Italian Women and Girls: Interview with Bessie Musco by Carmela Santoro

Bessie Musco

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NAME OF INTERVIEWEE  Bessie Musco

INTERVIEWER

DATE OF INTERVIEW  October 14, 1975

SUBJECTS COVERED

Description of hometown, life in Italy  

Trip to America

Account of schooling in U.S.

Impressions of Providence, adjustments

Work history

Recreation

Trip back to Italy

Feelings about America
Tell us about your town in Italy.

A: I was left in Italy as a child, 14 months old. I lived with my grandmother. I came here when I was ten years old. I came here with an uncle.

Q: Do you remember the town?
A: I was born in Buceme, Sicily.

Q: How big a town is it?
A: About 18,000 near Syracuse.

Q: Did you go to school there?
A: Very little, I think through the 4th grade.

Then I started here.

The teachers were very strict there, but we learned a lot.

I lived with my grandparents and an uncle and aunt. I didn't know my mother and father.

Q: What did you do for playtime?
A: We just played jump rope and ball. Most of the time we learned knitting and crocheting from my grandmother. This is what most of the girls did.

Q: What did your grandfather do?
A: He was a miller, had a windmill.

Q: Did people come with their grain?
A: Mostly my grandfather brought his grain and made a kind of pizza. Some of the customers would go after the grain and deliver it back. The mill was run by water. About a half an hour from
the town. There was also one in town but they didn't own that
one. They used horses. They ground almost all grains.

Q: What did your grandmother do?
A: She did cooking and weaving. She did my mother's trousou by
hand.

Q: How many children in your mother's family/your father's?
A: My mother's had six, my father's also six.

Q: Did your father work in Italy before he came here?
A: Yes, he owned part of the windmill.

Q: He and your mother were married there?
A: Yes, in 1909.

Q: When did they come here?
A: In 1913.

I was left in Italy, an only child. Then my mother asked my
uncle to bring me to the U.S. She was afraid to leave her other
four children in the U.S. to come and get me. That was in 1922.

Q: Do you remember the trip?
A: We came by boat. My uncle was in first class but I was down.
In freight. It was awful. I remember no seats. I enjoyed it
though because I was young. It was very crowded. If someone
was sick you got it over you. We were served in a mess hall.
It wasn't very clean. I could see my uncle during the day only.

Q: Where did you land?
A: In N.Y.

I liked N.Y. I saw the bright lights of New York. The most
impressing thing was seeing my father whom I didn't know.
Both parents met me. There was a lot of red tape before they
would let me go.
There was a lot of adjustment. I missed my grandmother. I used to call her ma.

Q: You spoke Italian?
A: Yes, but my brothers and sisters knew English. They spoke Italian to my mother because she only spoke that. My sister taught me how to count. I learned most language in school. I went to the eighth grade. I went to a special school for immigrant children. My parents had a house on Arthur Avenue.

Q: When did you land?
A: It was at Thanksgiving. That was my first Thanksgiving. It was a new holiday for me.

Q: When did you start school?
A: Almost as soon as I arrived. The teachers were wonderful. Then I went to Kenyon after a year. Then we went to Brigham after we moved. Then to Federal Street.

Q: When you were at the Balace Street school were there large classes?
A: There were groups of us. There were lots from different ethnic backgrounds. Not just Italians. I had never seen colored people before.

Q: Did the kids who were not immigrants make you feel different?
A: No, not at all.

Q: School was a happy experience for you?
A: Yes. The snow was quite an experience. I remember learning how to slide on the ice. The older people when I went to work made the most fun of me and my accent.

Q: Where did you work when you left school?
A: Where they made cufflinks.
Q: How did you get the job?
A: I looked for it myself.
It was at a different place where they made fun of me. They had the wrong idea of how things were in Italy, how we dressed.

Q: When you landed—did anything impress you about Providence?
A: No, not really. It compared to the size of my home town in Italy. The buildings were different, wooden. We had stone houses.

Q: Have you always lived in Providence?
A: Yes, 52 years.

Q: Have you changed any of your ideas since you came to the U.S.? Did you have any impressions of what the U.S. would be like before you got here?
A: No. I didn't think of it; I was here to find my mother and father. And my brothers and sisters. The trolley cars impressed me a lot.

