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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with John Tolento by Joan O'Brien

John Tolento

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NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: John Tolento
INTERVIEWER: Joan O'Brien
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/19/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Family background
Prejudice against Italians
Education
General viewpoints on divorce, welfare, woman's role
Italian customs
Italian pride
Oral History Interview

with

John Telento

February 19, 1979
His Home

by Joan C. O'Brien

INTERVIEWER: Do you know where your family came from in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't know the exact town but they came from the south of Naples.

INTERVIEWER: Ok. When did they come to America?

INTERVIEWEE: My mother was born here, my grandmother came here when she was about three years old so that would put it about 1900.

INTERVIEWER: What part of the country did they settle in?

INTERVIEWEE: Originally, in the East Side of New York City.

INTERVIEWER: Did they move?

INTERVIEWEE: They moved from there to Brooklyn, N.Y.

INTERVIEWER: Is that where you were born?

INTERVIEWEE: I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. but not in the same neighborhood because when my mother married she moved to a different neighborhood and I was born there.

INTERVIEWER: Were you raised in an Italian neighborhood?

INTERVIEWEE: Predominantly, yes. Up until the age of 12.
INTERVIEWER: What was it like for you growing up in an Italian family? Did you follow many Italian customs?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Well we had the usual Sunday meals which was important. The getting together as family and being concerned about family but being the second generation because my mother had been born here, it was imbedded in us or they felt that we should become Americans. There was a tendency to play down the Italian heritage that you had. So that even speaking Italian - because my Grandmother coming here so young tried to learn English and my mother, who was born here, knew very little Italian although she could converse, but very little Italian. Therefore, myself, I know absolutely nothing in Italian.

INTERVIEWER: That surprises me. Then you didn't experience many problems being torn between the Italian way of doing things and the American way?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I never really was conscious of being Italian because most of our friends, when we originally were in one neighborhood were Italian. When we moved, at the age of 12 and 14, to a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, where we had a Jewish landlord and also there was one street that was what you would call Black now but at the time was Colored. And going to school, again, there was very little emphasis on nationalities for children. Children, themselves were not very, at least I wasn't, conscious of my nationality. I don't
think I've ever realized being Italian meant any different than being anyone else. The names never meant anything because, growing up, most of the time, we called each other by our first name. Nowadays there is a tendency for everyone to call them by their last name. All of my friends I knew by their first names. Many a time I wouldn't even know their nationality.

INTERVIEWER: Did both your mother and father work?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Well my mother didn't work until the 1940's during the war, when my Dad got sick. Up until then she was home.

INTERVIEWER: How many children were in your home?

INTERVIEWEE: Two children.

INTERVIEWER: You live in Warwick now - you moved several years ago, right?

INTERVIEWEE: OK. Right.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a brother? a sister?

INTERVIEWEE: I had a sister. My sister was killed in 1945 on a bicycle.

INTERVIEWER: What was your financial status, when you were growing up - middle class?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, we were very fortunate. I wouldn't say middle class because, again, these are just current terms. At that time, my father worked at the Fish Market. And he was one of the few people who had a steady income during the Depression. So really, we personally, meaning my family, never felt the hard times of the Depression because Dad always worked and always making maybe
15, 20, 25, 30, dollars a week. This was considered much more than other people around us. So the Depression itself, never really touched us in that sense of the word. The family was not well off in any sense but Dad always had a car and he was looked up to because he worked in a fish market. This meant he was able to bring home fish. And fish, at that time, was a great part of the diet being a Catholic and Friday being strictly a fish day plus the holidays. He always took care of the family when it came to those particular times of the year.

INTERVIEWER: Very good. Did you ever run across any prejudice?

INTERVIEWEE: The only time I felt prejudice of being an Italian was when I moved. Well, let me give you a little background. Originally, I was brought up in Brooklyn. Then we moved to a Jewish neighborhood. While I was there I joined a Catholic Club.

