Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Carmella Pashalian by Paris Ledoux

Carmella Pashalian

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/italians

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/italians/51

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ethnic Heritage Studies Project at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Three Generations of Italians by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.
COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Carmella Oliveri Pashalian

INTERVIEWER: Paris Ledoux

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/24/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

The "Old Country" as heard from parents

Parents' Emigration

Parents' early settlement

Parents' employment

Parents' ethnic identity

Family and community

Roles of men, women and children in family

Italian heritage

Mobility

Values
Oral History Interview

with

Carmella Oliveri Pashalian

February 24, 1979
Cranston, Rhode Island

by Paris Ledoux

LEDOUX: Where did your family come from, in Italy?

PASHALIAN: They came from Reggio Calabria.

LEDOUX: What did your father and mother do in Italy?

PASHALIAN: They were olive pickers...and they did odd jobs.
They were from a very poor section; a very poor part of the country...not from an industrial area.

LEDOUX: Why did they leave Italy?

PASHALIAN: I guess they figured they could better themselves.
America was the land of plenty...so they figured they'd take a chance here. And while they were here, they made plans on getting married. They got married in Fall River.

LEDOUX: When did they come to America?

PASHALIAN: In 1907.

LEDOUX: And they lived in Fall River?

PASHALIAN: Yes; they lived there for about a year.

LEDOUX: Where did they go from Fall River?

PASHALIAN: They moved to Wauregan, Conn. for a while, then
they moved to Cranston, where they spent the rest of their lives.

LEDOUX: Did your parents ever tell you anything about coming over to America on the boat?

PASHALIAN: Well, they came with a lot of their relatives. It was quite a bumpy ride... rough seas... I'm not sure how long it took, but I'm sure that in those days it took quite a few days.

LEDOUX: Do you remember what your old neighborhood was like?

PASHALIAN: It was an Italian neighborhood. It was practically like another "Little Italy"... Everybody knew one another... it was fun... in the South Elmwood section of Cranston.

LEDOUX: Were your parents ever sorry they came to America?

PASHALIAN: No... no, they liked America. But they did miss their people. They had sisters back in Italy... (They left their parents, too... they died in Italy a year later.)... and brothers, too... they missed their sisters and brothers. Some of them moved to America, but to New York, Mt. Kisko... I guess they're scattered all over.

LEDOUX: Was communication a problem for them when they came to America?

PASHALIAN: Very much so; but it made it easier living in a community where there were quite a few people of their own kind... like I said, a sort of "Little Italy".
LEDOUX: What kind of work did your father do?
PASHALIAN: He was a millworker...for a good 12, 15 years.

LEDOUX: Did he continue to farm while in America?
PASHALIAN: Yes, in addition to his job, he continued to farm out here, and made a living at it.

LEDOUX: Did everyone in the neighborhood maintain a garden?
PASHALIAN: Yes, everyone had his own farming area...and grew everything from peas to potatoes, which lasted all year around.

LEDOUX: As you were growing up, what was the role of your mother and father in the family? What were your responsibilities as children?
PASHALIAN: My mother's role was to bring up the family; my father's was to go to work...of course my mother had nine children to raise...we had our chores to do. If, for instance, we wanted to go to the movies, we had to earn it--after all, money wasn't easy to come by in those days. If we got a quarter one week, we really thought it was something. We could go to a movie, or, well...we could go to a movie--we didn't know what dancing was in those days! But we did manage to go to a movie, though not often. Of course we did have to do things around the house. In those days my father was kind of strict...maybe a little too much. He kept us busy...made us stay around the neighborhood...there were so many of us.

LEDOUX: What language was spoken in the home?
PASHALIAN: Italian... and a little broken English.

LEDoux: You said that quietly... are you embarrassed that broken English was spoken in your family?

PASHALIAN: No... we were brought up on it... why should I be embarrassed?

LEDoux: Did your parents have any help in learning the English language?

PASHALIAN: No... and they were more or less the "home type". They never went out much. They'd visit people, people would visit them... but as far as recreation? They had nowhere to go; in those days.

LEDoux: Did they have a car?

PASHALIAN: No... they had no family car whatsoever... no horse and buggy. They didn't travel much. They would walk to and from church... my father took the train to work.

LEDoux: Did you ever encounter any prejudice against Italians?

PASHALIAN: No... Everybody was Italian when I was young! Or so I thought! When I met an Irishman, I'd say, "How come you're Irish?"

