Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Joseph Ferri by Donna Sawyer

Joseph Ferri

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NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Petri
INTERVIEWER: Donna Sawyer
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/21/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Ancestry
Parent and family
Life as a child
Present views and values
Personal family and life
Interviewer: Mr. F., you are a second generation Italian, is that correct?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you begin by telling me a little something about your ancestors, where they were from, what they did, and how and when they came to America?

Interviewee: Well, my father came over to this country from Pisa in Italy. He was about 19 years old.

Interviewer: Did your grandparents come over from Italy to America?

Interviewee: Then when my father was over here for a few years he sent to have his father come over to this country.

Interviewer: Where was his father, in Pisa?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: What about his mother or any other ancestors?

Interviewee: My father's mother died in childbirth.

Interviewer: Were you in contact much with your grandfather when you were young?
Interviewee: Oh Yes, he lived with us.
Interviewee: How old were you when he first came to live with you?
Interviewee: Well I was about four years old when he came to this country.
Interviewee: Do you remember any customs that he might have exercised that you could term typically Italian customs, when you were young?
Interviewee: No.
Interviewee: Any Traditions?
Interviewee: No, he really didn't have any other than he was a great man for mottos and sayings.
Interviewee: Can you think of any mottos that might stand out in your mind now that he used to say frequently?
Interviewee: Well there is so many but nothing of hand.
Interviewee: O.K. Let's see, What about your parents, did your mother work outside the home?
Interviewee: No she didn't.
Interviewee: No? She stayed in the home with the family, then.
Interviewee: Um hum.
Interviewee: What about your father? What did he do?
Interviewee: My father had a bicycle shop.
Interviewee: And where was that?
Interviewee: In Pawtucket.
Interviewee: When did your parents come over from Italy?
Interviewee: My father came over around 1907 and my mother came over around 1915 or 1916 when she was a baby.
Interviewer: Did they meet here in America?
Interviewee: Yes.
Interviewer: And where did they live?
Interviewee: In Pawtucket.
Interviewer: Your family life as a child, let's say, up until you were about eighteen, did your parents exercise any customs that might have been Italian?
Interviewee: No, my folks were very very modern. We were allowed to discuss things, but the final decision was always made by my father.
Interviewer: Do you consider that to be an Italian carryover?
Interviewee: I would think so.
Interviewer: Was there a strong Italian influence in your family, like did they refer back to Italian ways?
Interviewee: No, ... no they didn't.
Interviewer: Did they speak Italian in the home?
Interviewee: We spoke both languages.
Interviewer: Which was spoken the most, the Italian or the English?
Interviewee: If my grandfather was present it was Italian. To my father we spoke mostly Italian and to my mother it was always 100% English.
Interviewer: Do you think that is because your mother came over from Italy when she was very young?
Interviewee: Yes, she was educated here.
Interviewer: But she does speak fluent Italian.
Interviewee: Oh yes.
Interviewer: Where did you live when you were young?
Interviewee: In Pawtucket.

Interviewer: I assume you went to school in Pawtucket then. What subjects did you study?

Interviewee: I studied Latin, in High school, French, and Spanish in college.

Interviewer: O.K. What about chores when you were young?

Interviewee: We had a lot of them. I being the oldest had all the chores.

Interviewer: Can you tell me something about the different kinds of chores.

Interviewee: I did everything.

Interviewer: How many children were in your family?

Interviewee: Three.

Interviewer: Boys? Girls?

Interviewee: One boy and one girl besides myself.

Interviewer: Did they ever have any chores to do?

Interviewee: Well we lived on a farm and I had to feed the animals, milk cows, plow the land, pick grapes, and do all the farming.

Interviewer: Did you have the grape vines in you own yard?

Interviewee: We had al lot of them.

Interviewer: Can you tell me something about your home or land?

Interviewee: We had five acres. We had a seven room cottage and the rest was all land and gardens and grape arbors.

Interviewer: Did you find it difficult being and Italian?

Interviewee: As a child, yes. I am sixty-nine years old and when I was nine or ten we would get in
many a fight because in those days Italians were "waps" and "daegoes".

Interviewer: Can you think of anything you found difficult to do because you were Italian, like getting a job or something of that nature?

Interviewee: No not in getting jobs because I was very ambitious. But as I got older we were restricted from buying homes, we couldn't join clubs, in those days.

Interviewer: Was the religion stressed when you were young?

Interviewee: We had to abide by the Catholic religion but not in a radical form.

Interviewer: To get back to the jobs, do you remember what your first job was that you got paid for?

