Federal Hill Project: Interview with Eugenio Milano by Maria C. Iadeluca - June 18, 1978 - TAPE 19

Eugenio Milano

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INTERVIEWER: How are you?

INTERVIEWEE: Fine, thank you.

INTERVIEWER: During the course of this interview with you, I would like to know about your life, the place where you were born. Where do you come from?

INTERVIEWEE: My town is Piedimonte Matese in the province of Caserta. A fairly nice place for those who live there and who want to stay there. But I was younger at that time and the town had little to offer. I moved to Germany, I went there to work. I had friends in Germany who had made a good living there. I worked in Germany; I made good money. It was very nice there, the environment was more European, more Italian. From Germany I came to America (my parents lived here, and my sisters, too).
Here in America I had to start a new life. To do this one comes to face many problems and difficulties; among them the most tragic one is a new language. When I arrived to the United States I spoke no English.

INTERVIEWER: Did you arrive here alone?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I came here with my wife and my daughter, our first daughter who was born in Germany.

INTERVIEWER: What made you prefer America to Germany?

INTERVIEWEE: It was not a question of preference. I like to travel very much. When I was single, I lived in France, too, and worked there. Then in Italy I married my wife and we went to Germany. Then my relatives here gave me the opportunity to join them here and, as I said, we came here. We were just starting our family then and we had not yet decided where we wanted to live.

When I first arrived to America I realized that here one can do many different jobs even if he does not specialize in them. For example, in Italy I was an electrician. When I went to Germany I was employed as an electrician because that was my trade. Here instead, I can try to be a carpenter, if I am willing to learn how to do this job. Here one can learn how to work; one finds the opportunity to do those things that he knows how to do and also those things that he can learn to do.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say is different for you here as opposed to seeing yourself as an immigrant in Germany?
INTERVIEWER: In Germany the Italian immigrant is accepted more. The Germans accept us and not only because we work for them. They like us; we add to their lives. Here in America the immigrant is looked down at. Everybody knows he is an immigrant. The Americans "si tengono alla larga" —they keep the distances— Even if you are in difficulties or have some problems, they don't come forward to help. This, however, does not happen in Italy nor in Germany. I don't know why this happens here, but it does. The Italian immigrant on the other hand, when he arrives here, he does not trust these people. He is afraid of walking around alone; he learns to depend on a car. For example, I myself would enjoy taking walks in the woods with my wife and children or going to the parks or the lakes at night, but this is not too advisable. Sometimes one feels like a 'robot'; who can only go around the 4 walls of his room at home without being able to go out or take walks.

INTERVIEWEE: You talk about loneliness: you mentioned about your sister and your father, do you go with them to different places, like the parks, woods, etc.?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, they have their life too. We lived with my sister when we first arrived from Germany, but then we moved into an apartment and we are now on our own.
INTERVIEWER: How did you imagine America to be like?

INTERVIEWEE: In our correspondence my relatives would describe America as a golden land, the best land where one would find a treasure. But what a disappointment! When I arrived here I found no treasure. I have always been an immigrant and I know what life an immigrant lives, therefore, I knew before I came what to expect more or less. But my relatives would tell me that I was wrong, that an immigrant is not an immigrant in America, because in America everybody is equal and one lives like an American. Then when I arrived here I noticed that this was not true. One thing I noticed is that here I work a lot. I spend more time on the job than I do at home.

INTERVIEWER: Have you become associated with Italian people here during these years?

INTERVIEWEE: When I first came, I was (almost) always with Italians then as time passed I had to leave the Italians because among them there is always someone who looks at things differently or soon becomes Americanized. If one wants to live tranquil he cannot stay among Italians. With Italians one can disagree very easily: different political views, different ways of looking at things, etc. This is also due to the fact that one comes from the north, the other is from the south, one can never get along without arguing. It is very difficult to
be among italians.

INTERVIEWER: What type of job did you do in Germany?

INTERVIEWEE: In Germany I was a machinist. My trade though is that of an electrician. In American I started working as an electrician and 6 years ago I was making $1.65 per hour. With this amount of money one could only eat one could not think about a future. Three months thereafter I terminated that employment and started to work in the jewelry shops where the pay was more comparable.

INTERVIEWER: Is this your present job?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I presently work for an italian company in Johnston. (Which home office is in Italy). The company produces elastic threads, and all hospital and medical bands. There I am the "maintenance mechanic"; I repair machines and do other things too. I like this job very much, I talk italian on my job. Often enough I call our office in Italy to order pieces for our machines here. This is a big satisfaction for me.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that on your job you talk italian everyday. Do you speak italian at home, too?

