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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Lena Massarelli by Norma Colaccio

Lena Massarelli

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE    Lena Massarelli

INTERVIEWER             Norma Colaccio

DATE OF INTERVIEW        2/22/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Personal Data

Life in Italy

Reasons for leaving Italy

Trip to America

Working in U.S.

Prejudice towards Italians

Observance of Italian traditions and customs

Religious attitudes

Return trips to Italy

Consider yourself Italian or American?
Oral History Interview
with
LENA MASSARELLI
February 22, 1979
by Norma R. Colaccio

INTERVIEWER: What is your name?
INTERVIEWEE: Lena Massarelli.

INTERVIEWER: Lena Massarelli?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Where were you born?
INTERVIEWEE: In Italy.

INTERVIEWER: What part of Italy?
INTERVIEWEE: Rome.

INTERVIEWER: Rome? Okay. Tell me something about your life in Italy, Lena.

INTERVIEWEE: It was great. It was beautiful, my younger days, the joy of my life.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that is really interesting. Oh, what kind of work did your parents do in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: My father was a brick layer.

INTERVIEWER: A brick layer?
INTERVIEWEE: My mother was a housewife.

INTERVIEWER: Em-- did you ever work in the old country?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do?

INTERVIEWEE: I was a babysitter for the Count and Contessa-- how do you say?

INTERVIEWER: That's okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And ah, I traveled with them all over Europe, in Italy then after I got big, I was seventeen, I decided to come to this country to see my father.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you attend school in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like, tell me something about it.

INTERVIEWEE: School was much different than in this country. They are very strict and you studied.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you left Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Seventeen.

INTERVIEWER: What were the reasons for leaving Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: To join my father. That was the first time I met my father and when I came in this country, he came to this country before I was born and my mother died-- I lived with my grandmother and that is why I went to work as a babysitter. Then my grandmother died then I decided to come and meet my father. That was my desire.
INTERVIEWER: What did you find when you... when you came to America and you met your father?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, I find that I had a big family. I had seven sisters and two brothers which was all news to me.

INTERVIEWER: Are you close today?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I am very close to them. They turned out to be very good and I love them all.

INTERVIEWER: What can you tell me about the trip to America from Italy, what was it like?

INTERVIEWEE: It was a very beautiful trip. I enjoyed it. It was eight days on the boat and ah it was really a very beautiful trip even though ah there was a lot of people who was very sick but ah me, I enjoyed it. I tried to help everybody who was sick which I help a lady from Philadelphia. She had two small children and I got the first prize for being on the trip to help the people over there.

INTERVIEWER: Oh!

INTERVIEWEE: It is true! Isn't it?

INTERVIEWER: Isn't that interesting!

INTERVIEWEE: I still have saved the ribbon, in the cubbard since 1925.

INTERVIEWER: That is amazing. Where did you land when you came here?
INTERVIEWEE: In New York.

INTERVIEWER: In New York? When you arrived in America, what were your first reactions towards this country.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, it was new to me but it was beautiful even though I thought Italy was the most beautiful country in the world but I find it was nice over here, and I met the best and I remained over here for all these years.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live when you arrived in America?

INTERVIEWEE: In Providence.

INTERVIEWER: Where abouts in Providence?

INTERVIEWEE: Academy Avenue, 722 Academy Avenue.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you live there?

INTERVIEWEE: My father was living over there with all his family.

INTERVIEWER: And you moved in with them?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why your father came over here?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh well, he came over here for search more work, for opportunity because in Italy it was pretty tough at that time, like a lot of other people that come in this country to find a better opportunity.

