Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Fortuna Squatrito Pietrzyk by Marie Squatrito

Fortuna Squatrito Pietrzyk

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEW

NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Fortuna Squatrito Pietrzyk

INTERVIEWER: Marie Squatrito

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2/25/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Childhood

Parents

Education

Religion

Customs

Marriage

Polish traditions as compared to Italian traditions

Discussion of her name

Areas important to her that would not be so to other generations of Italian women
Oral History Interview

with

FORTUNA SQUATRITO PIETRZYK

February 25, 1979
Interviewer's Home

by Marie Squatrito

INTERVIEWER: Could you start by telling us a little about where you lived as a child?

INTERVIEWEE: I lived with my parents in a three family house in Providence. The other tenants in the house were an Italian family and their married daughter. Most of the people in the neighborhood were of Italian descent.

INTERVIEWER: Were they very close to you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes they were. They were as close as relatives. I learned how to speak Italian from the mother of the family.

INTERVIEWER: Did your parents ever speak Italian at home?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes they did—quite frequently—especially when they didn't want me to understand what they were saying. They also spoke Italian to the other family and to the other neighbors in the neighborhood.
INTERVIEWER: Were you able to understand what they would say at all?

INTERVIEWEE: I did understand some words, but really not that much as a young child.

INTERVIEWER: Did you later study it in school?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes I did. In high school I studied Italian for three years and I also studied it in college.

INTERVIEWER: Did your family want you to take Italian in high school and in college?

INTERVIEWEE: They didn't push me into taking the language. I wanted to because I am of Italian descent and I thought it would be interesting to be able to carry on conversations with relatives.

INTERVIEWER: O.K., could you tell us a little bit about what your father does for a living?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, he is self-employed. He is in the fruit and produce business. He's been in this business all his life.

INTERVIEWER: Why did he go into this business?

INTERVIEWEE: His father had operated a fruit and produce business and as a young boy, he would come out of school and go on the truck with his father.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other boys in his family that went into that business?

INTERVIEWEE: A younger brother also went into the business, but later round in life went to work in a factory instead.
O.K., did your mother work when you were a child?

No, she didn't. She stayed home until my younger sister went into school.

Well, taking care of the children, doing all of the cooking and cleaning, managing the household.

What were the feelings in your home concerning man as the head of the household?

Well, the feelings were that the man is at the head of the household, and that the woman really doesn't make any major decisions without talking to her husband first.

Who was the head of the household in your family when you were a child?

Well, my father was, but I would really have to say that it was a give and take relationship. My mother did help him make important decisions.

What were your responsibilities as a child?

Well, after I came out of school, I would change up and then do some of the chores that were expected of me around the house.

Did you ever help the people upstairs that were like part of your family?

Yes, I did. I would be in their house quite often, in fact.

Did your parents believe that you should have an education?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they did. It was really important to both of them. I really think that both of them would have liked to be able to finish high school and go on to college. They never had the opportunity, so they encouraged it for their children.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go to school as a child?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, as a young child, I went to school first in Providence. Then, I went through the Bristol Public Schools, graduated from Bristol High School and then later, I went to Rhode Island College.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why your parents moved to Bristol?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think it was very important to them that I grow up in the suburbs and have a nice big yard to play in with a lot of friends. I think they thought it would be a better atmosphere for children to live in, rather than the city.

INTERVIEWER: Was religion an important factor in your family's life?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was. It was very important.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to church every Sunday?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, we did.

INTERVIEWER: What church did you go to?

INTERVIEWEE: We went to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Bristol.

INTERVIEWER: Was that an all-Italian Church?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, most of the families are of Italian descent, or at least one of the parents in each family is of Italian descent.
How about holidays in your family? Tell us a little bit about how your family celebrated holidays.

Well, the holidays were very important to our family. We celebrated them with all our other relatives, visiting grandparents on both sides of the family.

O.K., the family was very important then?

Yes, it was very important. We would enjoy going to see all our cousins and aunts and uncles every holiday, and every Sunday for that matter.

What were some of the most special days of the year for your family?

Well, I think Christmas was the most special holiday for our family.

What were some of the special customs that you had for that day?

Well, for Christmas Eve, we would have a traditional Italian meal. We would have spaghetti and anchovies, and several other types of fish, and we would celebrate by all going to midnight mass together. On Christmas day, we would have a traditional American turkey dinner, but we would have alot of Italian pastries. We would again visit the relatives and sample some of the foods that they had made.

O.K., are there any other special holidays?

