Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Filomena Amoroso by Maureen McGarry

Filomena Amoroso

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NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Filomena Amoroso
INTERVIEWER: Maureen McGarry
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/21/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Childhood, parental influences

Church, school, traditions

Dating

Father's occupation

Life during the Depression

Visit to Italy
GS-361 THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

ORAL HISTORY INFORMATION

Name of interviewee: Filomena Amoroso
Address: 31 Twin Oak Drive Warwick, RI
Date of interview: 2/21
Location of interview: home
Name of researcher: Maureen McGarry
Others present: Family

Sequence listing of subjects covered in this interview:
Growing Up
Parents
Education
Italian Customs
Italian or American?

INFORMATION ON INTERVIEWEE

Age: 58
Sex: F
Religion: Catholic
Occupation: Assembler
Education: K-9

Date of arrival in U.S.: __________ Where?
From Where? (name town in Italy): ____________________
Date of arrival in R. I.: __________ Where?
Moves: ____________________

Reasons for moves: ____________________
If second or third generation, indicate generation: __________
Interviewer: For my second interview I am interviewing a second generation Italian in her home in Warwick. First, I would like you to tell me your name and if you're the oldest, youngest in your family.

Interviewee: My name is Filomena Amoroso and I am the oldest of nine children.

Interviewer: Nine children, big family. Can you tell me where you grew up?

Interviewee: Yes, I was born on Europe Street in the Federal Hill section of Providence.

Interviewer: Tell me what it was like growing up a little bit. Were your parents strict with you because you were a girl or a little more lenient? Who was the disciplinarian? Things like that, while you were growing up.

Interviewee: Well my father was very, very good and gentle. Never disciplined us because he
didn't have to because my mother was there. She did it all. She would make us do our little chores. And she would take care of us all. And she would punish us by making us do things, by doing them over again. Like doing the dishes, you do them twice, you get mad, you do them over again. And that's how it went down the line.... Took care of the young ones.

Interviewer: You did?

Interviewee: Yes. Like to get dressed, washed up, give them a bath. You do all that, just kind of helped around. Learned to cook. That was about it in the house.

Interviewer: In your neighborhood, was there just all Italians or was it more integrated with different nationalities?

Interviewee: Mostly Italian I believe there were only two Irish families in the whole neighborhood.

Interviewer: So did you all go to the same church? Was it a national church?

Interviewee: All the Italians did, yes. We went down to the Holy Ghost church up on Atwells Ave, and the two Irish families, that I knew of went to St. Mary's church on Broadway.

Interviewer: Was the an Irish Catholic church?

Interviewee: Yes more Irish and I guess part of the other
side of town went over there too. Irish on the other side.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little about the religious traditions you followed? Like I know St. Joseph's Day is a big Italian holiday. Do you celebrate that?

Interviewee: Yes, we do. We have zeppole, it's like a donut with creme in it. That's a tradition for the day and then we have, the day before Ash Wednesday we have a celebration. Then on Easter we have rice pies, sweet bread, everything is homemade and then down the line.

Interviewer: Is that like a big family holiday? Does the whole family get together and celebrate Easter or is it just your own family?

Interviewee: No... we have aunts and uncles come in. It's like an open house, anyone can stop in. But the big meal is really only the immediate family.

Interviewer: So, I know that... did you ever go...never mind, I won't ask that. I know Christmas Eve is supposed to be a big holiday, you
must celebrate that one too.

Interviewee: Yes, we have fish. We have something like three or four kinds of fish and greens and different things like that. And we end it off with pastry and nuts and it's like a big meal and we go to midnight mass. We come, we have a breakfast like and then we get prepared for the dinner which is big too and open house too. Anyone can come.

Interviewer: So, Christmas Eve is a day of fast, Christmas day is celebration. Is that what your saying?

Interviewee: Right.

Interviewer: That's pretty interesting...I would like you to tell me a little about your education. Did your parents feel that you should, it should be in the home or in the school of a little of both?

Interviewee: My father was strong in school. He believed that everyone should go to school and learn as much as they could for their own benefit. My mother believed that you should read and write but in the house you had to learn to do different things, to be loving people, to get along, like. My father believed very much that you should go to school and learn the English language but he also believed
you should learn Italian at home. In other words, if he was speaking to you at home he wanted you to speak Italian you would know Italian, at the same time you'd go to school and learn the English. You'd know two languages that way.

Interviewer: Was that so you could live in America, because you could speak the language? Not so you could live in America... See if you just spoke Italian...

Interviewee: Well you had to learn to communicate with the other people, that you were going to school with, but I think going to school and speaking English there then coming home and speaking Italian there gave you a chance to speak the Italian language. That was a part of the Italian heritage. You know your own. Keep that going, whereas if we spoke English and they spoke English we would only know the one language.

Interviewer: Yes... Which one did you learn first?

Interviewee: I would say I learned the Italian first.

Interviewer: So when you went to school did you find it hard?

Interviewee: No I didn't. No because we were starting school real young. You have no fear of saying the wrong things, you just went right
along with it. We were compelled to do our homework. That had to be done before supper at night. Make sure that was done and then after if you had other things you did it. Just went right along, played and that was it.

Interviewer: Were most of the kids in your class, were they Italian too?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: How about the teacher?

Interviewee: No, most of our teachers were not Italian.

Interviewer: So did you find they taught different values from what you learned at home because they weren't Italian?

