Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Mary Ferri by Donna M. Sawyer

Mary Ferri
SUBJECTS COVERED

I. Birthplace

II. Family Life and Times

III. Journey to America

IV. Parents Employment

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Oral History Interview

with

MARY F. INTERVIEWEE

FEBRUARY 22, 1979
Pawtucket, R.I.

by Donna S. Interviewer

Interviewer: Mrs. F., you are a first generation Italian, is that correct?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you begin by telling me where you were born in Italy?

Interviewee: I was born in Massa Carrara, a province of Aulla. That is the northern part of Italy.

Interviewer: Can you remember anything that your parents might have said about Aulla?

Interviewee: Yes. They used to work out in the fields. After a while my mother and father, they didn't like it so they thought they would come to America. My father came with two of my older brothers and they settled in Edgewood in Providence. My father used to go to work there. He left my mother in Italy with me and a brother and a sister. And then we came over here with my Grandfather because we wanted him to have a better life. We landed in Providence in 1896.
Interviewer: How did you come over here?

Interviewee: Oh. Well, we came in a boat and I don't know what kind it was because I was only about three years old. I had a sister about ten and my brother was about fifteen. There was five years difference between each one. My mother used to work in the fields in Italy. That was hard work for her and so we came to Providence like I said. It was nice in this country. I was little but my mother used to tell me how nice it was here. She didn't like to work in the fields in Italy but still she had to because some rich man owned the farm and she used to work and get all the harvest and then they would give her some of it. My father came away with my two older brothers and then he made money to send for us, his father, me, my brother, sister, and my mother.

Interviewer: What kind of work did your father do when he came here?

Interviewee: Agricultural. And I know one time, they told me he went to Brazil. But he didn't like it over there so he came back to Italy. So then they had some friends in Providence. I don't know what their names were. But, they liked it here very much. Then after a few years they got a new baby, my sister. She was born in 1898. Then after a while we came to know people in Pawtucket. So my father brought us all to
Pawtucket. He bought a house here. After that he worked in different places to make money, you know.

**Interviewer:** Did your father have any specific goal in mind when he came here. Was it just to be able to make money to care for his family better?

**Interviewee:** They didn't have nothing in Italy. They didn't own their own home or nothing in Italy. They used to work for this rich lady and man. They used to make good over their but nothing like over here my mother said.

**Interviewer:** Where the opportunities better over here?

**Interviewee:** Oh Yes!

**Interviewer:** Do you think that maybe you could tell me something about your life as a child over here?

**Interviewee:** Well, as I grew older, see I was three years old when I came, and then we came to Pawtucket, and after a while we used to hire a tenement around. After that we lived off Walcott Street. I used to go to school up at St. Joseph's School. It was nice. I had my little sister. I had to take her to school, I had to take her by the hand, take her. I don't remember much of those things but I know it was nice.

**Interviewer:** You said you brought your grandfather with you. Do you remember any customs of traditions or any thing he...

**Interviewee:** Well yes, my poor grandfather couldn't work any more. He could only stay home and eat.
And then he died here. He is buried down at St. Mary's cemetery, like everybody else, you know. He never worked here. He couldn't work where because he was too old. But we took him with us anyway. When I was nine or ten years old, my mother bought a house here. It was this one here, you know?

Interviewer:
The one next door?

Interviewee:
Yes. They used to call it Prairie Avenue. Now they call it Columbus Avenue. But then, everything was nice. I got older and older, and older. After a while I got married over here. My mother let me get married. My husband came from France and he went to Providence. He had some relatives there. Then he used to come to Pawtucket and my mother liked him so she let me get married. But I was so young. I was only fifteen years old. (They will say that mother was crazy.)

Interviewer:
But isn't that the age that most women got married back then or was it an exception?

Interviewee:
Well my other sister was married young too. Rosie, that is the one that came with me from Italy. The other one that was born in Providence, she was two years younger than me. So she didn't get married until she was older.

Interviewer:
What about your family life? Was there anything that you probably did because you were Italian, like big meals on Sundays, with the whole
family?

Interviewee: Yeah we used to have it, my mother used to have it here. She used to have a lot of people come from Massachusetts, from Bridgewater, and have a good time. Someone would bring something to drink, someone would bring something to eat, and they would all locate in my mother's house.

Interviewer: When your mother arrived here did she work outside the home?

Interviewee: No, because all the children were together then and she had a big family like the two boys who came with my father and us three that came alone. She had six all together and then the little one that was born in Providence. Six children she had so she couldn't do much here.

Interviewer: So she did stay in the home.

Interviewee: Well she was a midwife here.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that?

Interviewee: Yes, around here where our home is now, most every child had family she brought them to this world. She was a good midwife. I think she done that over in Italy too but I don't remember those things. She was a very good midwife and they would come and call her at any hour of the night. And then mybe hand her fifty cents or a dollar. That was in them days. How much do they want now I don't know.
Interviewer: How about religion? What was the religious beliefs then?

Interviewee: Well, we were always a Catholic. When my sister was born in Providence we christened her up at the Holy Ghost Church on Knight Street. We all were Catholic, everyone of us, that is the way she brought us up.

Interviewer: Did you find it difficult being an Italian?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Did you think there was any injustices done to Italians when they came over? Or do you feel they were treated fairly?

Interviewee: Oh, yes, we were all treated fairly because we had a lot of friends around here. Then after a while my husband had a lot of friends in Providence and they used to come over to my mother's house and have a good time. It was good in every way.

Interviewer: What do you think it means to be an Italian?

Interviewee: Oh, I don't know, I think it is good because I was always treated right.

Interviewer: That is important. You have been in America for how long now?