Yes, Easter was also very important to us. We had alot of Italian dishes on that day--alot of special Italian pastries made with cheese.
INTERVIEWER: How about Palm Sunday? Was that a very important day for your family.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was. We would go to visit our relatives. I would give each of my aunts and uncles and grandparents a palm. In return, they would give all the children money for the palm. It was a very important day, almost like Easter.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you give palms to all your relatives?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, it was a sign of showing peace, that you liked someone. By giving them a palm, you would show them that you liked them.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other special Italian holidays that you would like to tell us about?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, Saint Joseph's Day was very important to our family. We would go to visit Holy Ghost Church on Federal Hill in Providence. They have a very big procession and everything--and there is a special Italian pastry, zeppole, that we always have on that day. Also, our church in Bristol, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, has a special feast day in the month of July. We have a procession and carnival, and that's also very important.

INTERVIEWER: O.K.; could you tell us a little bit about your life, the way you live it today? First of all, are you married?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I am. I've been married almost eight years, this May.
INTERVIEWER: Is your husband an Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: No, he isn't. My husband is of Polish descent.

INTERVIEWER: Did it bother your family, at first, that your husband wasn't Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I don't really think it did. I think it was very important to them that I meet a good person, and I don't think it really mattered that he wasn't of Italian descent.

INTERVIEWER: Weddings have a very important role in the Italian tradition. Do you feel that you had an Italian style wedding?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do. We had Italian wine at our wedding. Also, we had Italian style cookies, and some of the music played was Italian.

INTERVIEWER: And of course, I guess a lot of people there were Italian too?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, right. A lot of relatives and friends.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any special Polish traditions that you followed for your wedding also?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, we did. Some of the music played were polka songs, so I guess you could say it was really a combination type wedding.

INTERVIEWER: Are there traditions or customs which you feel are similar for both Polish and Italian people?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do. I feel that the family is very important to Polish people as well as to Italians. Also, the Polish people have some special foods that they eat, and some patron saint's days also.
Do you follow along with any of the Polish traditions?

Yes, I do. There are several Polish foods that we eat in our home. We also have a special Polish meal for Easter, the day before Easter, consisting of Polish kielbasa.

In your home today, do you feel that you have a head of the household?

No, I don't. I really think that my husband and I share the responsibilities. I really can't say that he is the head of the household.

Do you work?

Yes, I do. I'm a special needs teacher in Assonet Massachusetts. I teach visually impaired children and children who are deaf-blind and severely retarded.

O.K., is that a big part of your life now?

Yes, it is. Special Education is very important to me. In fact, I'm working part time toward a master's degree in learning disabilities at Rhode Island College.

Do you think that your job might take away a little bit from some of your customs? Like, maybe you're not as close to your family as you used to be, or things like that.
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, well I do. I still consider myself close to my immediate family, but I'm really not as close to my cousins and aunts and uncles as I was before. Now, I mostly see them on holidays, rather than visiting them every Sunday.

INTERVIEWER: Basically, do you still celebrate holidays the same way as you did when you were younger?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I do in that I still have it with my family, but I think we've Americanized alot of our traditions.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still like to cook Italian foods?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do. In fact, my husband likes to eat Italian food more than I do, especially pizza, and spaghetti with meatballs. He's always asking me to make them.

INTERVIEWER: Is religion still an important part of your life?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it is. Because my husband and I are both Catholics, I think it's been easy to continue in a Catholic tradition that we were brought up in.

INTERVIEWER: What church do you belong to?

INTERVIEWEE: We belong to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, the church that my parents belong to.

INTERVIEWER: O.K., could you tell us if you've ever been to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I haven't, but I would like to some day.

INTERVIEWER: If you went to Italy, are there any special things that you would like to see?
Yes, I would like to visit the places where my ancestors came from. My father's relatives all came from Sicily, so I would like to visit there. Also, I would like to visit the northern parts of Italy. My mother's relatives came from the northern part, very close to the Swiss Alps.

Could you tell us a little about when they moved? Could you tell us where they settled in Rhode Island?

Well, my father's relatives all settled in Bristol. They lived very close to each other in one part of the town, in the Italian section of the town. Most of the relatives on my mother's side settled in the Federal Hill section of Providence.

Do the families still live where they originally settled?

Well, my grandparents on my father's side are deceased, but the other relatives all still live in the town of Bristol. They have moved out of the section of the town where they were living in. Most of them moved into new homes. I have my grandmother, living on my mother's side of the family. In fact, she's still living in the house she lived in since she was a young girl. I have several aunts and uncles who still live in the Providence area, but some of the others have moved out to the suburbs.
INTERVIEWEE: Well, it's very important to me that I have a career outside the home, even though I do enjoy taking care of my home. I just feel that it is much more rewarding to have a career, to work with children who have special needs. Also, I think I'm more interested in equal rights for women than Italian women in the past have been interested in. I really don't feel that women should be submissive to men and have to wait for the men to make all the important decisions in the country. So, that's really an important issue with me.

INTERVIEWER: O.K., thank you very much.

INTERVIEWEE: Thank you.