

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ETHNIC GROUPS IN YOUNGSTOWN

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

O.H. 1178

CONCETTA DEGEORGE

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

July 21, 1988

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: CONCETTA DEGEORGE  
INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McNamara  
SUBJECT: Ethnic Groups in Youngstown  
DATE: July 21, 1988

M: This is an interview with Concetta DeGeorge for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Ethnic Groups of Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at 41 Romaine Drive, in Boardman, Ohio, on July 21, 1988, at 10:00 a.m.

Could you tell me a little bit about yourself. Where you were born? Tell me about your family?

D: I was born in Potenza, Italy on February 20, 1911. My mother passed away when I was five years old. I lived with my grandmother. Then after she died I was put in an orphanage and I lived with the Sisters of Charity until 1921, when I came to this country. My father had found a woman in Italy and I came with her to America; New York.

M: I see. Whereabouts is this village that you lived in in Italy?

D: Potenza, is in Basilicata. That is between Naples and Bari. You have to go through my town to go to Bari from Naples.

M: Okay, can you tell me about your hometown? What did it look like? What were the houses like? Do you remember?

D: The houses were all of stone and brick. In Europe you get all brick homes.

M: Brick?

D: The house that we had, we lived on the upstairs floor. We had a college about two blocks away from my home, and a school. That is where I went to school from the convent. I used to walk to school right in my hometown.

M: Was it a very big town?

D: Well, it is the capital of the state that I lived in, so it was pretty big. I wouldn't say that it is big like New York, Pittsburgh, or these big towns, they are a lot smaller.

M: Why did you decide to come to this country and what year was it?

D: I came in 1921 it wasn't my decision, it was my father's decision because his godfather found a woman for him. In order to take me to this country he had to promise to marry her because he was a widower. My mother died in Italy while he was living in Pittsburgh. In order for me to get to this country somebody had to bring me.

M: I see.

D: But she was over twenty-one you know and so he married her.

M: So your father was already in Pittsburgh at this time?

D: He had already moved to Youngstown about a couple of years. He had bought a home here in town.

M: What was he doing in Pittsburgh?

D: He had bought a truck, him and two other hometown guys you know, they bought a truck and they were delivering flowers from Pittsburgh to Akron, Cleveland, Youngstown. That is how he happened to be in Youngstown, when they found out about a job. He was delivering flowers down at Julian Bakery. Mr. Julian was talking to him and he said, "There is a house up the street if you wanted to move." Julian took him to Truscon Steel Mill for a job application. He got called and that is when he bought the house right down on Hine Street.

M: When you came to this country where did you enter? Did you go through New York? Did you go through Ellis Island?

D: Yes, through Ellis Island.

M: What was that like?

D: Well, as a child, ten and a half years old to me everything seemed you know great. We stayed in Ellis Island for two days because my father didn't show up. We had missed the first boat and the second boat was a little bit late. So, we figured he wasn't going to go twice and not have us there. So we had to stay in Ellis Island for two days, till he came to pick us up. His girlfriend, my step-mother to be was put in me in a convent in New York until the day they got married. I went to my relations in New York City.

M: When you were going through Ellis Island, did they ask you a lot of questions, or did you understand English?

D: No, they did not have an interpreter.

M: Oh I see, did they check you for any diseases?

D: Oh yes.

M: And you still got through okay?

D: Yes, I got through okay.

M: You were with somebody right, at that time?

D: Well, I was with the woman, with my stepmother at the time, before they got married.

M: So then you came right to Youngstown?

D: Then we came right to Youngstown?

M: Where did you live then? Where did you live in Youngstown?

D: On Hine Street, the lower East side.

M: What was it like growing up there? Can you describe it for me?

D: It was nice. There were mostly Italian people, very few blacks. I got to go to school because I started the first grade even though I had... gone through the fourth grade in Italy, but I had to start the first grade because we got here in September. We left in June from Europe and we got here in September. I started school about four days after I got here. I started the first grade I didn't graduate I quit. I went to the tenth grade and I was sixteen years old then.

