Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Anna Casdia by Marie Squatrito

Anna Casdia

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Oral History Interview #1

with

Anna Squatrito Casdia

February 23, 1979
Interviewee's Home
by Marie Squatrito

[Interviewer:] Did both of your parents come from Italy?
[Interviewee:] Yes, they were very young when they came.
[Interviewer:] What part of Italy did they come from?
[Interviewee:] They came from Falcone Provincia Messina, Sicily.
[Interviewer:] Was that a big town?
[Interviewee:] No, a small town.
[Interviewer:] Do you know how many people lived there, about?
[Interviewee:] I really don't know. About six thousand, I guess.
[Interviewer:] When you were a child, did your parents speak Italian at home?
[Interviewee:] Yes, that's all they knew how to speak, and of course, we spoke it at home too. This was hard for me. When I went to school, I didn't know how to speak English, but I got by.
INTERVIEWER: I would like you to tell us about your family as a child. What did your father do for a living?

INTERVIEWEE: My father worked in a factory, in the old National Indian Rubber Company. On spare time, at night, he would go fishing with a fisherman next door to earn extra money. Then, maybe a few hours after supper, he and a friend of his would go to this E.B. Company on North Main Street and take clothes on consignment and go door to door to sell them on commission to make a few extra dollars. At the time, it was very hard. That's how the family got by, with all these extra little jobs.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother work?

INTERVIEWEE: No, no, but then we were eight children.

INTERVIEWER: What was her role in the family?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, a good mother. A good mother, cooked and washed, a good housewife.

INTERVIEWER: Did your father rule the house with an iron fist?

INTERVIEWEE: No, no, no.

INTERVIEWER: What were your parents' feelings about the man as the head of the household?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, the Italian custom is that the man should be at the head of the household, but the man always gives in to the family and then they work things out very well together.
INTERVIEWER: What are your feelings about this? Do you think the man should be the head of the household?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it's nice to have the man feel that he's at the head of the house, but you can always get anything that you want from him.

INTERVIEWER: What were the children's responsibilities in the home?

INTERVIEWEE: Well after school, first of all, we had to change our clothes, make sure we didn't mess them up. Each and every one of us had our little jobs. The girls would learn to cook or help around the house--do little housework, little chores. The boys had their chores to do, even as far as polishing and washing floors. Mother always said that when they grew up they would know how to do everything. Also the boys, my four brothers, also knew how to cook. I think today, this pays off. It's really good.

INTERVIEWER: Was education a strong factor in your family life?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I couldn't get much education. In those days, it was hard. I only got as far as the eighth grade. I always had in mind that I had to go home and help my mother, so you see, I didn't--it was hard.

INTERVIEWER: How about religion? Was that an important factor?
INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, religion was important. We went to Sunday school and on nights that were stormy we would all sit around the table and my father would tell us stories about different saints, and different churches, and different things all having to do with religion.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any special stories that you remember?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, there were so many little ones. I cherish them all.

INTERVIEWER: What church did you go to when you were a child?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I believe we didn't have Mt. Carmel. They had St. Mary's Church then, but when Mt. Carmel Church was built, we went to Mt. Carmel.

INTERVIEWER: Is Mt. Carmel an all-Italian church?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, but there are all different nationalities that go there.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any special beliefs that your family had?

INTERVIEWEE: We always believed that we had to respect our elders, help the elders, and be kind and never dare to answer anybody back. That would be terrible. In fact, we had a couple of people that lived on our street. They were so much older than we were that we called them aunts and uncles. They were nothing to us, but we were never to refer to them by a first name.
INTERVIEWER: Do you have a lot of aunts and uncles?
INTERVIEWEE: My father had one brother. He stayed in New York for awhile, but because his wife couldn’t come over to America, on account of a little eye disease, he went back to Italy. That’s the only brother my father had, but oh, he had loads of children and it’s a big family. My mother had one brother here, but the rest of her brothers and sisters were all in Italy. We have a large, large family in Italy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you write to them often?
INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, I went to visit them in fact. We send them goodies, packages and all that. They love that, you know. They are very modern now, very, very modern. They have lovely homes. I’m so proud of them. Many of them had to go to work in Switzerland and Australia in order to earn money to build up their homes because they had sort of a little tremor, and many of the homes broke. Now, they’ve got beautiful, beautiful condominiums and beautiful private homes. Really, I was amazed to see them.

