

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Fascism in Italy Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 408

ANTONIO BRUNO

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

June 10, 1986

ANTONIO BRUNO

Antonio Bruno, the son of Joesph and Mariangela Bruno, was born in Calabria, Italy on November 14, 1939. Antonio was educated in Italy and graduated from trade school in tailoring. Currently, Antonio is employed as a tailor for the Strouss Co.

In 1963 Antonio married his wife Caterina. They have three children: Jospheh age 21, Mariangela age 19, and Emilio age 18.

Special interests of Antonio include: reading, cooking, and construction work.

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INTERVIEWEE: ANTONIO BRUNO

INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese

SUBJECT: Life in Southern Italy, World War II in Italy,
Education, Culture, Albanian and Greek Influence
in Southern Italy.

DATE: June 10, 1986

C: This is an interview with Mr. Bruno for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Fascism in Italy--an Italian-American experience. The date is June 10, 1986, and it is approximately 8:00 p.m.

Thank you Mr. Bruno for consenting to this interview. I would like to ask you a few question about your life in Italy. Can you start off telling me about your family, how many brothers and sisters you have, where you lived, and where you were born?

B: My family is five people. I have one sister and one brother. We lived in a small town in the southern part of Italy by the Ionion Sea. It was a very small town, about a thousand people. It's very high in the mountains.

C: It is probably beautiful.

B: It is nice; it's facing the ocean. There are poor people there though. There are no factories there or anything. It's all farms and wineries mostly.

C: What year were you born?

B: 1939.

C: Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up in Italy?

B: It wasn't much really. Growing up there was not having that much, not having toys or anything like that. We had enough food during the war. There was not too much to

spare really, like clothing and all this other stuff. It was pretty limited. The fun was when holidays were coming; that was the most fun for us, like Christmas, Easter, and festivals. We used to go up in the mountains for festivals. It was the festival of St. Mary. They had a chapel there. They used to take that in May and leave it there. They would go back in August when they bring the saint back home. They would have a festival and games. Those were the fun days. There was no television or radio or electricity when I was growing up.

C: No electricity?

B: No, just playing with friends was fun. It was the same thing with schools; we only had a one-room school. Each class there was a different part of the town. You may have a first grade on one side of the town; you may have a third, fourth, and fifth grade at a different place. It was very, very small. All the small towns are like that.

The road would come to the bottom of the town and stop there. You would have to climb up by walking. We did a lot of walking. We used to walk ten or fifteen miles sometimes.

C: To get to one place from another?

B: Yes. We had to do that to get to the railroad station. We would walk about ten miles down to go get the train to go different places, different cities. It was the life. The life was really around your family.

To go to school you had to go out of town, for a higher school. Elementary school you could finish in our town. Right now they have everything; they have buses in those towns and schools. It's not like the kids here today. I didn't have a bike. I used to rent one. Most of the time we used to play soccer. Every day we used to do that; that was our fun. When I was a teenager, we used to get together and drink wine at night. We would get some food and have a picnic. When I tell that to my kids they don't believe me. They say it's impossible. We didn't have all this luxury like extra food and candy.

C: You mentioned the war earlier. You said you didn't have too much during the war. Can you tell me some stories about the war? I know you were very young.

B: I remember a little bit, but not much.

C: Can you tell me what you remember?

B: In my town there was really nothing going on. Nearby

there was a port; that's where we used to hear the bombardment. The planes used to go over and all the people would come out of their homes because they were afraid. They used to shut off all the lights. Nothing really happened though. When I was small, I remember Germans coming up in my town. They used to come up and get livestock for the soldiers.

- C: Did they harm anyone in the community?
- B: No. All of the food was rationed too.
- C: What else do you remember? Going to school you were small, about five or something?
- B: When the war ended I was four years old.
- C: Are you the oldest?
- B: Yes. My grandfather was in the war.
- C: Do you remember any of the stories he used to tell?
- B: Not really. I know when he was away he used to send stuff home. That is the only thing I remember.
- C: Was your father in the war?
- B: Yes.
- C: When you were older, when you got to ten or eleven, did you go to grade school there?
- B: They only had elementary school there. In sixth grade you finished elementary school.
- C: Do you remember what you learned about in school? Did you learn about Mussolini after the war?
- B: Yes, you learned history.
- C: What did they tell you about him before the war? Most people say they learned great things about Mussolini before he came into power in the 1920's.
- B: They didn't really praise him, but they praised a few things he did, like straightening up the country. The laws were good. Everything was running on time. The trains were running on time; the post office was working. You could have left your suitcase there and nobody would have touched it for a week. He made a lot of roads and buildings. Then he became involved with Hitler. He was good when he first started. There were people who liked

him and people who disliked him. Mostly we learned the history of Italy and Europe a little bit.

