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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Bonnie Benjamin by Donna Sawyer

Bonnie Benjamin

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NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Ronnie Benjamin
INTERVIEWER: Donna Sawyer
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/23/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Grandparents and stories of past
Parents: views and lives
Family life
Relatives
Education
Present views
Interviewer: Bonnie, you are a third generation Italian, is that correct?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what part of Italy your grandparents were from?

Interviewee: My grandfather was from Pisa and my grandmother was from Massa Carrara.

Interviewer: Did they ever tell you anything about their homeland?

Interviewee: Some stories would come down, not a whole lot, but my grandmother did come from a place where they did produce marble. My grandfather told me stories about the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Interviewer: Have you ever visited Italy?

Interviewee: No I have not.

Interviewer: Would you like to?

Interviewee: Some day, yes, possibly I would like to.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you would like to go see in particular?

Interviewee: Um, most of Italy I would like to go see. I
Interviewer: Would you like to visit the Vatican and so forth.

Interviewee: Did your grandparents ever go to Italy?

Interviewee: Yes, my grandmother went over after my grandfather died. My grandfather never did.

Interviewer: What about your parents?

Interviewee: Oh yes. My father and mother did go to visit. I would say approximately ten years ago. They said they enjoyed it very much.

Interviewer: Are both your parents Italian?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Where did your parents grow up?

Interviewee: My mother grew up in Springfield, Mass., and my father in Pawtucket, R.I.

Interviewer: Where are your parents living right now?

Interviewee: My father is living in Pawtucket and my mother is living in Warren.

Interviewer: What type of job does your father have?

Interviewee: He has a business of his own. He is self-employed. He started off working with my grandfather years ago doing bicycle repairs and sales and so forth. Then he went on to be a salesman of bicycle equipment. Then he eventually opened up his own business. He still has his business now and he is sixty-eight years old.

Interviewer: Very good. Does your mother work?

Interviewee: Ah, yes, she is a private nurse.

Interviewer: How did your father feel about her working?

Interviewee: AH, he was very against it when I was growing up, very, very against it. He came from the old fashion beliefs that the man went out and
and earned the "bread" so to speak, and the wife stayed home and took care of the children, cleaned the house, and did her thing at home.

Interviewer: Do you think that that is typically Italian?
Interviewee: Definetly so, definetly.
Interviewer: Have you ever worked yourself?
Interviewee: Yes. After I got out of highschool I went to hairdressing school. I worked for eight years, I would say, as a hairdresser.
Interviewer: How did your parents feel about you working?
Interviewee: Oh, they were all for it, very much for it. They thought it was good for me.
Interviewer: As far as your family is concerned, how many children are in your family?
Interviewee: There are five. Two brothers and two sisters.
Interviewer: What language was spoken in your home?
Interviewee: English. My father did a few times try to teach us bits and pieces of Italian but none of us really picked it up that great. We kind of just stuck with the English.
Interviewer: You don't remember any Italian now?
Interviewee: None at all. Oh, yes, one word, tassa, it means cup, I think.
Interviewer: What were your father's responsibilities at home?
Interviewee: At home itself? He was very heavy into the discipline part of, say my sister and I because we were the oldest, and other than that nothing really around the house, other than going out, working and bringing all the money in to support us.
Interviewer: So your father's role in the family was more or less just to provide for the children.

Interviewee: Yes, that is correct.

Interviewer: What about major decisions?

Interviewee: Oh, they were all up to him. My mother had no voice in the opinion whatsoever.

Interviewer: Do you consider that typically Italian?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely so.

Interviewer: What was your mother's role in the family?

Interviewee: Being the "perfect" mother, housekeeper, and friend, so to speak, to my father.

Interviewer: What were the roles of your brothers and sisters, as well as yourself? Did you have any specific jobs or...

Interviewee: Ah, my sister and I were raised much stricter than the other three. We had to do dishes after supper, homework right after school, every Saturday was spent cleaning different parts of the house mainly the cellar. And, um, that is about it.

Interviewer: How close is your family with the extended family or relatives?

Interviewee: With extended relatives? Very close to my grandmother but as far as aunts and uncles, not necessarily so. They live out of state anyway.

Interviewer: How do you feel about relationships with your relatives?

Interviewee: Well, at times I do wish we were a much closer
Interviewer: Is your immediate family a close knit family, a so called Italian family?
Interviewee: Yes, yes it is I would say.
Interviewer: Do you feel you could be or should be closer?
Interviewee: There again, ah, two of my brothers live out of state, and one of my sisters lives out of state, so I don't think we could become any closer but even though we don't see each other very much, there still is that closeness that was instilled in us when we were very small.

