Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Anna Rocchio by Debbie Rocchio

Anna Rocchio

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Leslie-Ann Mansalillo

INTERVIEWER: Norma Coiacie

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/24/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

- Personal data
- Questions concerning Italian ancestry
- Fluency in Italian language
- Religious beliefs
- Italian traditions
- Prejudice towards Italians
- Breaking down of ethnicity
Oral History Interview
with
LESLIE-ANN MANSOLILLO
February 24, 1979
Home of Interviewer
by Norma R. Colaccio

INTERVIEWER: What is your name?

INTERVIEWEE: My name is Leslie Mansolillo.

INTERVIEWER: Leslie, would you tell me something about yourself?

INTERVIEWEE: Okay. I'm 21 years old. I've gone to Saint Mary's Academy Bay View grammar school. I've gone to Classical High School and graduated and I attended- and I graduated from Bryant College, 2 year program and am now a Legal Secretary.

INTERVIEWER: Do you work within the state?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes I do. I work in Johnston, Rhode Island.

INTERVIEWER: Anything else you'd like to add?

INTERVIEWEE: Ah, of course I'm from an Italian background. I grew up in Providence, Rhode Island and in the past year I've moved to North Providence, Rhode Island.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. I would like to start the interview by asking you some questions about your Italian ancestors. First, what part of Italy were your ancestors from?

INTERVIEWEE: They were from around; I'm not sure of which town but they were from around Naples.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, fine. Do you have any idea why your grandparents came to America in the first place?

INTERVIEWEE: They felt it was the land of opportunity and that here they could make money and send for all their other relatives so they'd have the same opportunity.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Have you yourself ever visited Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I haven't but some day I'd like to.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Why would you go— for what reasons?

INTERVIEWEE: My grandmother and my grandfather always felt that it was one of the most beautiful places they've ever seen and ever lived and they loved America but they always loved Italy and they always told us stories when we were young.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any relatives living in Italy now?

INTERVIEWEE: No everybody's here, in America.

INTERVIEWER: Are you able to speak or write in the Italian language?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I took one year of Italian in high school
and that would be the only Italian I would be able to speak which is very little.

INTERVIEWER: Do your parents speak Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: They used to speak Italian when my grandparents were alive but they no longer use it in the household.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Are they able to speak it if they had to?
INTERVIEWEE: Ah, yes, but it's not the perfect Italian; it's a dialect.

INTERVIEWER: Do you understand them at all?
INTERVIEWEE: Yea, it's- I understand them to a certain extent and then lose them after a while.

INTERVIEWER: Did they learn to speak any Italian in school that you know of?
INTERVIEWEE: No, it was mostly at home with their parents.

INTERVIEWER: Leslie, do you consider yourself Italian or American?
INTERVIEWEE: I consider myself American but with a very deep background of Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Is your religion an important part of your existance?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, religion was always an important part, especially in growing up.

INTERVIEWER: Do you attend church regularly?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, mostly every Sunday, and if I don't, I hear about it at home.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Therefore it's because of your parents beliefs more than religion being an important
It's part of yourself.

INTERVIEWEE: No, I was brought up that way and I've continued it all through the years.

INTERVIEWER: While you were growing up, did you often feel your parents were strict?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, even now they're strict, ah, for example, what time a young Italian lady should be home at night—things to that nature they are very strict.

INTERVIEWER: So you feel this is because you live within their household?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, as long as I stay in their house, I do what they say; and there is no ifs, ands or buts about that.

INTERVIEWER: Even though you are a legal adult?

INTERVIEWEE: Yea, and I abide by their rules.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Do you feel that your parents are this way because they were brought up in the old Italian tradition?

INTERVIEWEE: I would say probably because I know my mother's parents were very, very strict with her and I would say that my father's parents were very strict with him too.

INTERVIEWER: What Italian traditions do your parents practice today?