C: Tell me about growing up as a teenager in Italy.

B: When you are a teenager, you go to school and start your trade. After school you go learn your trade, whether it's a shoemaker, carpenter, bricklayer, or tailor.

C: You're a tailor?

B: Yes. I was going to school and going to tailoring. They started you very young there. It takes about ten years until you learn your trade. In those days, there was not much opportunity to go to school like today. Your family really had to send you out of town. They had to send you to a big city in order to go to a university. Only the rich people could afford it, unless you became a priest, then it was free. (Laughter) I was going to at one point, then I changed my mind. My friends did that and after they got their schooling they turned around and left the priesthood and became doctors and lawyers.

C: That was smart.

B: They got an education, yes. School is different there; you learn how to write and read. They don't have as many subjects as here. They teach you the basic things, what you need in life: math, history, science, and writing. When you get out of elementary school it is like high school here.

C: I see, you go for long periods of time. Do you go from 9:00 until 3:00?

B: School there was 9:00 to 4:00, something like that.

C: Did you go on Saturdays?

B: Yes, we went Saturdays too, six days. It used to be six days.

C: That's why it was so intense.

B: Yes. It was all school, not playing and sports.

C: When did you move to the United States?

B: 1963. I left when I was twelve or thirteen years old. I went to a different town.

C: Tell me about that.

B: It was for my job. I had an aunt in another city. I worked there for five or six years. That's where I learned my trade mostly. I used to go back home once in a while.

C: Tell me how you met your wife. Did she live in the same town as you?

B: It was my father's town. I used to go there every year to visit my grandparents. My father is from a different town.

C: What town is he from?

B: His town is Colobrarro; that would be my wife's town too. She had relatives there and through pictures we communicated. When she came to Italy, she stayed six months and that's when we got married. Then she came back here because she was not a citizen. I had to wait about seventeen months for her to come to the United States, to get all the papers. You have to go through a lot of paper work. Finally, in 1963, I came over.

C: How is it different over there when you get engaged and everything than it is over here in the United States?

B: There was not that much freedom. As a matter of fact, her grandfather who was eighty years old did not want me to sit next to her. They were very jealous and really strict. Those were the old days. He didn't want me to sit next to her because he thought I would touch her or something. They're different. You get your chaperones when you go out.

C: Did you have a chaperone when you went out?

B: Yes, I did.

C: The eighty year old grandfather?

B: No. It was her aunt or somebody else. Of course, now everything is different.

C: I was in Italy last year.

B: I was there two years ago with my son. He found it interesting too. The people are nice. They tend to relax more.

C: They do.

B: They don't concentrate too much on material things. They enjoy their food. My son liked it. We visited Rome, Naples, and Sorrento, and Capri, Pompeii. It was very interesting.

In later days the southern part of Italy didn't have too much going on. Everything that was built was built in the north. Now they are getting factories and new roads and Southern Italy is building up. People used to live off of the land. Everybody had a piece of land. Maybe they had grapes, fruit, or wheat. Today it is different. All the young people left for the big cities. There is nothing there for them.

C: They don't want the same life style. Why did you come to the United States?

B: It was a better life.

C: Did you face any prejudice being an Italian when you came over here in the 1960's?

B: No. I hear people talking about it, but I have not experienced it personally.

C: Where did you settle when you came to the United States?

B: We came to Youngstown. Then we moved to Altoona, Pennsylvania. Then we moved back to Youngstown and then to Sharon.

C: Would you like to add anything else about your experiences in Italy growing up?

B: There are so many things I could really tell you.

C: Please do, this is important. I'm interested in your life there, what kind of problems you faced, what kind of cultural things you enjoyed, things that went through your mind as a youngster.

