

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Italian Americans

Personal Experience

O.H. 1168

AMEDEO CHIOVITTI

Interviewed

by

Frank Mancini

on

October 25, 1988

AMEOLEO CHIOVITTI

Ameleo Chiovitti was born in Northern Italy and immigrated to the United States in 1955 at the age of twenty. Italy was rough for him with constant work to be done on the farm that his parents worked. They raised tomatoes, sugar, beats, corn, beans, peppers, and grapes. When Mr. Chiovitti was not in school, he was usually working the farm. Other than working on the farm, there were not too many jobs open for Ameleo. He had relatives in America at the time of his departure from Italy.

Mr. Chiovitti left Italy in hopes of finding a good job in America. He went through immigration centers in Naples and then, again at Ellis Island. They asked a few questions including the following: why he left and why he came to America. He only stayed there one day with four other people in a cabin called Beautiful. There were no hassles for him. The first thing that caught his eye in America were the many cars on the streets. He had never seen so many. Mr. Chiovitti was not sure whether he would stay permanently or return to Italy upon first arriving in America. After he could speak the language, he felt comfortable and would later bring his brother and sister over.

Mr. Chiovitti came to Youngstown where his uncle got him a job repairing cars on a Youngstown railroad. He lived in a neighborhood with Germans, Croations, and Americans. It took him nearly eight months to learn how to communicate, and he recalled several problems. In 1957, he was drafted by the army, and he could not understand what the sergeant was saying. A person was assigned to him eight hours a day to help him learn English.

Mr. Chiovitti did not remember any cases of prejudice against him because of immigrant status, but rather, many Americans helped him learn safety on the job. Although Mr. Chiovitti learned to eat American food in the army, he did not like it at first. The army helped to change

that since all that they served was American food. Upon first arriving in America, he recalled being sick for fourteen days of the eighteen day trip to America. He ate only lemon and water for most of the trip.

M: This is an interview with Ameoleo Chiovitti for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Italian Immigration, by Frank Mancini, at 1470 Tamarisk Trail, on October 25, 1988, at 7:00 p.m.

Where are you from in Italy?

C: It is Bianco, a providence of Campobasso.

M: Is it north or south?

C: It is north.

M: What year did you come to America?

C: 1955.

M: How old were you?

C: I was twenty years old.

M: What do you remember about your family life in Italy?

C: It was really rough.

M: What did your parents do for a living?

C: They worked on a farm.

M: A farm? What kinds of things did they farm?

C: They raised tomatoes, sugar beets, corn, wheat, peppers, and grapes.

M: Did you help on the farm?

C: Yes, I did help on the farm.

M: And was it really tough work?

C: It was really hard work.

M: Did you go to school?

C: I went to school, yes, and when class would end from school, I would help my father with

the stalk and working on the farm.

M: Why did you decide to come to America?

C: I thought that it was a better future because, at that time, it was hard to find work. I figured that if I came to this country, I would have a better life.

M: Did you know someone who had already come over?

C: Yes. I had a lot of relatives over here. I had my uncle, cousin, and aunt.

M: Did you keep in touch with them?

C: Yes, we did. We wrote them a letter when we were in Italy. They made the papers for us. They brought my mother to this country, and, at that time, we had a law. My mother had young children under the age, and she was not allowed to bring them into this country. That is the only reason that I came over.

M: When you came over did you go through any immigration centers?

C: Yes, I did. When I went to Naples immigration, they had questioned me the reason to why I wanted to come to this country. I told them about how hard it was to find a job in Italy, and I told them that I wanted to go to America to have a better life.

M: Where was this at?

C: It was in Italy at immigrations in Naples.

M: Did you come to any immigration center in the United States?

C: When I came through the customs in New York, they just asked me a few questions, and that was it.

M: Was that in Ellis Island?

C: Yes, sir.

M: What kinds of questions did they ask you?

C: They asked me what I was doing in Italy, why I left Italy, and why I came to this country. I told them that I wanted a better life.

M: Did they give you any hassles at all?

C: No. They did not give me any hassles at all.

M: When you came over, did you have a job?

C: Yes, I did. As soon as I came to this country, about a week later, I got a job. My uncle who already lived in this country found me a job on the railroad.

M: Where was the railroad at?

