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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Marie DeCristofaro Strumolo by Norma DeLibero

Marie DeCristofaro Strumolo

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE Marie DeCristofaro Strumolo

INTERVIEWER Norma DeLibero

DATE OF INTERVIEW 2/25/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Early schooling, Classical High School

Identifying at URI

Continuity of foods, values

Parents' role in urging higher education

Desire to be recognized for accomplishments not ethnic background

Oral History Interview

with

MARIE DI CRISTOFARO STRUMOLO

February 25, 1979
Johnston, Rhode Island

by Norma A. Di Libero

INTERVIEWER: Today, I am speaking with Marie Di Cristofaro Strumolo, a third generation Italian. Marie, can you tell me something about your family life, past and present?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, our family life was enhanced by being Italian. Our holidays were such that the food was Italian; for instance Christmas Eve was with the traditional fish dinner. The pastries at Easter were traditional.

INTERVIEWER: Was this with your immediate family, or were other members of the family invited also?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yes; my house has been sort of the gathering place being next door to my grandmother's. My aunts would also bake. It was just not my mother that would bake and cook Italian. I would say that the whole family did participate and with this type of celebration with this type of food on holidays.

INTERVIEWER: Marie, were you distinct as an Italian-American in grammar school?

INTERVIEWEE: When I was in grammar school, I was a good student, so that would eliminate any type of pressure. I was a good student, so therefore, I hung with the good students, so we would not get caught up with your this or your that. I did experience, every September when I would come back to school from summer vacation, that some of the children would make fun of me and thinking back, they were lesser students and lesser everything. You know, this was there way of getting to me; and they would call me "danky" "Boston blackie" and all this kind of stuff and it would bother me, until I graduated from eighth grade at St. Theresa's and I was going to go to Classical. I was bound and determined that when I went to Classical I was not going to be tanned. I will never forget this day as long as I live, I'm sitting at the beach at Bennet Shores with a big, big Mexican sombrero covering my face and my shoulders. But, I was on the beach with all my cousins and my cousin Andrea comes up to me and says "Marie, what are you doing with that hat on?" I told her I did not want to be tanned when I go to Classical. She took that hat off me and she said to me "don't ever let me hear

INTERVIEWEE: you say that again." "You tan, you tan and that's it; just be proud of it and don't worry about a thing." Well, when I got to Classical, and I saw all the people there with tans and that tans were a status symbol, I was in absolute shock. I can still remember my day of realization. I won't forget it as long as I live, that a tan was something to be proud of because you had leisure time, you had a beach to sit on rather than playing in the city streets and so on and so on, so that's what changed my mind about the color of my skin. And not having blonde hair and blue eyes, I always felt a little slighted that I did not have blonde hair and blue eyes, but I got over that as soon as I got to Classical, mixed with different cultures, different economic backgrounds, people who's kids would go to Europe for the summer and they would go to camp for the summer and it was really nice being with them, some people who were a little bit better off, but yet, you could communicate with them because they were a different intellectual group.

INTERVIEWER: So this was almost a period of personalized growth for you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it really was. There was a big Jewish community there, and the Italians and the Jews, they seem to get along; they have the same sort

INTERVIEWEE: of values in that they want to succeed and to get ahead, plus the family types of things, and there were other groups there, but everybody was more concerned with doing well at school, rather than your Irish, I'm English, she's whatever. We just wanted to do well in school. We had to worry about deficiencies every two weeks. This was our main concern. Everybody just mixed and mingled; there was no....you know you were not ostracized because you were one religion or one nationality. Everybody just had a common goal, just to do well in school. Getting into a good college was the important thing. Very important. Much more important to others than to me. I was much interested in social life, but to do well too. I was not the type that would fall asleep at the books either, which a lot of my classmates would do. They would stay up all night to study. I won't say that I was that type of a student; I feel that I was well-rounded. I had a wonderful high school experience, which made me understand my grammar school peers better, who were relatively poor. At the time I did not realize that. When I did get to high school I did realize that difference and it was quite a good experience. U.R.I. was the same type of thing; people were bent on getting ahead that

INTERVIEWEE: they don't get bogged down with a nationality type of a crisis.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go to college Marie and were your ethnic values vital enough to withstand the crunch of modern American life on the campus?

INTERVIEWEE: I went to the University of Rhode Island for my undergraduate work and as far as my ethnic values I don't know if it has anything with being Italian, but I was brought up to be very, very independent. My father instilled independence in us which, which would make us....but like I was saying, we were brought up to be very independent, which would make us not necessarily leaders, but it definitely not followers and with independence came respect for our own opinions, decisions and the ability to say no, I'm not going to do what you're doing, be it right or wrong, I don't want to do it. And, I don't know if that has anything to do with the ethnic background. I think from the ethnic background we get a sort of "la dolce vita", we enjoy life, we enjoy parties, sharing with people and to withstand American college life, I would say that my family background did help me a lot because I was in college in the late sixties, it was a turbulent time; war protests, which I participated in because Italians do not want to fight in wars, that's for sure.