LEDoux: I thought prejudice might have been the reason why some of your brothers dropped the "i" from "Oliveri". What is the story behind the name change?

PASHALIAN: In Italy, the family name was Oliveri. But when they moved here, somehow or other, the "i" was dropped, probably by the immigration officials.
However, when they were naturalized, they changed it back to "Oliveri". It was a funny thing. I have a few brothers who never changed it back to "Oliveri"...I guess they figured they had been brought up on "Oliver", and didn't want to change it...they were in the service at the time (of my parents' naturalization) and when they came back two of them decided not to change.

LEDOUX: What Italian customs have you carried on in your family?

PASHALIAN: To tell you the truth, I haven't carried on any of them. I got more "modernized". My mother, she went to church every morning, she used to say her rosary. I never did it...the older children in the family did carry on the traditions.

LEDOUX: Did your parents have any regrets about coming to America? Was life better for them here than it was in Italy?

PASHALIAN: No, no regrets...they found it much better here. They found that by earning a living here they were much better off financially.

LEDOUX: As you were growing up did you learn to speak Italian?

PASHALIAN: Well, I spoke a little, but not much. I can understand it very well, but I could never hold a conversation.

LEDOUX: What does "being Italian" mean to you? And being American?

PASHALIAN: Well I'm proud of my heritage. I'm very proud...
That's all I can say...

LEDOUX: Over the years, has there been a strengthening or a weakening of the ties in your family?

PASHALIAN: Well... they got married, raised their own families.... It seems like they've all gone their own separate way.... I guess it's hard to say. Of course, I'm close to my sisters... I'm very close to my sisters.... I guess when they get married, they have their own thing....

LEDOUX: Has the family kind of broken up since your parents died?

PASHALIAN: I don't think we're all as close since my parents died. My mother and father--especially my father--had a lot to do with keeping the family together.

LEDOUX: Do you ever read Italian language magazines?

PASHALIAN: No--but I love the pictures!

LEDOUX: Do you ever listen to Italian music?

PASHALIAN: Oh very much so! I love Italian music. Especially the Italian disco!

LEDOUX: What do you think should be the role of the mother, father and the children in the family?

PASHALIAN: I think they should have a real good relationship, as far as whether they want to know anything, they should all get together and speak about it. If there's anything they want to talk over, there should be no hesitation....

LEDOUX: Actually, what I mean is, what do you think of the traditional roles in our society?
PASHALIAN: I think this is something the husband and wife should discuss beforehand. If the (man) wants to be the breadwinner, all well and good (as he usually is), but if the mother wants to work a few hours a day, and if the father's home, I think it's perfectly right. I think parents should find a way that she should get out, too. I think it's very good, too, for the mother to get out... into the world... even if it's only for a few hours. I think it makes a stronger tie for the family... I find that with me. I don't know what I'd do if I had to stay home. I love working.

LEDOUX: What do you think about divorce?

PASHALIAN: Well, I've never been in that predicament, so it's kind of hard to say. Well, I think if two people aren't getting along... before they get a divorce they should talk things over... see a marriage counselor. Sometimes it can be straightened out. ... I'm not against divorce... There's no sense in two people staying together if they're going to be miserable.

LEDOUX: How do you feel about abortion?

PASHALIAN: Abortion... I think it's up to the person involved. If they feel as though they have to have an abortion and if it's to protect their morality— if they feel they can't take care of a child... if they can go to a good clinic and have an abortion
then I'm all for it, if they want to keep their own child, then I'm all for it; it all depends on the individual... that's the way I feel.

LEDOUX: Do you feel that your beliefs are in conflict with your religious ideals?

PASHALIAN: I think so.

LEDOUX: Does that bother you?

PASHALIAN: I think so... really... well, not too much now. I used to be a very strict Catholic, but now... well, things have changed. I'm more or less... uh... I know the Catholic church is very much against abortion and stuff like that. But I've come to the conclusion that eventually (we'll) see eye-to-eye... they'll come towards it...

LEDOUX: How do you feel about the clergy?

PASHALIAN: Do you mean should priests get married? Yes, I think they should. Really... if ministers can get married, then why can't the Catholics? It's a sacrifice not to be married, you know? I think it's very important because they can feel other people out. Not being married themselves, they can't have the same feelings, like when a couple asks them different questions... they really can't feel people out. They have to go through it themselves. That's why I think they should, really. I think it's very helpful....

LEDOUX: What was it like dating, way back when?