INTERVIEWER: Did he find employment here?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes he worked as a bricklayer.
INTERVIEWER: I see, have you ever worked in this country?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: What did you do?
INTERVIEWEE: At the beginning I worked at a jewelry shop as a solderer then I went to waitress but I retire as a waitress.
INTERVIEWER: Did you waitress in Rhode Island?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, in Rhode Island and New York back into Rhode Island and still in Rhode Island.
INTERVIEWER: Let's see here, have you ever encountered any prejudice towards your ethnic background in America, have people acted differently towards you because you're...
INTERVIEWEE: Was Italian?
INTERVIEWER: You're Italian.
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I met a lot of them but I met a lot of very nice people. I met some nice, wonderful people. What they taught me, how to be a waitress, how to be in business, which I was in business for myself. I started a restaurant on my own and ah and that was credited to a Jewish man that I was working as a waitress in this place and he taught me and I went into business.
INTERVIEWER: Did you go into business with him?
INTERVIEWEE: No, my own.
INTERVIEWER: Your own business?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes I had a business of my own.
INTERVIEWER: Was this many years ago?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, before the second World War.
INTERVIEWER: Do you feel you were successful in business?
INTERVIEWEE: I was very successful, and then I lost my husband, and I had to sell everything out due to sickness.
INTERVIEWER: I see, then you were married?
INTERVIEWEE: Yea, I was married.
INTERVIEWER: Okay. And you met your husband...?
INTERVIEWEE: I got married when I was seventeen.
INTERVIEWER: You were young!
INTERVIEWEE: Seventeen and three months.
INTERVIEWER: Shortly after you came to America?
INTERVIEWEE: That's right.
INTERVIEWER: Did you meet your husband here?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Was he of Italian decent also?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, born in Italy.
INTERVIEWER: Did you know him in Italy?
INTERVIEWEE: No.
INTERVIEWER: I see.
INTERVIEWEE: I married Christmas time.
INTERVIEWER: Oh, How many children do you have Lena?
INTERVIEWEE: One.
INTERVIEWER: Was Italian spoken in your home?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, alright, did your child speak or understand Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, very much.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel you continued the traditions and customs familiar to you in Italy when you came to America?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, indeed. I still do my best in the American way but Italian is best.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me anything about some of the customs?

INTERVIEWEE: My cooking, my way of living, bringing up the family, being very restricted and teaching them to love everyone regardless of what nationality, religion, and all we are all human beings.

INTERVIEWER: Do you attend church?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes indeed.

INTERVIEWER: What church do you attend?

INTERVIEWEE: Blessed Sacrament Church.

Interviewer: I see, do you find the catholic churches in America similar to those in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes and no. I ...my way I can't get used to yet, the American way. I enjoy my Italian mass, my Latin mass 'cause I was taught all my prayers in Latin and I still say them in
Latin. I go to church now, this American way, and I say mine in Latin. I don't understand half of it...which is true. You do want the truth now ain't it?

INTERVIEWER: I do want the truth.

INTERVIEWEE: That is what I believe the truth.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever returned to Italy and for what reasons?

INTERVIEWEE: I have been back three times visiting. I went first time in 1950 after the war because I had a sister and she died and left eight children so I had to go over and sign out that I would be the guardian for the children which I look up to them like my own children. Then I went again 5 years ago and the following year I went again.

INTERVIEWER: I see. When you were there as their guardian, did you remain there for a while, or did you take them here with you?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I stood there 6 months until I signed all the papers to the American Constable and Italian Constable that I will support the children and I got a nun to be the guardian, I turn over the children.

INTERVIEWER: That's very interesting.

INTERVIEWEE: See my sister died when they bombed Rome and
she was crushed.

INTERVIEWER: How many brothers and sisters do you have living over there in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: None. She was the only sister from my father's first marriage.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

INTERVIEWEE: I have seven sisters and two brothers from the second marriage of my father.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Do you consider yourself Italian or American?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I am an American citizen. I love this country but if anybody tells me I am of Italian decent but I love this country.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Do you feel a stronger attachment to Italy than you do to America?

INTERVIEWEE: I have the same feeling for both countries.

INTERVIEWER: And finally, if you could start over again, would you come to America and live, why or why not?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't know about that now, maybe I would, maybe not. I had a lot of sorrows in this country too, but it's a beautiful country, maybe I would.

INTERVIEWER: You would do it all over again?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.