Q: Did you go downtown a lot.
A: The big department stores struck me and the movies. My father took us once a week. To the Majestic and Strand. We used to see Mary Pickford pictures.

Q: How many children in your family?
A: Seven boys and three girls—ten. I'm the oldest.

Q: Is Italian spoken in your home today?
A: Very little, just with my mother. When we're together we speak English. My mother understands but doesn't speak English often.

Q: Are you a citizen and when?
A: Yes, about 25 years ago.
Q: Why did you become a citizen?
A: I wanted to, I was eighteen, or 21.

Q: Did you want to go back when you first got here?
A: I was torn, but got adjusted. My whole family was American. I forgot about Italy after a while.

Q: Was there any conflict with how life was here and in Italy?
A: The language barrier was difficult. I was always left behind. Most of my friends understood me and would correct me.

Q: How different was the Italian community that you left in Italy?
A: I think they were just the same then but not today. Very friendly as they are in Italy. Even my mother says that. People have changed now. I think it is the cars and T.V. I think money has changed people. They have forgotten where they have come from.

Q: Would you have preferred to have stayed in school?
A: My mother had just had twins and needed help so I left school. The principal didn't want me to leave. It was a year before I went to work. They were the seventh and eighth children.

Q: Are you working now?
A: No, I worked for forty years.

Q: What kinds of jobs did you do?
A: I worked for the state, I made cufflinks—about 14 years. I went to the children's center when I worked for the state.

Q: Did you enjoy your work?
A: Yes, I worked 26 years there.

Q: Did you belong to a labor union?
A: We had an association. I don't believe in the union. We had to join this association.

Q: What is your objection?
A: I believe in fair labor in theory, but that's it. We didn't have them at first. We didn't have them at the factory.

Q: You're retired, what do you do for recreation?

Q: Do you go to concerts or plays?
A: Yes.

Q: Nightclubs?
A: No.

Q: Sporting events?
A: Sometimes ball games.

Q: Do you read at all? Special magazines?

Q: Any Italian papers?
A: No. Very little.

Q: Do you belong to any clubs?
A: No.

Q: Where you involved in the Church feasts?
A: Yes, here and in Italy when I was young.

Q: Are you interested in politics?
A: Yes.

Q: Do you consider yourself a member of a political group?
A: Not really, it's not the party. I vote whose the best man.

Q: Have you held political office?
A: No.

Q: Would you like to be involved?
A: I'm not sure.

Q: If you were asked to be a member of a governmental commission?
A: Probably.
Q: Are there any political questions that you are concerned about?
A: Right now, no. Things are pretty bad.
Q: When you get the paper what do you read first?
A: Something important, sometimes politics.
Q: Were you concerned about the teacher strikes?
A: Of course.
Q: Do you attend any particular church?
A: I don't go regular to church. When I go...I use to with my mother.
Q: Have you ever gone back to Italy?
A: Yes, in 1973. It was an awful feeling. My friends had changed and I had too. My hometown was the same. Some buildings had changed. They had water, electricity, better furniture, better education. Even the styles. Just like America. They dress very smart, very happy. They have the money. I was impressed.
Q: Was it emotional for you?
A: I cried. But when you're here you don't miss it. I would like to go back again. It was beautiful with the people you loved. My uncle, my father's relatives, the town, and the feasts. The princes' palace is there but an earthquake destroyed part of it. It used to be a bigger city until the earthquake.
Q: When you went to Italy how did the people see you?
A: As an American after so many years.
Q: How did you see yourself?
A: As an American. This is my home.

Q: What do you like best about the U.S.?

A: A lot of opportunities if you want them, a wonderful country. There's no place like the U.S.

Q: Any disappointments?

A: No. I worked hard for what I got, but no disappointments. America has been good for me.

Q: Would you still come here if you had to again?

A: Yes, to Providence. In spite of my travelling in the U.S. My family is spread out throughout the U.S. Florida, Virginia, California, Nebraska, Washington, Bermuda. But R.I. is my home.

Q: In what ways do you think you've changed?

A: I'm myself.

The only regret I have is that my parents left me there until I was ten because I could have had a better education. I used to fall asleep at nightschool. I don't resent my brothers and sisters who all went to school, just that I was left and that I could have had the same thing they had. I was ten years behind.