INTERVIEWEE: Genetic cowards, that's what I think they are called, but it helped me because there were a lot of roads I could have taken and they would have been the wrong roads,

INTERVIEWER: How influential were your parents?

INTERVIEWEE: Very, very influential. I knew that I could get support from them in certain things, like when I would have trouble with chemistry, my big albatross, in my sophomore year, and I would cry and I could not understand why I was not doing well in chemistry. I would study and get a four credit "C", being petrified of a four credit "D", you know what that can do to your average. They would come down and pick me up, take me home, burp me, feed me, put me to bed and I would be all ready for the next week. So, they supported me, when I needed help; they have a great respect for education. My father always made sure that we were at the library and he taught us the respect for education. He was a very well read man himself. My mother always preached for education.

INTERVIEWER: What did your father do?

INTERVIEWEE: My father had, he just retired, he had a job with Brown and Sharpe, which was a Yankee firm, and as an engineer, and he had quite a responsible position. He would fly all over the country

INTERVIEWEE: oh, California, Arizona; all over the place, selling machines, checking machines, designing machines so he realized how vital an education was for his children.

INTERVIEWER: Were you an only child?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I have two brothers who are also University of Rhode Island graduates. Peter is a pharmacist and a gentleman jeweler, and Paul is presently studying for an MBA in accounting. He also is a gentleman jeweler, which brings in the arts again, the Italian background, the love of working with your hands, but also trying to be book knowledgeable so you can say you are a gentleman jeweler, rather than not. We were brought up with a sense of "education is valuable"; there is no doubt about it.

INTERVIEWER: How supportive was your mother?

INTERVIEWEE: Very, very supportive. She never let me do housework; she just wanted me to study. I was terribly spoiled. That's all she wanted. It was not high pressure though, like I want "A's", I want you top grades, I want you in the ninetieth percentile, national merit type thing. I wasn't that; it was just a respect for education and while you are in this thing, you study and when you are not in school, then you don't study. So that's my time to study and you don't do

INTERVIEWEE: housework, or the little menial things you have to do around the house.

INTERVIEWER: Marie, do you speak Italian, or understand the dialect or the pure?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I understand the dialect somewhat. I could not understand a complete conversation, but I can understand a little. I took one year of the proper grammatical Italian in college as an elective, and I can't say that I could speak or understand a conversation. I could understand like social amenities, you know, conversations on a first grade level. That's about it, but...

INTERVIEWER: In conversing with your grandmother, how did you manage?

INTERVIEWEE: Broken English. She would converse in broken English. She had her simple ways of telling stories, in half English, half Italian, half broken English; I guess that's thirds, and we communicated. I understood what she was trying to tell me.

INTERVIEWER: How strong is the heritage with the third generation, Marie ?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, until my trip to Italy, I thought it was a lot stronger than what it is. But, when I went to Italy, for the first time in 1972, I realized that there is no correlation between the Italian-American and the Italians. First

INTERVIEWEE: of all in the way they live; the pace is very, very slow. They sit in cafes, they take a siesta in the afternoon. If there is a holiday on Tuesday, they take the rest of the week off and the week before off because there was a holiday on a Tuesday. Rome closes down for two or three hours for a siesta. Their days are longer than ours. They don't seem to work as hard as we do. They may work hard on the farms or the factories but they don't have the same attitude towards work that we do. They don't have the same attitude towards like a super market type of thing. They are not as progressive as the Americans. Whereas, in Germany, I identified more with the German way. The people are faster, they are more in a hurry. There are no siestas. This seems to be a faster pace, a sort of get ahead attitude. People speak English, rather than say, the further south you get in Italy, the less English they speak, or the less English they pretend to know not.

INTERVIEWER: Were you able to relate with them?

INTERVIEWEE: No, not really. I knew then that I was an American. At twenty-three years old I realized I'm not an Italian, I'm an American, with American influences, this country was influenced by the English, by the Germans with their methods,

INTERVIEWEE: more than the Italians. No, I didn't find that I identified with them at all. I loved their life; I loved sitting in a cafe. I knew I could fit in with them very easily. In a week or two I could be Italian. It's a wonderful life; it's a glass of wine, it's a pretty outfit, a nice looking escort. They are really a different of people than I thought they would be. Their cooking is different. I always thought my grandmother was a terrible cook. She cooks Italian. Like the sauce is watery, and a little sauce on a bowl of spaghetti. But the closer north you get, say closer to the Germanic countries, say like Switzerland, Austria, the more sophisticated it gets, the more modern it gets. I feel a strong tie to my Italian heritage in that I like being Italian; I like the music; I like knowing that the operas are in Italian. I like that knowing that the famous artists are Italian and that Michele Angelo and Leonardo Da Vinci have contributed so much to the culture. I like knowing that in Russia they imported, thanks to your son, they imported all the Italian artists. When you travel and you see what other countries call their national museums, Italy calls that a rest room. Our art is so magnificent. The museums are so fantastic. When you go to a national museum