INTERVIEWEE: At home the italian language is preferred. Not only for my wife and I, but for my children as well. Because the children have ways and time to learn the english language by going to school. (They attend a catholic
school: Holy Ghost Church School). I notice that my children have picked up the English language very quickly and they speak it very well. It is not hard for them like it is for us. Of course, the Italian we speak at home is not the perfect but very close to it. If we would want to talk the perfect Italian my children would not understand it and they would continuously ask me what I mean.

INTERVIEWER: Your first daughter was born in Germany, the other was born here?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, my oldest daughter was born in Germany. The second was born here in America at St. Joseph's Hospital. My wife was pregnant when we came here. The birthday of my second daughter reminds me of the number of years we have lived here because she was born 3 months after we arrived here.

INTERVIEWER: Talking about your children, how do you bring them up? Do you still consider certain traditional values to be highly important?

INTERVIEWEE: Some Italian traditions should not be forgotten, but on the other hand, they cannot be practiced on my family. For example, spanking the children or beating them up is very unfair and I do not believe in it. Although sometimes it is necessary to reprimand them but one should know how to reprimand.
With the modern life, though, one should not spoil children and give them everything they want. Many years ago when we were younger, our parents would beat us up if we did something wrong. Today we look up to our parents and we try to teach our children the respect and the love our parents have taught us.

INTERVIEWER: Your children attend the Holy Ghost Church school. How come you chose a private Catholic school?

INTERVIEWEE: It is certainly not because we have the Pope in Italy and we should keep on being Catholics. We are Catholics by instinct and with the heart. We want to teach our children not only the life of Christ and what he has done for us but also we want to teach them that if one is not a Catholic, one is "nobody". By teaching our children this, they will thank us in the future, they will appreciate our encouraging them about going to church on a Sunday. We should encourage our friends to go to church as well and to go because it is nice to.

INTERVIEWER: After talking about your children, I would like to ask you about your wife. In Italy especially for the past years it has always been said that the woman's role is to stay in the house and to raise children. What do you think a woman's role should be?
INTERVIEWEE: For us italians unfortunately the woman's role is a poor, unhappy one. We are used to the fact that the woman should be home, she should raise a family and she should never think about a job. Today we find ourselves in a society different from that in which we lived in, and here I think a woman should still dedicate herself to the family. However, if she has time, she can work, too, but she should never fail to take care of her family. Because the woman is very important for the family. If she neglects her family, the children will not be raised in the right way. It is nice if the woman could work especially in case of financial need, but 99% of her time should be spent at home.

INTERVIEWER: How do you spend your free time?

INTERVIEWEE: I go fishing; I go to the beach with my family; we go and visit some parks; if there is some festivity we go, otherwise we stay home. We enjoy staying home, too.

INTERVIEWER: When you talk about festivities, which ones do you refer to?

INTERVIEWEE: Festivities which correspond to those in Italy. St. Mary's Feast in Cranston; St. Rocco's Feast in Johnston; St. Bartholomew's in Silver Lake. During these festivities we always remember the old times, our youth and all those things we used to do then.

INTERVIEWER: Besides these festivities do you participate to other ones in your community?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, on Federal Hill, there is the St. Joseph's Feast. This is a feast which success is often subject to the financial situation of the community. But people have a good time; many people come and if the parking space wasn't such a big problem, more would come. Everybody likes to come to Federal Hill because this is the place for the italians.

INTERVIEWER: When you arrived from Italy, did you settle on Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: No I settled on Broad Street. Then two months after I moved to Federal Hill and I have lived there ever since.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you move to Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: On Broad Street we lived with my sister because we had just arrived and did not have a house yet. Then I found a house which I liked and it happened to be here on Federal Hill.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about this section of the City?

INTERVIEWEE: This section is neither good nor bad. We are in a happy media. One can live here comfortably. The stores are at a fair walking distance. The people are not too friendly, but there are always some italians with whom one can associate. There is more company of people here as opposed to other sections.

INTERVIEWER: Did you notice a change or some kind of development on Federal Hill during your 6 years here?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they are re-building Federal Hill because they understood that in order for Federal Hill to "re-live", many things need to be changed: house need repairs, roads need to be widen, more parking lots should be made because many stores don't have parking spaces, therefore, customers lose interest in shopping here.

INTERVIEWER: What is your relation with other inhabitants of this section?

INTERVIEWEE: I get along well with most of the people here. I spend sociable hours with them.

INTERVIEWER: When you arrived here, did you stop anywhere else before arriving to Providence?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did you come by plane?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I came by boat. That was a very nice experience. Eight days at sea is a real adventure. When one sees only sea and sky it is a big adventure.

INTERVIEWER: Which port did you arrive to?

INTERVIEWEE: New York.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of New York?