INTERVIEWER: How about your life now? As a wife, did you work?
INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, we ran our own beauty salon. Of course, there were three of us sisters, but two of them passed away so I took over the business until about seven years ago when I retired from it. Yes, we had a great business for almost thirty years—our hairdresser business.
INTERVIEWER: How did you finally make it to hairdressing school?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, first I worked in the National Indian Rubber Company making shoes. At home, after work, girls would trust me. I would do a little sewing, believe it or not. I would make dresses for them and different little things. In those days, you could have a dress made for $1.25, believe it or not. I saved enough money and then my sister decided that she needed help, so I went to hairdressing school. I didn't want to do hairdressing, I really wanted to do electrolysis, but you had to be either a hairdresser or a nurse so I figured it would be easier to be a hairdresser than a nurse. Then she got sick and passed on. I had to take over the business.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a head of your household today?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, my husband is the head of the household, but you know, he's always confiding in me. We both are. It's fifty-fifty.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still celebrate holidays the same as you did when you were a child?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, yes! We don't have all the goodies because we can't. There's only two of us here, but we do, we have the tradition with all the lovely little things--yes, all the decorations and good things to eat. Of course, now everyday is a holiday!
INTERVIEWER: Are there any customs that you have adopted from Uncle Joe that were different from customs you had as a child? Is there anything that he had in Italy that now you have?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I picked up all his lovely pastries, you know, and their lovely traditions—how they celebrate different holidays. They—it's just wonderful—it's too many to try to think of.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I have been three times, after I married.

INTERVIEWER: How would you compare it to the United States?

INTERVIEWEE: Well it's, well within the last ten years it has grown to be a lovely place with new buildings. They have all the modern equipment now. If you've got the money in Italy, you can live just as well there as you do in America. The only thing I find is that the women do not go to work there. No, their husbands keep them. In the northern part of Italy the women go to work, but the southern part, oh no. They'll just relax and they don't work, but they get everything that they want also, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you would have liked living there?

INTERVIEWEE: I like to vacation there, but I like to come back to America. I do love the northern part of Italy. I have a brother-in-law that lives there, right near the Switzerland border. It's just beautiful there. I was there this summer.
Today, we're going to talk about something a little bit different. We're going to talk about the names of the people in your family. Could you tell us what your mother and father's names were?

My father was born as the procession was going by his house on December 25. In Italy it's Buon Natale that means Merry Christmas, and my grandmother named him Natale. My mother's name was Fortuna. She was named after one of her grandmothers or grandfathers. It's a custom to name the first children for respect of the grandmothers or grandfathers, and if you have more children, either the brothers--like I was named after my grandmother. My real name is Frebonia, in Italian, but because we couldn't say it in school, they nicknamed me Anna. I'm sorry today, because I think it's a beautiful name.
INTERVIEWEE: And, I had a sister Caroline. She's passed on. She was named from a member of the family. My sister Josephine is named for my mother's mother Josephine. My sister Millie, rest her peace, she was named from my mother's sister, Carmela. Now, let's see, I've got my three sisters. Then, we have four brothers. My first brother was named Angelo, after my father's father. My second brother, Frank Squatrito, was named for my mother's father. Then came my brother Jerome, and my father had an older brother, so he was named after my father's brother. Then of course, my brother, Joseph, was named on my mother's side. They did things very evenly so that there wouldn't be any hard feelings. But, it's a nice, it's sort of a respect when you name your children for some member of your family. That is a tradition—an Italian tradition.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me a little bit about how your brothers and sisters live today?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, my brother Angelo, he worked in Kaiser and he has one son and his wife Etta. His son is named after my father, Natale, and he's educated. Today, he is an engineer, and doing very well.