INTERVIEWEE: Um—the holidays are a very important part of our family, ah, the family coming together
has always been but since my grandparents died, the family isn't all together as a unit, just the children and the grandparents. Um—as far as religion goes, St. Joseph's Day was always a big, um, it was like a holiday to us because my grandfather's name was Joseph and it was—we always made a big deal out of it. Um—holidays especially are very important where there's a gigantic meal and the family is all together and you cannot leave—there's um, the aunts and uncles, there's visiting, constant visiting all day for at least eight hours and at each house you have to eat, so it's just—it's always been that way and it probably always will be that way, in my household anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Therefore, you would probably continue to practice the traditions such as you've mentioned when your parents are no longer able to?

INTERVIEWEE: I think so, it's always; it's a habit now, and it's something that everybody enjoys so I would continue it.

INTERVIEWER: Leslie, since you are not married as yet, do you find yourself looking for an Italian catholic man as opposed to one of another nationality or religion?
I was always brought up that my mother and father would prefer that I would marry an Italian catholic. But, if I were to bring another nationality home they wouldn't care one way or the other. I think that they would more be toward, they would more care about me marrying the same religion than the same nationality.

And what about you, as an individual, is the religion part of it more important than the nationality part?

To a certain extent it is, it's hard for two-- I feel that it's hard for two different religions to understand each other and it would be--I think I would be better off if I were to marry a catholic and bring my children up in the catholic religion.

What does being of Italian decent mean to you as a third generation Italian-American?

The Italian traditions--let me put it to you this way. The Italian--the ties with Italy aren't as strong but, as my grandparents had and now it's time for me to encorporate both the Italian and American traditions and carry on the Italian traditions as much as I can but I am an American and I have to have my own traditions in America.
INTERVIEWER: Leslie, have you ever encountered any prejudice directed towards your nationality as a third generation Italian-American?

INTERVIEWEE: I did when I went to catholic school. For some reason, I never understood it when I was younger and I still don't understand it, but for some reason, there was prejudice, I really can't explain it but I always felt it when I was younger.

INTERVIEWER: From whom did this prejudice come?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, as I stated before, I did go to a catholic school so it was mostly nuns; they were of Irish-Catholic and English-Catholic background. And for some reason there was never a lot of Italians in the school and it was a private school so there was often some prejudice, as far as I could see.

INTERVIEWER: It wasn't ever stated outright?

INTERVIEWEE: No, but you felt it even as a child I could feel it. I would go home at night and my mother would just say, "ignore it, ignore it" it would just be something that I felt as a child.

INTERVIEWER: But it didn't get any better as your years in school went on?
INTERVIEWEE: No, I went to cath—it didn't get any better—
I went to catholic school for nine years and
it never changed from one year to the next.

INTERVIEWER: It's almost a decade, you would think ideas
would change in that amount of time.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, but, for some reason, it didn't as far
as I witnessed. If—I think if I were a top
scholar it might have been a little bit dif-
ferent, but, I was an average student.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the general feeling of
ethnicity is breaking down in America due
to intermarriage and the dissolving of the
extended family, why or why not?

INTERVIEWEE: I think that the family unit is breaking up;
society has changed, thoughts and morals have
changed, everybody's trying to be an individ-
ual and they're not as close as they used to
be; husband and wife, children and the grand-
parents and even the mothers and fathers.
The family unit has definitely broken down.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and finally, if you marry someday and
have children, do you feel it is important
for them to know and understand their Italian
background and would you impose these beliefs
on them?
INTERVIEWEE: I would want my children to know everything about their Italian background; how I was raised, why I'm raising them as I am but, I don't think that I could impose upon the individual--the way they would act. They would take what they know and what they have and use it to the best--hopefully, I think they would use it to the best of their ability, but I don't think I could impose my beliefs on them.

INTERVIEWER: Would you expect your children to follow the traditions that you set forth?

INTERVIEWEE: I would hope that they would, but I couldn't guarantee it, especially the way times have changed.

INTERVIEWER: Therefore, do you think the future looks hopeful as far as the Italian culture being carried on?

INTERVIEWEE: I think that--I know I'm proud to be an Italian, of Italian decent, but it's hard to say if the traditions will be carried on I know I'll carry them on, but in the future I hope that they will be carried on.

INTERVIEWER: Leslie, thank you very much for the interview.