INTERVIEWEE: Very different from how it was described to me. It is very big, yes, but very dirty.

INTERVIEWER: What was your impression of Providence and Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: My first big impression was hearing so many people speak italian on Federal Hill. I felt like being back in my village. Then I went around the city, I
went downtown and I noticed that it was dirty. People don't care about cleaning the city and this is very bad because when a city is always dirty people don't want to live in it, they would rather move out to the suburbs where there is more green, more space, better clean air. This is another thing about Federal Hill, it lacks the green, the trees, etc.

INTERVIEWER: What do your children do? Do they spend time in the yard after school?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they spend time down the yard, but very often they get annoyed and they would like to move away from Federal Hill, but I force them to stay because Federal Hill will change in the future. Either Federal Hill changes or we will change.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a house here on Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I made a small investment with the hope that things will change, because I understood that on Federal Hill it was a good investment.

INTERVIEWER: Coming to the United States have you brought with you some traditions from Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: None.

INTERVIEWER: What about Italian music? Do you remember songs from Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes I remember, and I also think that the Italian songs are more melodic. One feels good listening to an Italian song. The Italian songs are more sentimental and they have more meaning.
INTERVIEWER: What do you think about the sports here?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, there are many soccer teams now such as, Pope Giovanni XXIII (Holy Ghost Church), Columbia Club, Portuguese Club. There is also an american soccer team: the Pawtucket Rangers. This one is very good too. Some years ago the soccer teams here were not well-known. Then with the arrival of new italians, portugueses and other people the soccer teams have developed more.

INTERVIEWER: Do you often go to the stadium to watch the soccer games?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I like to watch soccer games, it is the favorite sport of all the italians.

INTERVIEWEE: Do you play soccer?

INTERVIEWER: Years ago, yes, but not now. My family obligations do not permit me to spend time playing soccer.

INTERVIEWER: How do you consider yourself an italian, an american or an italo-american?

INTERVIEWEE: I used to consider myself a real italian, but now that I have become an american citizen I consider myself an italo-american. For personal reasons, too, I see myself as an italo-american, but of course, I am italian, my blood is italian, I speak the italian language, my parents are italian. I could never neglect my country but living in American I have to respect it and we have to face the future undertakings.
We consider ourselves italo-american, never americans, but always italo-americans.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever return to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes twice. In 1974 I went for 21 days. Returning in Italy I found that everything had changed. The youth in Italy is different now. My friends are no longer there, so many things are changing in Italy. It is very different from the way it was 20 years ago. Today in Italy one lives like in America. The second time I went to Italy was in 1978 and again I found so many changes: the crime increases, the politics change every 6 months. One cannot recognize Italy today as opposed to yesterday.

INTERVIEWER: When you first arrived here, did you have a feeling about wanting to go back to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: No, because it has always been my desire to visit the world. I find myself so much far away from Italy that it is not convenient for me at this time to return. I would like to go, as the years go by, for another visit with all my family, but I do not want to return there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that you have changed in some ways after you came to the United States?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, my way of thinking has changed. When I was in Italy I was less responsible. Here in American one has to look at the economical and financial side of life.
(10 MINUTES OF THE TAPE ARE OMITTED. It is hard to understand the words, but the conversation during these 10 minutes relates to the "medical coverage" here as opposed to the one in Italy.)

INTERVIEWER: Are you interested in politics?

INTERVIEWEE: Politics is something I try to stay away from especially in America. As every good citizen I like to vote. I like to express my feeling through my vote about a specific person or another. Also I do not like to discuss politics with other people or discuss my vote with other people.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about certain organizations on Federal Hill which are continuously promoting programs for the people of Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't know too much about them also because they must be new organizations or may be because I just have not lived here long enough to learn of them, but I think they are doing a good job as far as I know. There is one organization which established vegetable lots for the people of the community. Right now there are 12 lots; there are 10 Italians and 2 Americans working on these lots. This is a very good idea and it makes the people want to stay here.

INTERVIEWER: So you like Federal Hill and you see a good future here?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do.

Now, may I ask you a question?

INTERVIEWER: yes.
INTERVIEWEE: What do you think of Federal Hill and its future?

INTERVIEWER: I trust Federal Hill will improve much more in the near future. There are people seriously interested in re-building Federal Hill. Several organizations are working hard for the re-construction of this section of the City and I believe that there is a good future here. We need cooperation and people to work together and help us in our intent to give Federal Hill a chance to re-born. Would you like to add anything else to this interview?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, on Federal Hill there should not be just one girl like you, Maria, but many many more girls who, like yourself, take interest in our lives and our opinions.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you Mr. Milano. I also thank you for this interview and the time you have dedicated to it.

INTERVIEWEE: You are very welcome. I thank you!