C: In Youngstown, Ohio.

M: When you first got over to America, what was your average ordinary day like?

C: Are you talking about money wise?

M: Just what did you do?

C: I repaired trucks for the railroad.

M: Now, you had a place to stay when you first came over?

C: Oh yes. I lived with my uncle, my aunt, and my relatives.

M: Did you live in a neighborhood with other Italians, or were there a lot of mixed people?

C: There were a lot of mixed people.

M: What kinds of people?

C: Like Germans, Croations, English, and Italians.

M: Did you meet these people and learn to communicate with them at all?

C: Yes, I did. I started to talk on the job, and I started learning little by little to pick up English.

M: How long did it take before you felt that you could speak English comfortably?

C: It took me a good eight or nine months until I started learning pretty good.

M: What did you miss in Italy when you first got to America?

C: I missed my family. My brother, my sister, and all of my friends.

- M: Did you want them to come to America?
- C: Oh, yes. Sometimes, I wish that I had them over here, but later on, I did make up the papers. I brought them over to this country, my brother and my sister.
- M: Were there any incidents that you can remember where you had trouble communicating that might have caused you, for example, your job or something like that?
- C: This happened about two years later. I got drafted in the U.S. Army. I had a rough time going through the basic training because I could not speak English.
- M: Who gave you the rough time?
- C: Well, at that time, the sergeant did not give me a rough time. It was hard for me because I could not understand what they told me. While I was going through basic training, I could not understand what they were trying to tell me. Then, they had a guy who spent eight hours a day with me who taught me how to speak the proper English. He also helped me understand what I had to in order to go through the basic training.
He taught me what I had to do to pass the basic training. I did pass, and he did help me. I had a rough time because I could not do it on my own. I always needed help, and they did help me in making me pass through the basic training. It was hard, but I made it. The hardest thing was that I could not speak English.
- M: What kinds of people were there? Were there other ethnic immigrants with you in the basic training?
- C: No. At that time, I was in basic training with nobody who could speak the Italian language. Everyone knew how to speak English.
- M: When you first got to America, did you plan on staying for good, or did you plan on going back to Italy?
- C: When I came to this country, I had decided that if the life was going to be better, then, I was going to stay, but if the life was rough, then, I was going to go back. Then, I started to speak English pretty good, and I got to know the people around here. I stayed.
- M: Do you remember any of the tough times that you had when you first got here? Maybe you could not communicate, or you could not find a job. For example, were you discriminated against because you were an immigrant? Do you remember any of those cases?
- C: There is only one case that I remember, at that time. I had a rough time on a job because I could not understand English. In the place that I worked at, I had a really rough time

understanding my boss who was trying to tell me what to do. That is the rough time that I had.

M: In what ways was America different than what you expected?

C: In this country, life was the easiest thing. I was lucky that I came and found a job right away. I had more of a future over here. There were a lot more things over here than in Italy, at that time. We never had them.

M: Did you find any cases of say, for example, the KKK? Or any anti-immigrant groups showing prejudice against you because you were an immigrant?

C: No, I never had a rough time because I was an immigrant. I had nothing against that.

M: Can you remember any cases of people going out of there way to help you get adjusted in America?

C: Yes, I did. I had people help me out when I went to work. They knew that I could not understand English, and they always tried to help me to understand. They made sure that I did my work safely without getting hurt. They knew that I would try really hard to do it, there were a lot of people there helping me.

M: What customs did you keep in America that were Italian customs? For example, did you eat the same foods or sing the same songs?

C: Okay, at that time, you are talking about the songs because that is what I could understand. Anytime that I wanted to buy a cassette, I was buying old time songs because those were the only ones that I could understand. Not because I had anything against Americans, but because I could not understand. Little by little, I stated to learn and understand.

M: Did you mix at all with any of the other ethnic groups when you first got here? You mentioned earlier some Germans. Did you mix with them, meet them, and get to know them well?

C: Oh, yes. I met some German fellow who came across. He could not understand English, but little by little, I can understand German. He could understand Italian. Little by little, we began to communicate together by a few words and understand each other.

M: How was life? What did you say that it was better for you in America than it would have been if you had lived in Italy all these years?

