor.

INTERVIEWER: Did you own your own house when you were in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes we did and we still have it. My mother and my family are still living in it.

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone from your town in Italy settle here in Rhode Island?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Most of my paisans are in Columbus, Ohio and New Jersey.

INTERVIEWER: Do you get a chance to see them at all?

INTERVIEWEE: No, not at all.
INTERVIEWER: You mentioned before that you and your husband both work. What kind of work do you do?
INTERVIEWEE: I work with a dress maker. I make dresses.
INTERVIEWER: When you first came here, did you have any trouble finding work?
INTERVIEWEE: No. This is the first shop I worked at and I've been there for 20 yrs. The boss asked me if I had any experience in sewing. I did have experience so he gave me the job. I'm still working there. I never worked anywhere else. The boss is Sicilian and it was his mother and father that came here from Italy. He is very nice and speaks Italian so we understand each other.
INTERVIEWER: As far as the family is concerned, what is the role of the father.
INTERVIEWEE: The father works to support the family. My father worked at the railroad out in Italy and supported six children. He brought home the pay, and we lived well in Italy.
INTERVIEWER: What do you feel the mother's role is in a family?
INTERVIEWEE: The mother's job is usually housework; like cook and clean the house and everything else that has to be done around the house.
INTERVIEWER: Do your children have responsibilities around the house?
INTERVIEWEE: The children help the mother so when the children grow up they won't have any problem when they get married because they already know everything.
They learn everything before they go out of the house. You train them when they are small by letting them help the mother.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that your homelife is the same here as it was in Italy.

INTERVIEWEE: I do the same things here as in Italy because that is the way I grew up. This is the same way I teach my children. I also learned to cook in Italy so I cook the same way here.

INTERVIEWER: Do they have appliances such as washing machines out in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: When I went back to visit this year, they have everything like we do over here. Washing machines, dish washer, television, dryer, everything. When I go back to Italy to visit, they have everything we have, it's just the same.

INTERVIEWER: Do you miss Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Well I do miss it because I have family out there. I have an older brother out there that I really miss.

INTERVIEWER: What are your family's feelings about you moving to America?

INTERVIEWEE: They ask why we don't live in Italy. They tell me that we could live just as good there as here. They said that there isn't any more trouble and we could find work out there. I tell them I like America because my oldest daughter got married in America and my youngest daughter goes to school in America; we are settled here.

INTERVIEWER: When you first arrived here, did you feel that the people here disliked you in any way?
INTERVIEWEE: I felt funny because we didn't understand each other. You feel miserable because you want to ask something and they do not understand. After a little while we learned the language.

INTERVIEWER: Are you interested in Politics?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I really do not know anything about Politics. I'm not too interested in them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself to be a true Italian or an American?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't really know if I can answer this. I guess I would say half and half. It is really hard to say because I have a family over there and a family over here. I really feel that I am Italian. I really can not say too much about this.

INTERVIEWER: If you could go back 20yrs. and live your life over, do you think you would still come to America?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think over there, in Italy you live more comfortably because it is more friendly and you know everybody. Over here you stay in the house all day long because everybody has to go to work. If you want to go out at night you are afraid because somebody may push you down and nobody in the streets would help you because all the cars are coming too fast. Out in Italy, you do not have to worry about that. It is the same thing because there are a lot of cars, but everyone in Italy are friends. Someone is always in the house in Italy, but over here, no body stays home. Out in Italy in the small
INTERVIEWER: When you first came to America were you frightened?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I wasn't afraid because we were young. The only big problem was the language. I could not explain anything so you feel funny. But everything worked out with time. It would be the same thing if you went to Italy and did not understand the language. You would feel like a stranger.

INTERVIEWER: Would you have felt better coming to America if you had studied the English Language?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, because language is a big problem. I remember when my husband went to work and my daughter was small, I went to the store to buy bread. I felt funny going, but I went because I needed the bread. I asked how much, but I asked it in Italian. He said 20¢ or something like that. I give him a ten dollar bill and he had to give me change back because I did not understand. The only thing I had trouble with was the language barrier, nothing else.

INTERVIEWER: Did your husband have problem with language when he came?

INTERVIEWEE: No, because he had a lot of relatives out here that helped him. They helped him find a good job and he was all right. If you look around, you will find someone who can speak Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live when you first come to Rhode Island?
INTERVIEWEE: Vintage St. off Broadway. The Broadway part of Federal Hill. We went to Federal Hill because everyone was Italian over there and you have no problem.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you find different here as compared to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, the clothes are different. Out in Italy we wear a lot of skirts with a pleat in the front. You never find them over here and they are beautiful. The length is a little longer over in Italy too. The shoes are different too. Out in Italy you are always dressed up where over here it is more casual. I see a lot of jeans out here. Jeans are only worn in the house when we are doing work. When you go out you have to be dressed up. When we came out here, we brought some clothes from Italy to wear here. A lot of people here like the clothes because they are different. We have a lot of gold out there too.

INTERVIEWER: Is the gold here more expensive than that in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Well out here you have 14k gold, where as in Italy they have 18k gold.

INTERVIEWER: How is the weather out in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: It is usually warm. It gets cold in the winter time but never goes below freezing. We get some snow up north where I came from. It does not stay long, only about a week and then you have sunshine and beautiful weather.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to adjust to the weather over here?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, because we had so much snow when we came over here that it bothered me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you drive?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I drive. I learned to drive when I came out here. Because if you want to go to work, you have to drive. If you want to get out of the house, you have to drive. I like it here, but you have to get used to it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still celebrate the holidays here like you did in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, just like in Italy. People come over and we have a big dinner.

INTERVIEWER: What do you usually eat at Christmas eve?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, we start with the antipasto, soup, macaroni or lasagna, depending on what you want. Then we have meat like broiled lamb chops, then we have fruit, coffee and sweets.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any type of Italian food that is not available here in America?

INTERVIEWEE: No we have everything. No problem with the food. We have more food here in the winter time than in Italy. Because over here you get food from California. Out in Italy, if it is time for oranges, you have oranges, but if it is not the time, you do not get any oranges. Out in Italy we put a lot of food away in the cellar to try and save it for the winter time.

INTERVIEWER: Does Italy have markets like we do here?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. They have a big market just like over here.
They also have a lot of stands. The Americans brought a lot of culture to Italy. No matter where you go, you find everything American.

INTERVIEWER: Well Cleo, that was very interesting and I thank you very much.