Interviewee: No, I don't think so. I think we were all treated very much the same and the values of the home life and the school life. Really and truely being almost all Italian neighborhood, that we were mostly all Italian we were treated all alike. I don't think we had, as far as saying being Italian we weren't taught because there were Irish or English teachers.

Interviewer: But you didn't find anything they taught in school against what your mother taught?

Interviewee: No, I wouldn't say so...

Interviewer: The teachers weren't Italian was it hard for you to understand and translate?

Interviewee: No, not really. What they tell you in school
and what your mother, father spoke to you in Italian would be more or less relating to things around the house, and they would explain the word. Where in school, the English was all there and all explained there so it was a different thing between the Italian and the English.

Interviewer: How did your parents feel about your dating? Were there any restrictions?

Interviewee: Yes, because my mother was choosy who I went out with. First it had to be white and a Catholic most of all. But other that that it wasn't that bad and everyone picked out who they wanted, my mother didn't match up anybody. So it was a question of my mother believed in true love and love alone. You had to get married in the church because you were Catholic and that she demanded over anything else.

Interviewer: How about your father, did he want you to marry an Italian?

Interviewee: No, as long as it was a white person and they were Catholic that was the main thing.

Interviewer: Did they have to approve before you were married? Was there any courtship, engagement thing where your boyfriend would have to ask your father to marry you? Anything formal
Interviewee: The custom is if the girl had a boyfriend the boyfriend would ask the father, but I think that went out too. My father wasn't that type. My mother came from Italy but she was a very modern woman.

Interviewer: Lucky for you. What did you father do for a living when he came here?

Interviewee: He was a knife maker, it was a family trade.

Interviewer: He did that in Italy too?

Interviewee: Yes, his father did it, and his grandfather did and then he had his own knife business here. Then I quit school in the ninth grade to help him.

Interviewer: Was there a reason why you quit school? Did they want you to quit?

Interviewee: No they didn't want me to quit. But, I quit because I felt my mother had all of us and me being the oldest I thought I'd go to work and help them out. My father was disappointed. He wanted me to go to school and go to college but it didn't work out that way.

Interviewer: It seems you grew up during the years of the Depression. How did your parents feed nine children?

Interviewee: My mother made her own bread. And she made her own macaroni and she would mix up with beans, sometimes just gravy, and if it were
Sunday, we had meatballs with macaroni. My father had chickens in the backyard. We used to feed on. We used to have rabbits in the backyard.

Interviewer: Did he have a garden?
Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Was it a big garden?
Interviewee: No just enough to keep us going. Tomatoes, plums, stringbeans, a couple of peach trees, peartrees in the backyard. Fig tree, grapevine, quite a big grapevine.

Interviewer: A fig tree?! I can't imagine a fig tree on Federal Hill.

Interviewee: Yes that was... We had a big backyard. My father bought a big house on Toby Street so we had a bigger backyard. We really enjoyed life there. We built a little wagon and we'd go up on Atwells Avenue where we did our shopping.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of specialty shops?
Interviewee: Yes, but mostly is was on pushcartsthen, now there's a lot of stores. As you went along of course everyone else was out there too and you met everyone. Took you about four to five hours to shop. A big reunion. But you bought everything for the whole week. Prepared it or put it away and it would last you until the
next Saturday, when you go shopping again.

Interviewer: What was on the pushcarts? Like I can think of the guys up in Boston screaming and yelling.

Interviewee: That's what it was like. Yeh, they had almost everything on pushcarts. They had fish, vegetables, fruits...everything, all on one big pushcart.

Interviewer: Did they really scream?

Interviewee: Yes, they wanted to see who could yell louder than the other. Get your attention. Part of Federal hill used to be like the markets out in Italy with the squares and all the pushcarts side by side.

Interviewer: Did they cater mainly to Italians, then?

Interviewee: Yes, mostly all Italians. The Irish were out there then because I guess that was the main source of shopping there. But they had everything.

Interviewer: Cobblestone roads?

Interviewee: Yes and you had a neckel you used to take the trolley up. I rode them they were beautiful. They used to be the open trolley. Too bad they don't have them today. I think it would be nice for the next generation to see. I think they are missing alot.

Interviewer: I know I've never been on a trolley, it must be fun.
Interviewee: It was fun.

Interviewer: If you had the chance would you want to visit Italy? Any desire?

Interviewee: Yes, I've been to Italy. I was there in 1973. I think it's beautiful. I didn't go up to my fathers town, my mothers town because it was wintertime and I couldn't get up there because of the snow. Rome is fabulous. I've been to Florence, I think it's great. But I really and truly wouldn't want to live there. I think that the city is similar to New York, kind of fast going. As far as living in the town, I don't think I could do that after living in America.

Interviewer: Are most of the towns, country?

Interviewee: Yes, I would say so and I don't think it's as modern as we have here. Little towns here are modern as compared to out there. I don't think I could actually survive that system of living out there either. I don't think I could eat the food because it's too rich as compared to what I've been used to here.

Interviewer: But you enjoyed going to visit?

Interviewee: Oh yes. I think that the people are very nice and sociable and it's great to get back to hear someone speaking the Italian, whereas here you walk the street and here it's English, there it's Italian. Some of the people in the city of
Rome speak English but its different there, its not like us.

Interviewer: For my last question I would like to know if you consider yourself Italian or American?

Interviewee: Well I'd say an American. I love America. But as for tradition, I will stick to the Italian traditions and way of doing things. And I think that if anyone asked me though I would still say I'm American.

Interviewer: I would like to thank you very much for this interview.

Interviewee: Your welcome.