Interviewer: Do any of your relatives ever tell you any stories about Italy, or maybe their travels to America from Italy, like your grandparents?
Interviewee: Oh yes, my grandmother has a terrific story about my grandfather crossing over. He was about eighteen, I believe, when he came over. He got very, very violently sick on the ship. When he finally reached America, he bent down and made a cross in the sand and swore he would never, ever travel across that sea again. And he never did!

Interviewer: He never had the desire to go back?
Interviewee: No, he never did.
Interviewer: Did your grandmother ever go back?
Interviewee: Yes, she went back, about seven or eight years ago.

Interviewer: Does your family still have any relatives that still live in Italy?
Interviewee: I have heard that there may be very distant cousins over there but we don't keep up with it so we aren't really sure.

Interviewer: As far as any Italian traditions or customs, I realize that you are a third generation Italian, and the ties to the Italian customs are not quite as strong as they maybe would be if you were a second or first generation, but can you remember any Italian traditions or customs that you might have had to carry out as a child?

Interviewee: Yes, we used to go to my grand mother's house every Sunday night for a very big family gathering, aunts and uncles and cousins and so forth. She made the traditional home made bread, chicken soup, and a big spaghetti meal. And of course salad and so forth. Also a lot of Italian pastries. Holidays and Sundays, that was just a must, we had to go to my grandmother's.

Interviewer: Do you remember what your grandmother's house was like when you were younger?

Interviewee: I remember it was immaculate, that much I do remember. Everything was just in certain spots. She was a very strict grandmother, and a very loving grandmother, but very strict.

Interviewer: In what ways was she strict.

Interviewee: You weren't allowed to touch certain things. It was like back in the old days when children were supposed to just sit there and maybe play
Interviewer: As far as your education, where did you go to school.

Interviewee: Ah, I went in Pawtucket, to Tolman Highschool. Then I went to hairdressing school.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you might have wanted to go on to a college?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely, definitely so. I still do as a matter of fact, to be a nursery school teacher.

Interviewer: So you regret not going to college.

Interviewee: Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: Did you not go to college because maybe your parents felt that it was not proper for a girl to go to college?

Interviewee: No, no, not what so ever. I had applied to a couple of colleges but I just did not persist on it.

Interviewer: Then your parents did feel that a woman had the right to be educated equally.

Interviewee: Oh, yes, definitely so.
Interviewer: Did you ever have any conflicts in your school years because you were Italian?

Interviewee: No, none what so ever. There again you were involved with all kinds of ethnic groups.

Interviewer: What about the education of your parents. How far did they go to school?

Interviewee: My mother went all through highschool and my father went to college for I believe two years, and law school for I believe two years also.

Interviewer: You had mentioned to me that your grandmother was very, very strict. I was wondering, what about your parents, were they just as strict, or were they leniant with you?

Interviewee: My mother was strict, yes very strict, being that I was the oldest of five children, so, they were very, very strict with me and actually my sister too. My father was definitly strict. You had to be in by such and such an hour, and if you were a minute late, he would be sitting at the kitchen table with the light on. When you would pull into the driveway, you knew you were in for big trouble. Alot of lectures as to why I should have been in at such and such a time. He was never one for hitting us. He never really hit us but he was a great story teller and would give us alot of examples on things like why you shouldn't do this because of such and such. And, like I said before, an awful lot of lectures.
Interviewer: As a final question, would you consider yourself to be more American or more Italian orientated?

Interviewee: Definitely more American orientated, mainly for the fact that I was a third generation, and I didn't really have any of the customs of let's say the second generation. No, definitely more American.

Interviewer: O.K. Thank you very much Bonnie.
Third generation Italians, for the most part I would imagine, are fairly removed from the strong Italian customs and traditions. Even if they, the third generation, do not live a life full of Italian traditions, there is always that tie to grandparents who are first generation Italians. In my third generation interview, this was quite evident. The interviewee did not carry out any Italian traditions or customs yet remembers living some as a child. The biggest thing was to spend Sundays with the family at grandmother's house. This seemed to be very common thing and was exercised every Sunday.

The interviewee also remembered the immaculate grandparents house. Also, a chest full of religious articles. These are both generally typical of a first generation Italian.

The interviewee mentioned several things that seemed to fall into Italian customs. Such things were discipline procedures, religion, manly roles, womanly roles, and the strong attachment to the grandparents.

I definitely can see some Italian influence in these areas even if the interviewee, presently, does not exercise any Italian traditions or customs.