M: Did you have a hard time adjusting to school?

D: No.

M: What about the language barrier?

D: I picked it up, I think I picked it up right away.

M: Did you?

D: Yes, because people now don't even think that I came from Europe because I don't have an accent.

M: I was just going to say you don't speak with an accent.

D: I picked it up right away. I just kept on skipping grades because I already knew a lot of the stuff from the school in Europe.

M: Did you live in a boarding house or anything like that on Hine Street?

D: No, no, it was my father's house. He had moved from Pittsburgh. After he got the job at Truscon he moved from Pittsburgh and he had the house ready for us when we came.

M: The other Italian families that you said lived in that neighborhood, were they from the same areas in Italy that you were from or were they from all over?

D: No, they were from all over. We had people that came from the same town that we came from in Italy, but they were living on the upper East side.

M: Do you think that is why your father settled in that area, was it because it was predominately Italian?

D: No, they just happened to get that house for the price that he wanted, that he could afford, and being that he had already gotten a job at Truscon, so he settled there.

M: Can you describe the job that your father had? What did he do in the mill?

D: He was a boiler attendant. At that time they used to feed the boilers by hand. Put the coal in or whatever till Republic took over and my father didn't know how to read and write. So then he had to pass a test, a reading test like and he couldn't do it so he lost his job there for a while. He got rehired after they put the other boilers in, he was a boiler attendant again and a pipe fitter. In the winter time he worked as a boiler attendant and in the summer time he worked as a pipe fitter like a mechanic, in different places.

M: Now this company was Truscon?

D: Truscon Steel.

M: How far was that from where you lived?

D: Oh, I would say about twelve to fourteen blocks?

M: Did he walk then?

D: He walked yes, back and forth.

M: Back and forth?

D: He didn't have a car till quite sometime after that. I think that if I am not mistaken he got the car around 1925, he got an Essex. He knew how to drive because he had driven a truck. It was just that there was no money then, because had to feed two extra people my stepmother and me.

M: Did he ever talk about his job in the mills? Did he like the job?

D: Oh yes, he like the job and they liked him. A lot of people still today talk about my father.

M: Really?

D: Oh yes, he was well liked, an easy-going man.

M: Okay, in that area on Hine Street, was there an Italian church that you belonged to or did you have to go out of the way to go to church?

D: We had to go across the tracks at first before they built the Oak Street Bridge to go to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church.

M: That is the same Mount Carmel?

D: Yes, that is the same church and I still belong to...

M: That is quite a distance from here for you to go all the way over there.

D: Well, we still do. We drive now. My daughter drives, I don't drive, but we make sure that no matter where I lived after that we still belong to our old parish.

M: Can you touch on some like ethnic customs that prevail in the church for instance, what do you do on holidays such as Christmas? I know that Italians have certain customs that they follow as far as Christmas Eve, or like for Easter, can you describe some of those customs for me that are ethnic?

D: Christmas Eve of course is our fast day, fish day, you know whatever you call it. We go to mass, Our priest had two masses, one at like 5:00 and one at midnight. So we try to make the 5:00 mass because the family all comes here to my house. I have six children and they all come here and eat, after we all go to church together for the mass.

M: Do you eat the traditional fish?

D: Yes.

M: Do you prepare it?

D: I prepare everything. A traditional Christmas Eve dinner.

M: What does that involve?

D: It involves the seven different kinds of fish cooked different ways. Spaghetti with no meat just meatless spaghetti, and salad, and different breads. We make the bread we eat. Like in my home town we used to make brown bread and we put egg yolks on the top and we baked it and then we would have the almonds, we would blanch the almonds and we would put it all over the top and that is the bread for Christmas.

M: Do you still make that?

D: I still make that.

M: Do you eat eel?

D: Oh yes, I like it too.

M: Do you?

D: Yes. Some we eat with the sauce, some usually fried.

