Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Donna Sawyer by Maureen Sweeney

Donna Sawyer

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE  Donna Sawyer
INTERVIEWER  Maureen Sweeney
DATE OF INTERVIEW  6/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Grandparents

Visit to Italy

Parents

Employment

Family, role of father and mother

Grandmother's trip to U.S.

Community

Education
INTERVIEW
ITALIANS IN RHODE ISLAND
DONNA SAWYER
THIRD GENERATION ITALIAN

INTERVIEWER:
MAUREEN SWEENEY
GENERAL STUDIES 363
DR. SANTORO
APRIL, 1979
Interviewer: What part of Italy were your ancestors from?

Interviewee: My parents weren't from Italy, but my grandmother was from Massa Carara, a place up in Northern Italy. My grandfather was from Pisa.

Interviewer: Did your grandparents ever tell you anything about their homeland? or What is was like?

Interviewee: My grandmother did mention that up in Massa Carara there were large marble mines and that many people worked there. The only thing my grandfather would have told us is about the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Interviewer: Have you ever visited Italy?

Interviewee: Yes I have.

Interviewer: What parts of Italy have you visited?


Interviewer: What were your feelings about Italy?

Interviewee: I liked it. I was pretty impressed with it, but I wish I could go because I was still a little too young to appreciate what Italy had to offer. But I do remember it and I really enjoyed a lot of the things I remembered seeing.

Information about Donna's parents.

Interviewer: Where are your parents from?

Interviewee: My mother is from Springfield Mass. She also lived
Interviewee: in Hudson, Mass. when she was younger. Her parents were divorced and she went back and forth between her parents. My father is from Pawtucket.

Interviewer: Are both your parents Italian?

Interviewee: No. My mother isn't Italian, but my father is Italian.

Interviewer: Where did your father grow up?

Interviewee: In Pawtucket.

Interviewer: Where are they living now?

Interviewee: My mother lives in Warren, Rhode Island. My father lives in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Interviewer: Did your father ever live on Federal Hill?

Interviewee: No.

Employment

Interviewer: What type of job did your father have?

Interviewee: My father started working when he was six years old in his father's store. It used to be for toys and bicycles and baby supplies. My father is carrying the store now.

Interviewer: Did your mother work?

Interviewee: Now she does. Before they got a divorce she did not. But now she is a private nurse for a woman over on Blackstone Boulevard, in Providence.
Interviewer: Did your father want your mother to work or was it against his wishes?

Interviewee: Totally against his wishes. He expected her to be in the home making supper, and taking care of the kids.

Interviewer: Did you ever work?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: How did your parents feel about your working?

Interviewee: I wanted to volunteer in the hospital once and he didn't like that too much. When I was sixteen and decided to get a job I went to Newport Creamery and he liked it. He thought it was o.k. for responsibility.

Interviewer: Why didn't he want you to work at the hospital? Did he ever give you any reasons why?

Interviewee: No. He felt I was too young. I was only thirteen. He thought I would be in contact with too much disease or something like that. He never gave me a true answer.

Interviewer: Would you say he was typically Italian?

Interviewee: Very.

Family

Interviewer: How many children are in your family?
Family (cont'ed)

Interviewee: Five.
Interviewer: How many brothers and sisters?
Interviewee: Two brothers and two sisters.
Interviewer: What language was spoken in your home when you were growing up?
Interviewee: English was spoken all the time. But my father speaks Italian fluently.
Interviewer: What was your father's role in the family?
Interviewee: He worked, every day, six days a week. When he wasn't working he was home and meals had to be placed in front of him. He'd sit down and eat. Very little was said unless a big decision had to be made. He more or less sat back and just watched how the house was run and made sure everything went well.
Interviewer: Did he have any other responsibilities outside of home?
Interviewee: He used to own a lot of property (rooming and boarding houses) so he had a lot of outside responsibilities.
Interviewer: What was your mother's role in the family?
Interviewee: She did the cooking, the cleaning, taking care of the children, and bringing the children wherever they had to go.
Family (cont'd)

Interviewer: Did she have any responsibilities outside the home?
Interviewee: She did a lot when I was in high school. She offered her for the different functions the high school would have. She used to sew a lot. She also started sewing for a square dancing club. She used to make the skirts. My father didn't know about it because it was like a job, she was getting paid. If he had found out how much time she was putting into it he would have been in a great deal of trouble.

Interviewer: What were the roles of the children in the family? What were some of their responsibilities?

Interviewee: We more or less had to take care of ourselves and our rooms and things like that. We didn't have to cook. I helped my mother as I got older because I was the last one and I was there to help cook and clean the house.

Interviewer: How close was your family with relatives?
Interviewee: We used to be fairly close. I used to go to my grandmother's all the time, as a family, when we were younger. There's a wide spread in ages. My sister is ten years older than I am. So by the time my sisters got out of the house and my brothers left, there was just my older brother and myself.
Interviewee: We were still too young, but by the time we were old enough the family had already split up. We weren't that close with the other relatives.

Interviewer: How did you feel about being close? Did you feel as though you could have or should have been closer?

Interviewee: Yeah, we probably could have been closer. It seemed like we were close but I can't remember the family together, I was too young. By the time I was old enough to realize we were a family it was getting smaller in number. My sister got married and then my other sister married.

Interviewer: Did your father any other relatives living in Italy?

Interviewee: Not that I know of.

Interviewer: Did your father or any relatives ever tell you any stories about Italy or coming to America?

Interviewee: My grandmother did mention she came over when she was very young. She was three or four years old. She doesn't really remember the trip that much, but her parents told her the trip was long. Also her father had come over first with two older brothers and then latter on they sent for her mother and her other brother and sister. That's all they
Family (cont'd)

Interviewee: told me.

