Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Anna Gargano by Cynthia Nanni

Anna Gargano

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SUBJECTS COVERED

Childhood
Importance of retaining Italian language
Education
Family values, roles
Traditions
Religious views
Return trips to Italy
Oral History Interview

with

ANNA GARGANO

February 1979
Friend's Home

by Cynthia Nanni

INTERVIEWER: Are you all Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: I am Italo-American, my parents were Italian. I was born here in America, therefore I am Italo-American.

INTERVIEWER: Do you speak Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: Very well, and I understand it as well. I can write very little.

INTERVIEWER: I am going to go back to your childhood and what are some of the things you encountered. First, did you speak English?
INTERVIEWEE: At home we always had to speak Italian, because our parents could not speak American. But later years, they learned from us. We picked up the English from school.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have older brothers and sisters who helped you speak English?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, there were three older than myself.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel there were any prejudices when you went to school because you were an Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: Not in those days, because everyone spoke the Italian language. Now in this generation, they do not speak the Italian language. Therefore their children don't speak Italian either. But I never forgot it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that that is important that you never forgot the language?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, because nowadays, there are many Italians coming from Italy.
and I found it so interesting to speak to them. They also think it is so wonderful that I still remembered the language.

INTERVIEWER: Who do blame for the lost of the Italian language?
INTERVIEWEE: I blame the parents because they didn't teach them.
INTERVIEWER: Going to the school, you had no problem with the language.
INTERVIEWEE: That's right. In fact I remember three small children that came from Europe. The school was May Westcott School, which is now Thorton School. These children didn't speak any English, so I interpreted for them during recess time. They were accepted even though they only Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Did any of teachers speak Italian? Was it difficult for these children who didn't speak English?
INTERVIEWEE: Well we had two Italian teachers in our school, Miss Richitelli and Mrs. Pesatora. Miss Richitelli is still living, she is about in her eighty's. Mrs. Pesatora, which was Miss LaFazio, has passed away. Their parents were Italian. We were not allowed to speak Italian in school. Neither did the teachers speak Italian in school.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that most of the students were Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, most were from Italian descent.
INTERVIEWER: How long did you go to school?
INTERVIEWEE: I went to Junior High. That was a common grade to complete. We had hard times and then the depression came in. You had to try to get a job as soon as possible. My first job was at Colonial Knife. I opened and closed knives and that was $ .10/hr. That was in the 30's. We were lucky to have a job then.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think your schooling was important at the time?
INTERVIEWEE: I thought it was, but our parents couldn't see it. Those days they felt that the boys should go to school and the women's place was at home. My brothers graduated high school. But in those days, you had to be fourteen to work instead of sixteen.

INTERVIEWER: Where did your wages go?
INTERVIEWEE: It strictly went to the parents. We were not allowed to open our checks.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of your values toward the family?
INTERVIEWEE: I still wish I had them. Those are the parents that people should have today. We respected our parents. I feel the generation today doesn't. They want to go more or less on their own. They want to pay board, their own apartments.
What made the Italian family unique than other families?
There were certain things that made us a close knit family. For example, at supper time, whoever pulled the string for the lights to come on, they always said "good evening". That meant to all in the house. And when you were at the supper table, your hands and face had to be clean. There were ten in our house and it was a very strict house. We didn't know any better. We just obeyed the parents. If they said you couldn't go then you couldn't go. You wouldn't answer them. You would probably cry yourself to sleep, but you just wouldn't disobey them.
I still think I have a streak of being strict.

Were there any other jobs you had?
Then I worked in the Thorton Mills. The pay was a little better and it was closer to home. From there I worked in the Uniroyal Plant, which I worked for thirty two years. I got early retirement due to forced closure. I get a pension now.

Did you continue to work when you got married?
Yes. My mother was also allowed to work.

Who is head of the household in your family?
My husband. Infact we both are, but he is man of the house. I handle the money matters.

Can you tell me a little about your courting your husband?
Well I was only allowed to go out one night 7:00 to 10:30. I had my own car, I had to work for it, and I had to use only to go to work, church, and one night a week out. You could say you had a flat tire once, but not every week end.

Were you allowed to date others than Italians?
Yes. We would go on the sneak though!

Did you feel you wouldn't date others than Italians?
Infact, I wanted to date somebody different than an Italian because I figured the Italians were too strict. But I married an Italian. My husband had to ask permission for me to marry him, but not today.

Were there any pressures from your family to get married?
No. I was twenty-four, those were the war years.

Do you carry out any of the traditions?
Yes. The holidays I still bake. Easter time I make the spinach pies, the rice pies, and the filled cookies. The whole family still gets together.
INTERVIEWER: Now I would like to talk about your views about religion. Are you very religious?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes I am. I am Roman Catholic. I go to church every Sunday.
INTERVIEWER: Some of the issues that have been brought out are abortions and divorce. How do you feel about these?
INTERVIEWEE: I don't believe in abortions because if the Lord wants you to have that baby, there is a meaning to every child on earth. I believe that if you can't live with a man, why sacrifice your life. Life is really short. My parents were very religious.
INTERVIEWER: Would you like to know more about your roots?
INTERVIEWEE: Sure. I been back to Italy about eight times. One can't imagine how you feel. All the people greet you, even strangers. I remember once when I arrived, a boy ran down to tell my uncle that the Americans have arrived. I never met my uncle before, but when I saw him, I saw the resemblance to my father. He just embraced me. Then another uncle and the cousins all came. I was queen of the ball. Everyone brought some food with them; grapes, bread, boiled eggs, figs, and my uncle brought sausages every morning. Remember, every was fresh. The ladies would go shopping for the lunch and supper because they had no refrigerators. Their supper was about 8:00pm. When you left, they would stand in a line and give you two kisses, one on each cheek. People would cry. They thought I was so smart because I could speak both languages. They would ask about people they knew of.
INTERVIEWER: Had your parents ever had a chance to go back?
INTERVIEWEE: No. My father wanted to but, it cost to much money.
INTERVIEWER: Would you want to ever live the life they live in Italy?
INTERVIEWEE: No. I am born here in America.
INTERVIEWER: What have you observed about some changes that have occurred amongst the Italians?
INTERVIEWEE: They have become very Americanized. They have become very educational. They go to school more. They want good paying jobs. They don't like to labor in the fields. They are very proud. Now they wear pants, in Europe they never did. In the Vatican, you had to wear a shawl and keep your arms covered. Now they go to church with nothing on their heads, short sleeves, and they wear pants. That's Americanized.
I also remember Federal Hill when it had the push carts. It was so beautiful. It reminded me of market days in Italy. It will never be the same.

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel is more important: marriage, money, family, and success?

INTERVIEWEE: A good marriage. You have to be loved. Money you can always make if you are ambitious. You have to have your health to achieve your goals.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to see the traditions carried out by future generations?

INTERVIEWEE: If there is enough of the Italians around. If my children marry into another field like Irish or Polish, it is their destiny. If they are happy, there is nothing I can say about it.