M: So you still follow that tradition? Did you do this in Italy too? Was it the same?

D: No, I didn't do anything because my mother died too young, my grandmother died when I was five and I was put in the orphanage. Right in my hometown it was a boarding house for girls that were going to college and I but I used to help the sisters. I learned to cook here.

M: Okay, are there any major differences like belonging to the church in Italy and to a church here in Youngstown, are any cultural differences that you can see? Is there anything that was distinctly different in practicing

for instance, Christmas there or going to church over there was there anything different?

D: Not really. See the way I lived in Italy with the sisters we lived at the convent you know. Of course you had to go to church, to pray before your food.. before you ate.. and bless yourself before you went out the door. It seems like a habit to me now, but I still do it.

M: I see. So you picked that up living there? Okay, do you remember World War I over in Italy? Were you affected much by the war?

D: Yes, I had an uncle that died.

M: Did you?

D: He was the youngest of the family and I remember that.

M: I was wondering, you yourself though were you affected at all by World War I? Do you remember much of it?

D: No, not to much because my grandmother and grandfather at the time they had a place out in the country, they had a farm so we weren't affected with food or anything.

M: Just your one uncle that you remember dying?

D: Just the one uncle died that I remember, was killed in the World War.

M: Okay, in regards to religion and going back to the church and everything, do you feel that Mount Carmel Church plays an important part in your ethnic identity as far as keeping Italians together?

D: I think so yes.

M: You think so?

D: We had a priest that originally built the church and he was...terrific.

M: Who was that?

D: Father Franko, he built the church in Niles too, Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

M: Yes, that is the one that I belong to.

D: He also built the one in Ashtabula, Mount Carmel in Astabula. He lived about... Like I would say from Youngstown to Niles from my hometown.

M: Oh, really?

D: So we picked up all the ethnics from the old country, we just keep it up in the church. Father Cariglio is strictly Italian.

M: And he follows a lot of the same traditions?

D: Yes.

M: Do you think that there are different traditions, I know that there are different dialects that Italians follow, are there different traditions within the church itself? Does everyone pretty much follow the same?

D: I don't know, now I think they are all, how would you say, we are all one.

M: Are you?

D: Yes. Now we are all one.

M: More like a community?

D: A community, yes.

M: Do you belong to any ethnic organizations within the church?

D: Well, I belong to the Mothers of the Crusifix, that is one of the oldest clubs in the church. I belong to the Senior Citizens, I belong to the Italian Sons and Daughters of America originally from Pittsburgh and that is about it.

M: You said you are going to Italy in August.

D: Yes, August 3.

M: Are you going back to your hometown?

D: No.

M: Where are you going to?

D: We are going to go on a tour.

M: Oh, I see.

D: I went to Italy in 1971 and I didn't even go to my hometown then, because I was the youngest of the family. My aunt had died and my grandmother and grandfather had died after I had come to this country and all my

cousins were older than I was. So I didn't want to get away from the tour. So I didn't even bother going, because by the time I would have got to my hometown from Naples, and find my family, and go back to the group, I would never have had enough time to spend with them so I didn't go.

M: You still have family there?

D: Family here?

M: In Italy?

D: In Italy, Well, I guess I have cousins because when my son was in Germany he went down to visit them.

M: Oh, I see.

D: Yes, I got the names and where they lived and he went over to visit them.

M: Do you still keep contact with them?

D: No, I never did.

M: How about your children, do they speak Italian?

D: No, they understand a little bit, but they don't speak it because my husband and I, we both talk English. The only time we talked Italian was when we didn't want them to know what we were talking about, but they would pick it up.

M: Have you passed a lot of your traditions as far as the Catholic Church, and your ethnic background, have you passed it onto your Children? Are they involved still?

D: Oh, yes. They all do. Now I don't do as much cooking, they come over and do everything and if they don't know how to do it they will ask me, but we always have the holidays together here. And they try to keep the traditions going as much as they can.

