Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Mary Tolento by Joan O'Brien

Mary Tolento

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/italians

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ethnic Heritage Studies Project at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Three Generations of Italians by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.
SUBJECTS COVERED

Family background

Prejudice against Italians

Education

General viewpoints on divorce, welfare, woman's role

Italian customs

Italian pride
Tell me about your family. Do you know what part of Italy they came from?

My mother came from Corsica. My father came from Italy but I couldn't tell you the name of the town he came from.

Your parents both came from...

From Europe.

Did they come on a boat?

I believe they came by boat.

How old were your parents when they came?

My mother was 22 years old. My father, I believe was 29 years old.

Were they married when they came here?

Yes.

You were telling me before about how they met, will you repeat that?

Yes. My mother was introduced to my father. He asked her if she would marry him that he was going to America. She had a period of time to make a decision. She said yes and they got married.
decision. She said yes, they got married and they came to America.

INTERVIEWER: Where did they settle when they came?
INTERVIEWEE: Alabama.

INTERVIEWER: You said your father had opened up a store?
INTERVIEWEE: He had a country store. They sold meat and vegetables, and other products.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born?
INTERVIEWEE: I was born in Brooklyn.

INTERVIEWER: Why did your parents move to Brooklyn?
INTERVIEWEE: My father's brother had gotten him a job in a candy factory and he came up here to apply for that job. When he settled he sent for my mother and the children.

INTERVIEWER: How many children were in your family?
INTERVIEWEE: We were eight.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like for you growing up?
INTERVIEWEE: We had the bare minimum. Of course my mother was widowed at an early age and she had eight children to support. She had to go on relief. As I said, my brothers went out and tried to earn money by shining shoes—do whatever they could to get something. My father had passed away a month before I was born.

INTERVIEWER: Where was your mother working at that time?
INTERVIEWEE: My mother stayed home to take care of the house and the children.

INTERVIEWER: Did you follow many Italian customs?
INTERVIEWEE: No I couldn't recall. I don't think that we did except for the food.
INTERVIEWER: Your mother had a hard time of it, then?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I believe so.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever experience any prejudice against you because you were an Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: No, not really. My mother did speak of the prejudice shown against the Blacks in Alabama.
INTERVIEWER: Did you live in an Italian neighborhood while you were growing up?
INTERVIEWEE: Predominately Italian but there were other nationalities living there.
INTERVIEWER: What kind of an education did you have? Did you go to college?
INTERVIEWEE: I graduated from high school.
INTERVIEWER: What about your parents, do you know?
INTERVIEWEE: My mother never had an education and I don't believe my father had one either.
INTERVIEWER: Did your mother want you to go to college?
INTERVIEWEE: She didn't care one way or the other. My brother Arthur encouraged me to go. He said he would pay for it but I really wasn't interested.
INTERVIEWER: But you could have gone if you had really wanted to.
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Do you believe in the importance of a good education?
INTERVIEWEE: I believe it is important to a man but not necessarily to a woman. I believe that a woman is going to get married and have children and her place is in the home to raise those children.
INTERVIEWER: That's very interesting.
INTERVIEWEE: That doesn't go for everyone though. But that's the way I feel. My family came first.
INTERVIEWER: What religion are you?
INTERVIEWEE: Catholic.
INTERVIEWER: Did you ever belong to an Italian Catholic church?
INTERVIEWEE: No. Well it was an Italian church and they did have Italian masses but I didn't attend those.
INTERVIEWER: The church you attend now is all different nationalities, right? It is in Warwick.
INTERVIEWEE: Correct.
INTERVIEWER: Tell me how you feel about divorce.
INTERVIEWEE: Divorce. It is no bed of roses being married. You have to work at it and it takes a lot of sacrifice and trust in one another. But if two people can't live with each other then I believe they should be divorced. They would be better off.
INTERVIEWER: You married an Italian person, right?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Was there ever any possibility of you marrying a non-Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I dated other nationalities. I wasn't prejudiced.
INTERVIEWER: When you were growing up, did you associate with mostly Italians?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Was that mostly because of your neighborhood?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Right.
INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about welfare?
INTERVIEWEE: Like my husband does. (See interview with John Tolento) If a person needs help then by all means he should get it.

INTERVIEWER: Was your family ever involved in politics?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know of any old Italian stories or poems?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to see your children carry on some of the Italian traditions?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I would.

INTERVIEWER: Such as? Your husband mentioned always being home for dinner together, the holidays.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, absolutely. Being with the family and sharing things together.

INTERVIEWER: Your husband mentioned that family is very important while he was growing up. What about you? Do you remember?

INTERVIEWEE: Well we really had very little contact because my mother's people were all separated. One went to Detroit, another moved to Pennsylvania. She had some relatives still in Alabama. So she more or less had to depend on my father's family and she wasn't to keen about that. She tried to stand on her own two feet. She didn't encourage the relationship.

INTERVIEWER: How about within your own family, with your brothers and sisters? Were you close to them?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I think so. As best as we could be.

INTERVIEWER: You said that they were working.
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Right. I can't recall really being together all at one time.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been very hard.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. My mother was always with the children. She worked very hard. She wasn't a domineering person. If you wanted to do something as long as it was the right thing she would go along with it.

INTERVIEWER: Did she speak Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Broken English. She knew French but coming to this country there weren't many people who spoke French so she picked up Italian also. She spoke Italian with the Italians and spoke English, the best she could with her children. She didn't speak Italian to us.

INTERVIEWER: Did you learn Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about such things as anti-Italian jokes?

INTERVIEWEE: It depends on the person who tells it. If I knew that he's not prejudice against the Italians it doesn't bother me. I'll laugh but you know, it hurts, it hurts inside.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about all Italians being associated with the Mafia?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, that isn't so. People are wrong to feel that way.

INTERVIEWER: Do you belong to any Italian organizations?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I don't.
INTERVIEWER: Have you ever?
INTERVIEWEE: No.
INTERVIEWER: Your husband mentioned that you used to receive an Italian publication.
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Did you read it?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes I did and I enjoyed it very much because there were things in there which I could relate to.
INTERVIEWER: Do you think that it is important for Italians to keep up their heritage?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do.
INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been to Italy?
INTERVIEWEE: No.
INTERVIEWER: Would you like to visit?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, definitely.
INTERVIEWER: What areas would you like to visit? Would you like to go back to where your parents came from?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. And to visit Italy. To see all the beautiful things that they have.
INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself more of an Italian or more of an American?
INTERVIEWEE: More of an American.
INTERVIEWER: But you are proud of your heritage?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
INTERVIEWER: Do you like being Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I'm very proud to be one.
INTERVIEWER: Thank you.