Interviewee: Well as old as I am. Now wait, how old is Palmi now? Palmi is 80, and she was born when we started her. So I would say about eighty years.

Interviewer: So would you consider your self more American that Italian?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you speak Italian?
Interviewer: Have you ever gone to Italy?
Interviewee: Yes, I went after my husband died because he never wanted to go back?
Interviewer: Why not?
Interviewee: When he got to New York he didn't like the boat he came on. He said to me after I am gone you go to Italy to see it. I wanted to go all the time when he was living but no he said, I am not going back over that water any more! I am going to stay here. So, when he died, after a year I went. I wanted to see where he was born. He was born near that tower of Pisa and I couldn't go up stairs because there was no elevator, but I walked way up because he used to tell me that he used to ride his bicycle from where he was. But I never got to go there because I was with a tour.

Interviewer: Did your parents ever speak of any places in Italy, maybe the town where you were born?
Interviewee: We were not too far from Genoa. And all my fathers brothers used to work at the Arsenal there and they were all smart people. They all worked for the government over there. But my father, he was a wanderer I guess, he liked to go around. He went to Brazil like I told you, and Argentina too.

Interviewer: Did you visit the place where you were born in Italy?
Interviewee: No, we couldn't stay there. You see where I was born it was near Genoa so I could see it from the train that I was on, but I never went to visit there cause we have nobody there now.

Interviewer: Do you feel your Italian background might have anything to do with any of your present day values? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you value, or treasure most?

Interviewee: Well, I really treasure all my family.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you value that so highly because you are Italian. The Italians place such a high value on the family.

Interviewee: No, because when people talk about Italians I always say "We're the best". (They will think I'm crazy.)

Interviewer: Oh no, not at all! When you had your own family did you do anything that you felt was because you were an Italian, any customs or any traditions in your family?

Interviewee: No, I never wished to be anything else. I was happy with what I had. We done very good. But I had to work all the time. I helped my husband. Wherever he was I was there. And if he pulled on that string I pulled on it too. And if you didn't do that you wouldn't get along.

Interviewer: So you did work even though you had a family.

Interviewee: Yes. I worked in my husband's store. But it was work.

Interviewer: What kind of a store did your husband have?
Interviewee: We had a toy and bicycle business. He couldn't talk very much good English, you know. So I had to do all the bookkeeping. So that was a lot for him. He always said anything we had was what I made because he had to feed the family. So, anything we had extra was what I made.
I knew what he meant. So I stayed in the store and did everything.

Interviewer: What about your children? How many did you have?
Interviewee: Three.

Interviewer: What do you think their role in the family was?
Did they have chores or what did they do to help contribute to the family?

Interviewee: Well, they all worked for us. They were like a salesman, you know. The two of them did and my daughter, she used to keep house while I would go to the store. The boys were out as salesmen. (What was it you asked me?)

Interviewer: If they had any chores to do?
Interviewee: My boys worked all the time. My oldest one, whenever there was a job somewhere he done it. He worked for the post office, special delivery, and he done everything. Then when the second one came along he use to be the salesman. My daughter, she use to stay home to mind the house go I could work with my husband.

Interviewer: Did they have to help you financially when they worked?
Interviewee: No. I wouldn't say that. By that time we
had our own. We done very good. I don't think they... well they might have given some, I don't really know.

**Interviewer:** What are your views about education now?

**Interviewee:** Well, I didn't go more than the sixth grade up to St. Joseph's. Then I was married so young that I didn't have a chance to do nothing. (You asked me something.)

**Interviewer:** Well, nowadays do you feel boys and girls should be educated equally?

**Interviewee:** Yes. My boys both went as far as they wanted. They went through highschool, but my oldest one went to Providence College and that was good for and Italian. Then after a while he got married and that was the end of that.

**Interviewer:** O.K., very good, Mrs. F., is there anything else you would like to add?

**Interviewee:** Well, I would like to add that I think I am a fortunate woman. My husband died at the age of seventy-one and I am still here at the age of eighty-five, so I really think that I am really fortunate.

**Interviewer:** O.K. Thank-you very very much for your time for this interview. It has been a real pleasure. I have really enjoyed it. Thank-you.
In the past, I have heard, that Italians had a very difficult time adjusting to the new world in which they had come to live. I thought that they had conflicts with the people that were already here as far as accepting them as parts of their communities. I thought that they were restricted from buying homes or taking part in social events. This did not seem to be the case at all with my first generation interviewee. It seemed like their lives were very settled and easy when they came here. They found work, made a fair amount of money, bought a home, opened a new business of their own, and seemed to have very few conflicts. I am curious to why this family seemed to escape the hardships that so many other immigrants had to face. I think maybe one thing that could contribute to this is that maybe the interviewee was intimidated by the interview. Maybe she felt that she had to make everything sound so wonderful and easy for some reason.

Yet, there was a great deal of truths that did come to the surface in this interview. The interviewee seemed to respect her mother very highly. There were many comments made about how wonderful, hardworking, and understanding her mother was. It was as if her mother had been the major figure in her life. This could be attributed to the father being out of the house most of the time working to support the family.

There were not as many Italian traditions and customs exercised as I had expects. The interviewee was fairly old, though, and I imagine a great deal of information is stored away in a private part of herself, and therefore not mentioned or recalled during the interview.

She had worked unlike most Italian women, while the children helped at home and in their parent's own bicycle store. The children were depended on to help keep house and help
run the store.

The interviewee made mention that she and her husband were very close. They worked side by side and seemed to stay together a great deal. It seemed fairly obvious that she respected and loved her husband very much.

On the whole I feel that this woman is very proud to be an Italian, has several Italian attitudes, and is thankful for the life that God has given her.