INTERVIEWEE: in Switzerland, it is like folk art, the thing that we would get from Appalachia. If you love the arts, you feel proud that you or the world looks to Rome, in this beautiful Vatican, even though this is a religion, and not everyone is a member, but it has beautiful art. But as far as my Italian heritage, it is so inbred, it's such a part of me that I don't even think of it being anything else. I can't really say if I have really been influenced by my Italian heritage or I enjoy who I am, I enjoy my family. I don't like the stereo-type. That bothers me. The Italian stereo-type when they show these records on television. They show all these fat people and everybody in Rome is skinny. Why do they show these offensive, loud, T-shirt types, that offends me. I cringe at being associated with them, whether being Italian or whatever. But, then again, I feel comfortable in that I know who I am. I feel I have a very nice family, no matter what nationality they are. We love our customs, we love our food. They make wine and they love it, and the natural food craze that is going on is a farce to me. I was brought up on fresh vegetables and lean meat, veal and chicken, rather than processed food, packaged macaroni and cheese types. Another thing that

INTERVIEWEE: amused me were wine tasting parties. You know, that was boring. A few bottles of wine, a few kinds of cheese, that was my life. This is not something I considered sophisticated, something we did and baking bread, all these fads that have become popular now, a new way of life. These are things that have been part of my life. So, I guess I have been influenced by my Italian heritage. It has never interfered, as in previous generations. I am proud of the fact that my grandparents are part of that immigrant group and that I have come to such a point. I don't feel that my grandparents were inferior, as sort of the way that immigrants were classified; they were very fine people in Italy. They came here and they were in a different group. So, I'm proud of myself, I'm proud of my grandparents, my own parents, my brothers, so I can say I'm proud to be Italian; proud of my husband who is half Italian, half Irish, claims the Italian meroese, physically, any way.

INTERVIEWER: What does he do Marie?

INTERVIEWEE: He is in advertising at the Providence Journal, and he loves what he does.

INTERVIEWER: How well are the Italians represented in the teaching field?

INTERVIEWEE: There are a lot of Italian-Americans in the

INTERVIEWEE: teaching field. I've been in quite a few schools and a lot of my colleagues are Italian. It's difficult to say how many or what the percentage is because we are all teachers, rather than we are some Italian, some Irish. In conversation, or socially, you get down to always food or the way you cook, the customs or the slang things you would say; gestures, maybe.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you teach and what do you teach?

INTERVIEWEE: West Warwick and I teach remedial reading in elementary school in grades one, two and three. There are quite a few Italian school teachers in the West Warwick school system.

INTERVIEWER: Are there many Italian children in West Warwick?

INTERVIEWEE: We have a few families that the parents would be first generation, and I have had some of these children, but it is predominately, Portuguese immigrant group, rather than Italian. I am not working with them any longer, because they have a bi-lingual program. now that takes them. In the past, I have had them in my reading.

INTERVIEWER: Marie, what do you treasure Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: I think from my Italian heritage, I have learned to love life. Italians are great lovers, they enjoy their gardens, their flowers; they enjoy whatever nature has to offer them, wherever they live, la dolce vita. They enjoy making wine

INTERVIEWEE: from the grapes, they enjoy roasting peppers they grow; they enjoy music; they sing; the bus drivers who were Italian, they sing operas. There are no economic barriers to this culture, whereas in America, if you are rich you enjoy the arts, if you are poor you may enjoy them, but you don't get to participate in them. Family is very important. There is a loyalty to your brothers, to your parents.

INTERVIEWER: Is this still sustained with your grandmother?

INTERVIEWEE: My grandmother will be ninety years old in July.

INTERVIEWER: Is she still the matriarch?

INTERVIEWEE: Is she still the matriarch? She has failed in the last couple of years, but I can say she still is the matriarch. She is still respected, she is still loved, she is still cared for, whereas, in the past she was the one who was doing these things, but she is well taken care of and the prime consideration.

INTERVIEWER: What is American to you Marie, what does it mean?