It was mostly Italian, mostly all Catholic, naturally. Very little prejudice because we stayed within our own group. I did go to a school that had both Black - this is even in Junior High School - Black and Jewish. Some of my friends were Jewish but we really never looked at them as Jewish except maybe with food, you know eating a little different food. The built in prejudices weren't that predominant in my particular case. My mother happened to be brought up in an area where there were Jewish people and got to understand Jewish
people. Although there was prejudice, it wasn't that pronounced. The time I felt, going back to your question, the time I felt that there was prejudice being built in was when my wife and I moved into a predominantly German neighborhood. Now our customs seemed to clash. This was a more solid German, a little older neighborhood, much more conservative. We as young Italians, again I use the word Italian but just young people, the word Italian doesn't enter into it because we didn't think we were Italian per se. Our neighbors who happened to live in that particular apartment were also Italian. We had a tendency - now our heritage came out - where we would sit outside, talk, maybe have a little pizza, in a little more rambunctious manner. We were sort of vocal, very outgoing in comparison to what our concepts of what a German was. In this particular neighborhood it was so. Everything was very quiet and we sort of broke the ice. I think there may have been a prejudice developing then that these foreigners were coming into our area or something. After that we had moved out to Elmont, N.Y. which was not predominately Italian. It was a pretty well mixed neighborhood but going to church was a predominately Italian - Irish thing. That's where I felt the first thing of being an Italian. When I introduced myself, I immediately was classified as an
Italian, belonging to the Mafia and all the prejudices that went with it. Just during meetings, I was told, you are going to meet this Irish person against an Italian person. There was that wall built between them. That was the only time I really realized that people were prejudice against Italians.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about that?

INTERVIEWEE: It disturbed me and I had made up my mind...

Of course, previous to that, having gone to college, I had met Polish people, Jewish people, other Italians, Germans, and again, nationality was never mentioned. In fact two of my best friends - Stan was Jewish, the other fellow was Polish - and going back even further, when I was sick I roomed with a Black fellow. So the prejudices weren't built in as far as that was concerned. But this feeling here, I felt that it was wrong for them not to judge me as an individual. I made up my mind then, which must have been building up over a period of time, that I was going to be proud of my Italian heritage. That was when I became conscious of being an Italian. Everything I've done has always tried to reflect that there is a Michaelangelo as well as an Al Capone in our family. In our family tree or something like that. Just because your name ends in a vowel doesn't mean that they should classify you as that particular
INTERVIEWER: So you resent all Italians being labeled?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I resent all groups being classified because now I felt what it was and I thought it was wrong. I tried to imbed in my own family that you take everyone for what they are. There are certain characteristics that we contribute to a Jew, to an Irish man, to a Black man, to a Polish man and those are the things that we have to break away from. I would have to say that maybe in some cases I still have those stereotypes but I try to keep them to a minimum.

INTERVIEWER: You said you went to college. You went through a four year college?
INTERVIEWEE: Four years.

INTERVIEWER: Did your parents go to college?
INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did they want you to go to college?
INTERVIEWEE: Well, the circumstances were such that I had been sick for two years and when I came out I was going to be limited as to my working physically. Therefore they encouraged me to go to college. They never told me I couldn't go. They tried to support me as much as they could financially which was in that case very little. They never discouraged me for instance by saying, "You don't need a college education. You can make a living by going out and working with your back." But what was imbedded in was that you should always...
INTERVIEWER: Have a job. If college will get you a better job, then go to college and get a better job. My Dad never went past the sixth grade and my mother never went much further than junior high school. My Dad, his parents had died, and they had to be cut on their own. At that time, those who got to high school were considered the exception.

INTERVIEWEE: Do you believe in the importance of a good education?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, definitely. I tried to instill in my children the importance of a good education but not necessarily a college education. It depends on the individual. In our particular family we may find that maybe one or two of our children are not college material. Therefore if they can go out and get a job using their hands— in other words, it is perfectly ok. I am not obsessed with the idea of having to go to college but I do encourage the higher education.

INTERVIEWER: For both men and women?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. Definitely.

INTERVIEWER: You married an Italian girl, right?

INTERVIEWEE: That's correct.

INTERVIEWER: Did your family want you to marry an Italian girl?

INTERVIEWEE: I can definitely say that the feeling was that you should marry an Italian girl, you should marry a Catholic girl. That I would have to say was a prerequisite. They definitely wanted you
to marry into your own nationality. There is no question about that. It just so happened that in our family, I think only my mother's brother married a Jewish woman. Outside of that everyone married an Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever come across pre-arranged marriages?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I know that is suppose to be a custom but I've never come across that.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever belonged to a national church? An Italian church?

INTERVIEWEE: Not an Italian church as such except that depending on the neighborhood. When I lived in Brooklyn, we had Our Lady of Pompeii which happened to be predominately Italian. Therefore the priests were Italian but they only had one Italian mass, most of it was in English. The order who ran that was Italian.

INTERVIEWER: You don't belong to a national church now do you?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: I'm going to ask you some questions about general viewpoints which you hold. Do you believe in divorce?