Interviewer: How did they get here? Did they come by boat?
Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Did they ever say how long it took to get here?
Interviewee: No, they never mentioned that and I never thought
  to ask. It must have taken a long time because my grandmother
  had mentioned once that her husband had said, "There is no way I'm
  going back over on that boat." He didn't like the boat. It must
  have taken a long time.

Interviewer: Are there any other traditions, you can remember,
  that were passed on to you from your ancestors?
Interviewee: We did always go to my grandmothers every Sunday.
  She did cook large meals. I can remember that.
  As far as anything else off hand I can't remember any specific ones.

Community

Interviewer: How did the community feel about your family?
Interviewee: My father said there was no problem. My grandmother
  seemed to think there weren't any problems accepting them because
  they had a lot of friends.
Community (cont'd)

Interviewee: My grandmother said she had a lot of friends here when her parents moved to America. I guess they must have established a pretty good repore with most of the people.

Interviewer: Did they live in an exclusively Italian neighborhood?

Interviewee: No they didn't. They lived in Pawtucket first and then they went to South Attleboro. They weren't anywhere near federal hill.

Interviewer: So, no one really objected to your living there?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Where there any prejudice's?

Interviewee: No. Just when my father was younger, he said that he had trouble in school. The kids would call him yap, or something like that. He remembers getting into several fights because he was an Italian. As far as the community they were pretty fair.

Interviewer: Did you feel any conflicts with anyone in your community when you were growing up?

Interviewee: No, I don't think I ever did.

Interviewer: Did you feel there were any prejudices toward you, your family, or any Italians in general in the community?

Interviewee: No, because by the time I was into the community the fact that the Italians were outsiders had
Community (cont'd)

Interviewer: What other type of people lived in the community?
Interviewee: I can't remember off hand.

Interviewer: What was your family's relationship to the larger society outside of the community?
Interviewee: We stayed pretty much to ourselves, to the immediate family. My mother had a lot of friends that worked in the schools because she was socially involved. She was in the PTA. As far as being socially envolved within the community we really weren't.

Interviewer: You really didn't have any conflicts or prejudices in the larger society?
Interviewee: No.

Education

Interviewer: Did your father ever tell you where he went to school?
Interviewee: Yes. He went to St. Joseph's school in Pawtucket.

Interviewer: Where did you go to school?
Interviewee: I went to grammer school near my home in Pawtucket. Then, when I reached the 7th grade I went to St. Academy, Bay View in East Providence.

Interviewer: How did your father feel about this?
Interviewee: Both my parents wanted me to go to that school. They felt strongly about me going to a catholic school.

Interviewer: Did they give you any reasons why they didn't want you to go to public school?

Interviewee: They felt it was too rough for their little girl. They felt the people going into the public schools were a little too rough. I would have had to go to a school in Pawtucket, called Goth. They felt it was a little too hard for their daughter to handle so they sent me to catholic school.

Interviewer: How far in school did you gain-school?

Interviewee: I graduated from Bayview. I'm in my fourth year at RIC and I'll be graduating in May.

Interviewer: Were your parents pleased with your education?

Interviewee: Very pleased. My father was always the one who enforced education highly. He said, he felt it was the best thing to get well educated and worry about the jobs latter. He said definitly fo to school.

Interviewer: Is this from past experience or what he's seen in Italians?

Interviewee: It could be because he felt strongly about going to school. He went to P.C. for a few years. Then
Education (cont'd)

Interviewee: he went to law school for a few years. But then he dropped out of law school because he had to take over his father's business. He really wanted his kids to be well educated.

Interviewer: Did his parents want him to go to school?

Interviewer: Did they feel strongly about education towards him as he did towards you?

Interviewee: I don't think so. I think they more or less pressured him, once he was old enough to work. And when his father died, I think they pressured him into taking over the business. They more or less wanted him to follow in his father's footsteps.

Interviewer: When you were going to school did you feel any conflicts, similar to your father's or any different conflicts.

Interviewee: No. Because we were all girls, and 90% of us were catholic and were from middle upper class families. We were more or less from the same category. There no conflicts.

Interviewer: How about the rest of your family? Did all your brothers and sisters go to college?

Interviewee: No. They all graduated from high school. Some attended college. My brother attended college but he didn't finish. He stayed at RIC for three
Education (cont'd)

Interviewee: years. He was very interested and talented in music. He got into a group and left college. My two sisters went to hairdressing school. They were hairdressers for several years. My other brother went to URI for a year. He left after a year.

Interviewer: How did your father feel about their educational goals?

Interviewee: He was disappointed when my brother Stephen left college because he had been in there for three years. He really wanted at least one of us to go to college and graduate. That put the pressure on me to finish.

Interviewer: Did any of your brothers feel any conflicts when they were in school?

Interviewee: No. Because my brother also went to a catholic school, Bishop Feighn. They were more or less in the same middle upper class category. My other brother went to St. Raphael's.

Interviewer: How does your mother think of the family? Does she feel it is more Italian-oriented or American-oriented?

Interviewee: She's not Italian but she does feel it is more American oriented.

Interviewer: What about your father, what does he feel?
Education (cont'd)

Interviewee: I think he would feel the same way. Even though I know a lot of things probably because he is an Italian. I think more or less he did what he thought was right for the family.

Interviewer: One last question. Do you feel you are more American-oriented or Italian-oriented?

Interviewee: I would have to say American. Being third generation Italian the ties to the Italian cultures and traditions have grown kind of thin. Now I would have to say being named and everything, I really don't exercise many Italian customs. I am an Italian but mostly American by upbringing. I am still proud to be an Italian.

Interviewer: You are definitely part of the Italians in Rhode Island?

Interviewee: Definitely.