Interviewee: That I got paid for? Because I started to work when I was six in my father's bicycle store. Well, the first job I had was in a market, I was in my first year at college. I was paying my way through college and I worked in the meat department in a market in Pawtucket.

Interviewer: Now at the present do you feel it is difficult being an Italian?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to be more American or more Italian?

Interviewee: Well, American, naturally.

Interviewer: What do you think it means to be an Italian?

Interviewee: Well, it has a sense of pride. The Italian race has come a long long way. They have encouraged art, music, painting, politics, just
about anything. And I think the race has been a very progressive race.

Interviewer: What do you feel it means to be an American?

Interviewee: I have independence, freedom of speech, and I think all the nations in the world, up until a few years ago, respected us very highly.

Interviewer: Do you think there is any major differences now between being and Italian and being an American?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Do you speak fluent Italian yourself?

Interviewee: Yes I do.

Interviewer: Have you ever gone to Italy?

Interviewee: Once.

Interviewer: Did you visit any places that maybe your parents or your grandfather might have spoken of?

Interviewee: Yes, In the city or town where my father was born and brought up, the Leaning Tower was there. So, naturally we went there and to other cities as well.

Interviewer: Did you recognize anything that maybe your parents talked about?

Interviewee: Yes, the leaning tower was one thing. I guess that was about the only thing they ever talked about that was very impressive.

Interviewer: From what your parents told you do you feel that the Italy you saw was very different now?

Interviewee: No, it was like being in New England.

Interviewer: Really?

Interviewee: The climate and everything.
Interviewer: What would you say right now are the three most important things that you value and why?

Interviewee: Well, Health, Family, and security.

Interviewer: Do you feel that being an Italian and being influenced by Italian parents and grandparents has anything to do with these values?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: You don't think that being an Italian has anything to do with why you value the family so highly?

Interviewee: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: What do you think the Italians feel about the family?

Interviewee: The family is always very close, and the oldest one is usually the one who has the responsibilities and the father demands and commands respect.

Interviewer: Did you demand and command respect when you had your family?

Interviewee: No I didn't. We were all very close and we talked openly about everything. We discussed everything and I was very pliable.

Interviewer: Did you exercise any Italian customs in your family?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: What do you feel the role of the man is in the family?

Interviewee: Well he has to face all the responsibilities, and if he faces the responsibilities I feel he should be the one to make all the decisions.
Interviewer: Do you think that that is typically Italian?
Interviewee: No, I think that it is plain common sense.
Interviewer: Didn't the Italians favor that highly?
Interviewee: Maybe, but I think that it is only a natural sequence.
Interviewer: What about the roles of women in the family?
Interviewee: Well the mother has to be respected and um...
   (long pause)
Interviewer: As far a jobs or whatever?
Interviewee: Well I think the mother should be in the home,
especially when the children come home.
Interviewer: So you feel the man should work and the woman
should stay home.
Interviewee: That's right.
Interviewer: Do you feel this might have anything to do
with your Italian background?
Interviewee: No I think that it is just common sense.
Interviewer: What about the children in the family? What
roles do they have in a family as children and
then as adults?
Interviewee: I have always told my children that I don't
expect too much from them. I always want them to
do their very best they can do. And if one was
superior to the others it made no difference,
as long as that one child did as well as they
could do.
Interviewer: Did you stress religion in the family?
Interviewee: No, not radically. We talked religion. My
children were all brought up to follow the
rules of the Catholic religion. But we were
not radicals.

Interviewer: What are your views on your children dating?

Interviewee: I have always let my children choose whom they wanted to go with. I have confidence and trust in them that they would pick out good companions.

Interviewer: What about marriage?

Interviewee: The same goes for marriage.

Interviewer: As far as education, what are your feelings about boys and girls being educated? Do you feel that they should each be educated equally?

Interviewee: Yes I do.

Interviewer: O.K. Well, thank-you Mr. F. I appreciate your time for this interview. Thankyou very much.
In most cases, I had assumed, a second generation Italian was in very close contact with the Italian customs and traditions. My second generation interviewee seemed to exercise Italian views but would not attribute them to his being an Italian. Knowing the interviewee very well, I can say that a great deal that came out in the interview, and a great deal that did not, has a lot to do with his being an Italian. I can see a direct relationship between so many things he does and says with his being an Italian. I tried to bring out as many Italian views as I could in the interview but the interviewee would not respond in a truly open and honest fashion. I know for a fact that he was intimidated by the tape and he probably was so involved with the recorder that he could not relax enough to respond naturally.

As far as not attributing his views to being an Italian, I know he is a very proud man and he would like people to believe he was influenced by nothing except his own wisdom and common sense, which has lead to his success in life.