C: At the time that I came, Italy was really rough. It was hard to find a job anywhere, so I

came here. I had a mother to buy what I want. For me, it was easier to come to this country. Today, Italy has changed. They have a lot of things.

The last time that I came, Italy was rough. You could not find a job anywhere. When I came here, I started to work and see the money right away. I could see the life over here was easier, and it was different all together. In Italy, it was really rough because you could not find a job, and you could not buy a lot of things that we had over here.

M: Did you find yourself eating American foods when you got here or Italian foods?

C: Both. When I came to this country, I went to live with my uncle and aunt, and they cooked Italian and also American. As soon as I came, I did not like American food. Then, little by little, I started to like things. Then, when I went into the army, they never cooked any Italian food. That is when I learned to eat American food. Since then, I have learned to eat anything.

M: Did you talk mostly Italian, American, or English around the house?

C: When I came from Italy, I spoke Italian because I did not have any choice. I made up my mind that I wanted to learn how to speak English. So, no matter who I met, I started to talk to them in English. Although the words were bad, I started to speak English because I wanted to learn how to speak English. I spoke both languages: Italian and English.

M: Do you speak a lot of Italian today?

C: Today, around the house, I speak Italian because my mother lives with me, and she does not understand that much English. It depends. If the Italian people come down here, I speak Italian. When the English come over, I speak English.

M: What do you speak with your wife? Italian or English?

C: With my wife, I speak both languages. Sometimes, I speak Italian, and sometimes, I speak English.

M: What determines what you speak?

C: When she makes me mad, I speak English and Italian, or both languages.

M: Anything else that you would like to say? For example, a thousand years from now when someone hears this tape, what would you tell them about your trip about coming to America?

C: It was beautiful, and I enjoyed it. It was hard times, and it took me eighteen days to

travel by ship from Italy to New York. I came with a ship named Conta Bianca Mian. We left Italy, and we stopped in Portugal. We went all the way around, and it took us eighteen days. Then, we stopped at the Canadian border. From the airport, we came around the side to New York. It was really rough. I was sick for fourteen days. I would eat everyday. I had lemon and a glass of water for fourteen days.

M: Is that lemon and water?

C: I could not eat because I got sick.

M: Did you lose a lot of weight?

C: When I reached New York, I weighed about 90 pounds.

M: Wow, that is it.

C: The ocean is what really made me sick. At that time, it was really bad.

M: When you got to America, did you feel a little bit better?

C: Oh yes. I put my foot on the ground, and I felt better. The ground under my foot looked light. It was turned upside down, and that is how bad I felt. I was dizzy. I had been on the boat in the ocean for eighteen days, and I got really sick.

M: When you were on Ellis Island, how long did you stay there?

C: We stayed there one day.

M: One day.

C: Well, we stayed on the boat without getting off. We stayed there one day.

M: How were the accommodations? How were your sleeping quarters?

C: We slept in a cabin. At that time, there were four people in each cabin. There was a room for the captain. The water was rough, and I got sick. My stomach got upset, and I could not eat. Anytime that I would go and eat, I would start to throw up. All that I ate was lemon and a glass of water everyday because I could not eat any food. I would throw up. I got sea sick really bad.

M: Did somebody come and pick you up?

C: Oh, yes. I had two uncles from Youngstown, Ohio, who came to New York to meet me.

We spent two days in New York because we had more relatives there. He put us on a train, which took us all night, and he brought us to Youngstown, Ohio.

M: What was the first thing that caught your eye, and you said to yourself, "Wow, this is America?"

C: As soon as I got off of the ship, I looked to New York. What caught my eye was the cars. When I said, "Wow." I never saw so many cars until I came to this country. The big city and the big buildings are what got me interested.

M: Did you send back for any relatives or friends to come over after you were already established here?

C: Yes, I did. I made the papers for my brother and my sister to come to this country.

M: They stayed here?

C: They are still living in this country.

M: Was there anybody who you know of that came over and then, went back because they did not like it?

C: I did. I had one brother who came, and he did not like it because it was hard for him to learn English. So, he went back to Italy.

M: Anything else that you want to talk about as far as the transition?

C: I am so happy that I came to this country. I will say it again. I left Italy along time ago because it was really rough. I had a really rough time, and I am so happy to be in this country.

End of Interview