INTERVIEWER: Is it true that second generation Italians try to educate their children? Do you feel that's true?
INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes! What we couldn't get, we try to give to our children.

And, I have my brother Frank. He has two daughters. One's already a schoolteacher, and her name is Cookie. Well, in fact, her real name is Fortuna, after my mother. Because the children made fun of it at school, she changed it to Cookie, but she still is Fortuna. Her sister is Marie. She's named, I believe, after her grandmother on her mother's side. She will be a teacher come this June, and of course that makes me very proud.

My brother is in the fruit business, and they have a lovely home. Also, Angelo has a lovely home and all.

Then, I have my brother Jerome. He has two children, a daughter Geraldine. She's in med school right now, and then a son. He's a manager of a roller skating rink. My brother works, and his wife also works. When there are two people working, I think it makes it easier to educate the children.

Then, I have my brother Joseph. He has no children. He's in Florida. He was in the service for twenty-two years and now he's retired and taking it easy.

And then, I have my sister Josephine. My sister Josephine also has no children. She married a fellow from Italy, too—a very lovely fellow—and their living out in Braintree, and doing very well.
And then of course, my second sister, Caroline, she never married. She passed on very, very young. And then, I have my sister Millie, Carmela, that was named after my aunt. She passed away about six years ago. It was a tragic life she led. She lost her husband very young, but still put four children through college. There's one that's a registered nurse. I believe now, she's working on her master's. Then she has her son James. He's got a big position with one of the factories. He went to college also. I can't tell you where. In business, anyway. And then, my niece Caroline. She studied to be a teacher, and my nephew Jackie, who is working on his master's in Florida. He is a bio-chemist. They are all doing well. I think I told you, yes, I think I got them all in. They are all doing very well. My father had a fruit business too, you know. After on in years, when the factories closed and we were older and the boys were older, he got into the fruit business and did well. And of course, one of my brothers is in his own business. I'm very proud of my brothers and sisters. They did very, very well. Coming up from depression is hard.
INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me a little bit about the fig trees? I heard a lot about them, but I never understood them.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, my father, God love him, he was a very active man. Well first of all, when we were younger, we had four big lots. In those days, you had to plant your vegetables for year round, because you don't get fruit and vegetables like you do today. You would then preserve tomatoes, and eggplants, and peppers, and celery you would keep underground with the dirt. Then of course, when he sold those lots and bought a home, the last homestead, in the back yard I believe he had, really, it was a beautiful garden. It had vegetables and about eight fig trees. Now, those fig trees, you had to bury them in the winter otherwise they would freeze. When the old Italians saw them they would say, "OH, FRESH FIGS!". They would all come to see the fresh figs, but as he got on in years it was too much work for him. He said, "If you people want figs, you gotta help to bury them." They were just a prize. They were sweet and delicious.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't it sort of turn into a family tradition in that everybody would help to take care of them?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, my brothers, everybody would help. We were a very close knit family. If one got sick, we were all sick. If one did well, we all did. It was just beautiful! I can't forget. I mean, I have lovely
memories. Even though we had hardships, the depression and all that, I wouldn't change my childhood for nothing. You know, we would come home from school. In those days, we probably didn't have cookies. My mother would make little cookies or little biscuits with a little flour, a little sugar, a little egg. We would find hot cookies and maybe cocoa and milk, more cocoa than milk in those days. Well, if she didn't have cookies or stuff like that, she would take a piece of bread with a little sugar and put it in the oven. We always found something very lovely. It was hot and smelled do good. But, I wouldn't change my childhood days for today. No, it was hard, but they were very lovely. You appreciated everything... everything.