INTERVIEWEE: I can honestly say that I am an Itale-American. I feel I've gotten the best from both cultures. My parents were born here, I was born here, so technically, we are American, with Italian customs, in the home. But American to me is the history, the Revolution; of course I partici-

INTERVIEWEE: participated in the in the bi-centennial. I am not anti-American by no means. I love Gettysburg and that whole Valley Forge, I've been there. But in a historical sense; now I've just gotten into American folk type of crafts, quilting, which is American. I love to do that, but maybe I can say that I got my handicraft skill from my Italian ancestors and their crotcheting of the lace and everything. But, I feel I enjoy being an American from an Italian point of view. I enjoy both, but I identify with American as far as the history. As far as the food, I don't know, because, what is American food? We really can't define it. The culture, what is the culture? It's everything. It's every kind of people, it's every kind of background.

INTERVIEWER: As generations become father removed, is there a lessening of the Italian ties?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I feel a strong tie because of my grandparents on both sides. They were from Italy. They spoke Italian, so it was obvious to me that I was affiliated with Italy. My own children or as the generations go on, they will be associated with Americans. There will be no Italian speaking as such, but on the other hand, the names will usually be Italian. I will probably maintain as many of the customs

INTERVIEWEE: as I could for the holidays. These customs are most beautiful. The food is festive, the atmosphere is festive, the religion is very important. I would maintain as close to an Italian household as I have now.

INTERVIEWER: How do you keep your culture alive today?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, with the appreciation of the arts and music and books and this thirst for learning and a thirst to know about famous Italians, not so much about the country. The country has been in such turmoil for so many years, its sort of humorous, but strong family ties that have become important. Home life is very important. The quality of your home, trying to keep it as nice as you can; trying to make it as comfortable so you want to be there and other people want to be there to participate in the good life with you. Good wine, good food, a nice conversation. I'm sorry that I don't speak Italian. My brother speaks Italian. He has had the opportunity to learn it in Italy and that would be one way of keeping the culture alive. Passing the language down, but I cannot lament about that. My grandparents did not speak proper Italian anyway. I could not have learned it from them, but I would encourage my children to seek out things that are Italian. To read books and to find out

INTERVIEWEE: what their heritage is. It is very important to identify with a group. And since you do identify with a group, it is nice to know the nice things about the one you belong to.

INTERVIEWER: By revitalizing your culture do you feel you have contributed to the United States?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, by being a teacher. I've had contact with immigrant parents, Italian immigrants. And, I've told them that my grandparents were early immigrants and in the same bracket that they are in, in the factory. And, they have seen the results of this, fifty years later and that has encouraged them. I have contributed to the United States by teaching children to read. We have a high illiteracy percentage in such a civilized country. I've contributed to the people around me with the things that I've learned, with my Italian background, such as gardening and planting tomatoes. They all want to know what my father is planting this year, how his wine came out and about my mother's cooking and how does she do this or that. Very enjoyable things and it makes for pleasant conversation. Friends have joined me to watch an opera on Channell 2 and they have Italian dances once in awhile, that I go to see. I remember once at the University of Rhode Island, they had certain flag dancers.

INTERVIEWEE: I had never heard of them, but I went because they were Italian. I feel that I have contributed to this country, by being a good American, living within the law because of the way I was brought up, by an Italian influenced home. I've contributed by educating myself because of the values that were instilled in me. I've contributed financially by paying plenty of taxes and generally living a decent life

INTERVIEWER: What patterns do you see immerging?

INTERVIEWEE: I feel maybe it's being too liberal that people are going to start judging people, or they already do by the individual rather than by the cultural background or the ethnic affiliation. If you are ambitious, it's not because you are Italian, it's because you are an ambitious person, or you are lazy, not because you are Italian, rather than the stereo types that are so offensive to every nationalities. They have their stereo type baffleen and it's very sensitive to every nationality and the people have got to realize that In every group you have all sorts of traits no matter what you language is. There's lazy, ambitious, evil, good sinister, passive, aggressive, all kinds of people. In every nationality they should be judged as such, not because of their name ending with a vowel

INTERVIEWEE: or with a "burg" or "stein" or something like that. They should be judged on their merit rather than the whole culture being judged.

Marie tells us about some of her earliest days of discrimination in grammar school and the great remorse it brought her. Later, at Classical and still later in college she becomes aware of who she is, how important her family and Italian culture is and how much satisfaction and pride it brings to her.

Later as a teacher, friend and wife she uses this heritage in her everyday life. It is obvious in all she says that Marie enjoys everything Italian, but summarizes it by saying that people should be judged by their qualities, not their ethnicity.

It was very pleasurable speaking with a third generation Italian who has kept many of the customs and was willing to continue them with her forthcoming children.

In many instances Marie was confusing to me, in that she attributes the way she was taught to be independent, respectful to her grandmother and love for her brothers because of her ethnic background. I felt this was so not because of being reared in an Italian home, but because she was reared in a loving and learning home environment.

I feel with Marie's strong Italian beliefs, and her many contributions, much of the Italian culture will survive for years to come.