PASHALIAN: My family was very strict. I remember... I had
to take a chaperon. They wanted someone in the
family to go with me. I have sisters that my
mother and father had to have other sisters and
brothers go with them. They couldn't go on a
date unless their brother was with them.

LEDOUX: How old were you when you started dating?
PASHALIAN: Eighteen years old...well...I was 14 when I first
---well, I guess you would call it puppy love--
The iceman, who used to deliver ice to us, well,
I fell in love with him. It only lasted a week
only because I was caught kissing him. My first
kiss.

LEDOUX: What happened?
PASHALIAN: My parents got in on it...it was the first and
last time I ever saw this fellow...and I didn't
date until I was 18.

LEDOUX: What kinds of restrictions were on you during
your dating years?
PASHALIAN: I had to be in no later than 10:00p.m. Imagine,
I was 18...and even when I was 26 and going steady,
I had to be in by 10:00p.m....

LEDOUX: Did you ever come in after curfew?
PASHALIAN: Well, during the week I saw (my fiance) almost
every night, until 9:45p.m., then on the weekend,
maybe the latest was 11:00p.m., and they
didn't like it.

LEDOUX: Did you ever get in trouble?
PASHALIAN: Well, after a while they got used to it and didn't
say anything. They started getting a little more modernized by that time (1948).

LEDOUX: Have you raised your children the way that you were raised? Were you as strict with your children?

PASHALIAN: No. I was a little more lenient.

LEDOUX: Do you think your way is better, or your parents' way?

PASHALIAN: Oh, I think my way is better... naturally... they were too strict.

LEDOUX: Is there anything in your childhood--some past experience--that made you into the lenient parent you feel you are?

PASHALIAN: Yeah, well, I feel this way: If you're going to go out, you're going to go out, you're going to find some way to go out, no matter how strict your parents are. There's always a way you're going to go out. The way I feel today is to be lenient--not over lenient--but be lenient enough to say, "Alright, you're on your own, just watch your step, that's all." Like I said, if you want to go, you're going to find a way out, so I say that today's standards are the best. I would never change for the old.

LEDOUX: What do you think of welfare and social services?

PASHALIAN: I think that welfare is very, very good--but don't take advantage of it. There are people who really do need it.
LEDOUX: How do you feel about education?

PASHALIAN: If possible, I think everybody should have an education...if they can afford to.

LEDOUX: Do you think it is as important for women to have an education as it is for men?

PASHALIAN: Women as well as men. Suppose something happens to the mate--I think a woman should always be educated...so that she can make a life of her own.

It's very, very important....

LEDOUX: Have you ever been to Italy?

PASHALIAN: No, but I would like to someday. It would be a very nice place to be. I have a few friends that's been and they say it's beautiful out there.

LEDOUX: Has your mother ever told you about her birthplace in Italy? Could you give me some kind of physical description of it?

PASHALIAN: They lived in a kind of brick house; no, stucco. It had a dirt floor...and it was on the side of a mountain, as far as I understand...in a very poor section, near the olive groves. There were a lot of earthquakes, quite often. My mother lived through quite a few of them. Living on the mountain...the weather was strange. They even got snow. But almost as soon as it would fall, it would melt. It would come down, a couple of inches, but it would melt in no time. She told me they would go out to hang the clothes--barefoot in the snow--and they were never cold because
the snow would never last. In the summertime they
would get snow, but it would never last....

LEDOUX: Do you have any relatives left in the old village?
PASHALIAN: Yes, I still have relatives there and (my brother
in-law) still writes to them.

LEDOUX: Have you always lived in the same community?
PASHALIAN: Yes, I've always lived in Cranston.

LEDOUX: Do you work outside of the home?
PASHALIAN: Yes, I work in a sandwich shop in Cranston, with my hus-
bond.

LEDOUX: What do you do for recreation?
PASHALIAN: I go bowling; to the movies now and then, when there
is a good movie; we go dining and dancing.

LEDOUX: What is your social life like?
PASHALIAN: We have a lot of friends and family to visit and
go out with. It's more fun that way...When we're
not working, we're out there!

LEDOUX: Have you done any traveling outside of RI?
PASHALIAN: Yes I have...N.Y., N.J., Florida, etc, ...I've
been to quite a few places...not too many, but
here and there.

LEDOUX: What in life is most important to you?
PASHALIAN: To be happy, to enjoy each day...to take one day
at a time, and enjoy it as much as possible. That's
about all I can say...to see my children settle
down...I think that's what makes parents happy.
That's it.

*   *   *