M: Going back to the ethnic organizations, are there a lot of younger members in the church that are involved in that, or do you think that it is sort of dying off? I know it seems like the original group of people, the first generation Italian, to be more involved in keeping their ethnic identity and it seems like the younger group of people are more Americanized, I guess you might say, do you feel that?

D: No, I really think a lot of the younger people, they are following in their traditions with the ethnic groups of the Italians. You see them even come to

church and they pitch in on whatever the older groups do.

M: So you don't think that they are losing any of their identity?

D: I don't think so, no.

M: Okay.

D: I know that my children didn't. Now I don't work with the clubs like I used to because I live a little bit too far, but before when I lived by the church I was there all of the time and you would be surprised how the younger kids would like to take in something, you know.

M: As far as like the cooking and traditions like that, they would be interested in it?

D: Yes.

M: Could you describe to me what Youngstown was like when you first came here as compared to now? Are there any big differences? I know that there are lot.?

D: The steel mills up there and the town, we used to enjoy just going downtown just... Especially around the holidays, Christmas holidays. All the different Christmas songs, the town all lit up; where there is nothing now.

M: So you think that Youngstown has changed a lot?

D: Oh yes.

M: Are there any good changes you feel? You have to think about it?

D: Maybe I am old-fashion, I liked it the way it was better.

M: Did you?

D: Yes.

M: Even without having a car and having to walk everywhere?

D: No, because every ten minutes you got the bus and went down, for \$.10 you got the bus, you know, and it would take you downtown to all parts of the city. Where now if you don't have a car you are lost.

M: Right. When did you move to Romaine Street, when was

that?

D: Well, after my husband passed away I moved here in 1972, because he died in 1971 and I moved here in 1972.

M: Where did you live before 1971?

D: Before 1971 I lived on Byron, the upper East side, and before then I lived on Walnut Street, that was close to the church.

M: So you have lived on Youngstown all of your life?

D: All of my life.

M: I see. Would you ever go back to Italy to live do you think? I mean did you ever think of it, think of ever going back to live? I know not now probably because of your family?

D: Well, I think that they are living pretty good in Italy now.

M: Are they?

D: Oh, yes. Because when I went back in 1971, I don't think there was any poverty in Italy like we have here, because everybody has their own little farm and they have washer and dryers and they have a television and everything. I think that they are living pretty good in Italy. I don't know whether I would like it, because I lived in this country longer than I lived in Italy, so I have a lot of friends you know.

M: Did you notice any of the major changes that you remembered when you lived there, and then when you went back? Were there any big differences that you noticed there?

D: Well, I didn't go to my hometown, so I don't know if there are any changes. The churches to me seem to be the same in Italy. They are all, beautiful churches I don't know if you have ever seen them. They are old-fashion churches just like we have at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Have you have ever been in there?

M: Yes, I have.

D: The one here?

M: Yes, it is beautiful.

D: I enjoy the old-fashion church better than these new ones that they are building now.

M: Is there anything that you would like to mention that I haven't covered, is there anything that you could add? That you could think of?

D: For instance, what?

M: Just on Youngstown itself, is there anything else that you could think of?

D: Well, it is not like it used to be. Before people were more neighborly than they are now.

M: Why do you think that was? Why do you think they were more neighborly and more friendly, is there any specific reason?

D: Well, we all lived in the same category you know, we were all poor, working men, and now they get \$10 more and they don't know where they come from, and they think that they are better than you are. That is what I find.

M: Do you think it might also be attributed to the fact that so many people were from the same backgrounds too, as far as they were all Italians in your neighborhood as you have described. Do you think that that might have been one reason?

D: I think so.

M: Because I know today, it seems that the streets are so mixed, you find German people, you find Eastern-European people living next door to each other and you don't find too many of one ethnic group.

D: No, they kind have moved away to better themselves and they are not neighborly as they used to be.

M: Okay, well I think that is about it. Thank you for letting me interview you.

END OF INTERVIEW