INTERVIEWEE: Very interesting question. I would say today I do believe in divorce but I don't think I would have believed in it 20 years ago. I think today society is such that if two people just can't make it that they should get a divorce. The only thing that disturbs me is that I think people will have a tendency today of going into it saying that if
it doesn't work out we'll get a divorce, whereas as when we get married that wasn't the idea. The idea was you get married and through heaven or hell you were going to have to go through this thing. Never having to be faced with this question in my own personal life, I would say that I personally would be against it. But I wouldn't frown on anybody if they felt that was their way of surviving.

**INTERVIEWER:** How about the woman's role today. Do you believe a woman should be in the home taking care of the family?

**INTERVIEWEE:** If you said today, I'd have to say I definitely have liberalized my views. Up until we moved up here, I thought the woman's place was in the home only because of the training I had about "Well that's the way it was." Mom took care of this, Mom took care of that. However, my mother did work so I was exposed to the other side of the coin. I tried to keep up with the times. I tried to encourage my wife and my daughter to go out on their own, to start to develop the individual. I wouldn't say that I would go to the extreme but I definitely think that now we should take each other as individuals. Where as before, we were being prejudice in saying your a woman therefore this is your job and I'm a man and this is my job. I think that now we are developing ourselves and accepting ourselves as individuals.
INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about welfare?

INTERVIEWEE: Very interesting question. Welfare, again not experiencing it myself but from what I believe in, people have a general opinion of it. Therefore if you said you were on welfare, everybody says you're a cheat, you're this, you're that. Again, we are classifying as a group. Personally, I think welfare is good. I think that the thing that has to be added to it is the incentive of getting off of welfare. To give you an experience about people on welfare and why some of them don't want to get off. The conditions are such that a family will be better off on welfare. We have made it, in some cases, economically feasible for them to stay on welfare.

INTERVIEWER: You are involved in politics, right?

INTERVIEWEE: If that's what you call getting 280 votes out of 3000 - yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were your parents involved at all in politics?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Is this just you yourself?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. This is part of my way - if you go back earlier into the interview - of expressing myself and making myself proud of what I am. Trying to show people that being Italian doesn't classify you as being on the backside of the coin.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know any old Italian stories, songs, or poems?

INTERVIEWEE: No. As I said we were almost told to forget our
Italian heritage because we had to be Americanized and that was the big trend. Except that as the fifties came into the sixties it became fashionable to go back and say "I'll cook you an Italian dinner." if you were with non-Italians. We sort of tried to turn this around. As far as traditions themselves - songs and stuff like that - I never really learned any. I can listen to them and I'll enjoy it because there is a certain common heritage but I personally couldn't sing any Italian songs.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to see your children carry on some of the traditions?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I would like to turn the clock back because there are certain traditions in our family which they should be proud of. We try to carry on our traditions. We try to eat together as a family, if it is possible, we try to work together as a family, we try to help each other as a family, and we try to go out and show people by our actions. Now I'll go back and say that the cliche of an Italian being outgoing - I definitely want to maintain it. I feel as if that's the way we are, people are welcome to us then we should take advantage of our positive background. That I would definitely encourage.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider your family to be a very valuable - I don't know how to say this - one of your most important values?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I would say that the influence of my mother and the influence of my father (not as much with my Dad) ... I would say that the influence of my mother and myself that family is important. That no matter where you are, family — blood, like the old cliche says "blood is thicker than water."
That was one of our philosophies.

INTERVIEWER: Do you belong to any Italian organizations?
INTERVIEWEE: As such, no. I don't belong to the Sons of Italy or any other Italian organization. I did subscribe to an Italian magazine called "Identity" which went out of business. There is a new Italian magazine coming out which are subscribing to but don't ask me what the name is. If I see something on Italians in that particular view, I'm subscribing to it because I feel that we have to improve our image. We need a lot of public relations.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been to Italy?
INTERVIEWEE: No?

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to go?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I'd like to. Not necessarily to see where my grandparents came from but just to go to Italy and see Rome and all the arts — where it all started.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself an Italian or an American first? I think you've almost answered that question.

INTERVIEWEE: Well I consider myself to be an American. I really
don't draw the line between an Italian and an American. I consider myself an American citizen but I consider being an Italian only for what it can contribute really. I don't know whether if you said, was I an Italian-American or an American-Italian... That I would have to play with. I don't preach being an Italian but I just feel that I should be proud of being an Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.