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Italian Women and Girls: Interview with Lisette Conte by Carmela Santoro

Lisette Conte

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Reasons for coming to U.S.

Impressions of America

Feelings on being an American
Mrs. Lisetta Conte
October 19, 1975
Arrive U.S. 1956
Branch Avenue

Q: Where were you born?
A: In France. My father immigrated from France in 1922. He was Italian but born in Austria. My father became Italian after the war.

Q: When Mussolini came to power your father left Italy?
A: Yes. My father left his family and went to France. After two years he called my mother and I was born there. He was alone when he escaped. He ran from the fascists. The rest of the family was born in France.

Q: Where was the town?
A: Near Marseille.

Q: Did you go to school in France?
A: Yes.

Q: How many years?
A: Fifth or sixth grade. Then Mussolini called all Italian immigrants back and my father went back. He (my father) didn't want to be a French citizen. WWII had started and my father didn't want to go into the French army. My brother was in the Italian army. 16 years old. I went back to Italy in 1940.

Q: Where did you live?
A: Trento. It was Austrian. My brother died in the war.

Q: What did your father do?
An upholsterer. He went to the houses. Tapestry maker.

Maybe an interior decorator.

Q: What did he do when he went back to Italy?
A: Whatever he could find. He tried cutting trees. He sell wood.

Q: What did you do for recreation?

Q: Did you go to school in Italy?
A: Yes, I started in 2nd grade because I didn't know Italian. The language was difficult for me. I just went to sixth grade. You had to go to the city for high school.

Q: You speak two languages then.
A: Yes very well, French and Italian and some English.

Q: When did you come to the U.S.?
A: In 1955 or 56.

Q: Why did you come?
A: Italy was destroyed from the war. Not too much work. No homes. You paid a lot of money for an apartment. Like Milano. After one year we started building a house. My husband had a state job. Railroad. Everyone believed the U.S. had a good future even though we were okay in Italy. My husband was a policeman before we were married. I lost my job because I married. He quit the police force so he could marry me. Then he worked at the railroad. My husband had a good steady job. But we came to the U.S. for more opportunity. His aunt sent for him.

Q: How did you get here?
A: By plane, into N.Y.
Q: How long did you stay in N.Y.?
A: Very little.
Q: What was your first impression?
A: A lot of people. In the port there were all Italian immigrants. Everyone spoke Italian. You were scared. A stranger in a different land.
Q: Did anyone meet you in N.Y.?
A: This cousin. Then we went to Connecticut. For one day. Then to Providence.
Q: Where did you live in Providence?
A: For one month at his aunt's house.
Q: What was your impression?
A: I didn't see much. All Italian immigrants. It was Italian section. I saw a black guy for the first time. It scared me a little.
Q: Did the Italians here speak a dialect?
A: Yes. I knew a lot of southern dialect. The houses were different here, wood. I like it better. Everybody proud of their houses. I like the separate houses here. I like the grass.
Q: What do you like best?
A: The opportunity and you can do something with your life that you want. A home. Good job. Work. The children can go to school.
Q: Are you disappointed?
A: Life is different. You don't see a lot of people. You don't see too much flowers. Italy is much smaller.
Q: Did you go to school in the US.?
A: No.
Q: When you came you had one daughter?
A: Yes. Now I have five.
Q: Have you gone back to Italy?
A: Two times.
Q: How did you feel when you went back?
A: Italians changed a lot. There was more opportunity there now then before. A lot stronger.
Q: Did the Italians see you as an Italian or as an American?
A: I think as an Italian.
Q: How do you see yourself?
A: I think as an American. It's almost twenty years here. I was only six years in Italy because I was in France. I've been in America more.
Q: Are you a citizen?
A: Yes, after five years.
Q: Why did you become a citizen?
A: I believe in this country, my children were born here. I work here. I make my life here. This is my land today.
Q: What do you do for recreation?
A: I have five children, that is my recreation. I like to picnic. I go to movies sometimes. I go to parties. My back hurts. I like to swim.
Q: Are you interested in politics?
A: No.
Q: Suppose you had to start all over would you still want to come?
A: In this country I have everything, but I have all my family in Italy. Part of me is there. I want to live in this country because I see opportunity for my children. It's too late to go back. I think, yes, I would still come here. Even with all the progress over there. For me.