B: What we faced wasn't too much money growing up as a teenager, but we were happy. Friends used to get together and have a good time. We used to go out looking for girls. We would go to other towns and just walk sometimes. We used to go to the movies and listen to music. In this country Elvis Presley was popular and Paul Anka; we liked the same rock music that was here.

C: What about politics?

B: There were a lot of politics and they took it personally there too. You could start fighting with views from one party told to another. They don't respect your wishes.

I didn't really want to get involved in politics. I went along with whatever my parents said.

C: Did you vote over there?

B: Yes, I did. The communist party used to go after the young kids too to recruit them. They used to talk them into it so they would join them. I never liked that.

C: I understand they have bands come in and then they try to have a communist speaker come and speak.

B: Yes. They make a lot of speeches. They had them in public squares outside. The Italian people are not very organized. You get five or six of them in one room and they cannot agree on anything. (Laughter)

Italians enjoy the outdoors. You go there at night and the parks and villas are full of people walking and having food. They have dances outside, music, and food. They like their coffee, espresso. The life is different there; there is not that much pressure. In the big cities, it is probably a faster life. In some of the small towns you can't change the old people; they still think in the old ways. As a matter of fact, in my town they speak Albanian; they don't even speak Italian. That is a dialect, a Greek dialect. They use that even when they get married. There are six or seven towns in Calabria like this. It probably happened in the fourteenth or fifteenth century when the Turks invaded Albania. A lot of those people left there. What they did was form small towns. Their towns were up in the mountains; the higher the better. They left their language there.

C: So you speak with a dialect?

B: Yes, I speak Albanian. It is a very hard language. I can't write or read it.

C: You do speak Italian also then?

B: They left that. Everything is Italian there. When you go to school, you are not allowed to speak Albanian.

C: But in the village you speak Albanian?

B: Yes. When I call my mother that is how I speak to her.

C: When you're together with your family do you speak Italian here in the United States?

B: Yes, sure.

C: Your mother speaks Albanian?

B: My mother and my grandmother. Albania is an island right across from Greece. It is very small. That mass in our church is Greek, but it was under the Catholic church. In weddings they had the crowns and they exchange them. It is the same thing with the wine and communion. They break the glass. If the glass breaks it means a good life; if it doesn't break it is a bad life. They have all of these rituals. They go around the altar three times. When somebody gets married in a little town everybody is invited.

C: Tell me more about Albanian history.

B: When somebody gets married, they dress up in the old custom outfits. They all have red dresses and green tops and gold ribbons around it. The best man has a flag. When they leave the house and go to the church, he dances in the street going to the church. She can have as many girls as she wants, but there is only one best man. They help you bring the ring and they help you put the rings on her, every one of them. Of course, she gives it back to them. There is a ring with a ribbon hanging down.

C: You said that few villages in the area have this?

B: Just my town. That is an Orthodox church and that is what they do. There are only a few towns that do that in the southern part of Italy.

The way the dialects started is from all other countries coming in there. During the invasion the French were there, the Vikings, the Turks, the Arabs. You have a mixture there that has been there for centuries. You can go from one town to another and you have a different dialect. It is the same thing with the food. As you go from one town to another everybody cooks a different way. The food there is altogether different.

C: Than in Northern Italy?

B: In Northern Italy they use more potatoes and barley. They don't use too much spaghetti or peppers or tomatoes. They don't use that stuff too much.

C: Speaking of these different cultures in Southern Italy, do you find a lot of Greek culture in Southern Italy, maybe even in Sicily and places like that?

B: In Sicily probably, sure. They have a Greek temple still standing. In Sicily they are darker people too.

As you go north you find more blond people. Of course, there are blonde people south too.

C: This has been very informative. Do you have anything else you would like to add? I'm looking for stories about the war.

B: One guy who was a prisoner said he walked from Russia back to Italy. It took him about three or four months. He and this other guy were so hungry they used to eat rats and skins from potatoes. They were treated badly. Even the Germans turned against him. I can't really remember that much. I learned about the destruction in school.

C: Did you learn anything about the Jews in Italy?

B: No.

C: Thank you very much, Mr. Bruno. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW