

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Fascism in Italy Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 443

ELSA COLECCHI

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

June 11, 1986

ELSA CIAROLLA-COLECCHI

Elsa Ciarolla-Colecchi, the daughter of Giuseppe and Pasqualina Ciarolla was born on September 21, 1910 in Roccorasso, Italy. The three surviving children are: Nello Colecchi, Linda Colecchi-Bagaglia, and Mara Colecchi-Perrino. Elsa's husband abandoned his family in 1946.

After the war, Elsa continued her education and earned a diploma in 1948 to teach the art of dressing, pattern making and design. In 1952, she moved to Roma and in 1954 she and her children moved to the United States.

Elsa is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ. Organizations in which Elsa is active include: Ladies Circle, and SCOPE-- Senior Centre in Warren.

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INTERVIEWEE: ELSA COLECCHI

INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese

SUBJECT: World War II, Education in Italy, Culture,  
Treatment of Allied and Axis Forces in Italy

DATE: June 11, 1986

CA: This is an interview with Elsa Colecchi for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Fascism in Italy Project. The date is June 11, 1986.

Thank you sister Elsa for consenting to this interview. Tell me from the beginning all the way to the end.

CO: In the beginning there was Mussolini's history.

CA: Tell me even before that. What year were you born?

CO: I'm too young to tell. (Laughter) I was born September 21, 1910.

CA: Do you remember when Mussolini was elected?

CO: No.

CA: Do you remember the march on Rome in 1922?

CO: No.

In 1922 there was his party. He formed a big, big party, the fascists. They started to do big things. Then he started the war on Ethiopia. He won the war. Everything was going good in Italy when he won the war.

I don't remember much about when Mussolini started, because I was only twelve years old. I was too young to understand in the beginning. As far as I was concerned I was under King Victorio Manuel III.

The son of King Victorio Manuel III, Umberto I, told his father that he gave too much power to Mussolini and that he [Mussolini] could put a big ransom on the king's head. His party became stronger and stronger as time went on, Mussolini's. There were so many different parties in Italy at the time: Socialists, Communists, but not Democratic.

Then the fascists started to cause a lot of trouble. They started to force the Italian people to be fascists. This is when the war started in my country. The first thing they did was to take all the gold: Wedding bands, earrings, and everything. They replaced those with aluminum ones. They took all of the wool. The mattresses were made out of wool and they would take that too. They also took all the copper because they made the bombs out of them. They rationed our food. We got one hundred grams of bread, flour, or corn.

CA: Where were you born?

CO: Roccarasso. They started to give us food stamps. I took the flour instead of the bread because we would go buy contraband. You can't feed three kids with one hundred grams of bread.

CA: Everyone cooked together?

CO: Yes. Everyone cooked there, but I had my own oven. They gave authority to my cousin to sell the flour and make the bread. With a little bit of flour, I could buy other contraband, a little bit of potatoes, and a little bit of water. We put it together and it would raise. We could feed the kids better like this. All of my kids were small. I had to feed my family.

Anyhow, that Christmas I was working all of the time, sewing. I would work day and night and nobody was paying me; I had a big book of credit from the people. For me, I had a hard time to make my living and raise my kids.

In the beginning, Mussolini started social security for us. With the social security we had to carry a card. When we greeted anyone from the government that was in charge of the cards we had to say, "Vivo Mussolini!" We said it but it wasn't in our hearts because we still had allegiance to King Victorio Manuel III. The Communists and Socialists wouldn't do this and they were arrested. In order to buy food you had to fill out a form, even for a sack of potatoes. If we had animals on the farm, we were only allowed to kill so many a year according to the size of our family. I was only allowed to kill one pig a year. They rationed us so low, I couldn't feed my

kids on one pig. I had to lie in order to feed my children.

When they took Mussolini, all the fascists in Italy started to run because everyone was rebelling. In the meantime, the Germans were bombing in our area. When the Germans moved into our town they took all of the men in our city to help blow up bridges. Some of these young men that the Germans captured escaped and went over the mountains into another town and they found the American forces. The Americans took these boys and put them in a concentration camp. These Italian boys told the Americans that the Germans used them to set dynamite on the bridges in order to blow them up. The Americans took these Italian boys out of the concentration camp and the boys showed them where the dynamite was planted for one hour each day. The American soldiers were in a town called Villa Santa Maria. They started to work with the American forces toward the Adriatic and Cassino.

When the American soldiers were getting closer, the Germans took all of the pipes from the stoves around town. They planted these around the mountains near our town. Then they planted dynamite there and we lost many people.

People came from all over to my town--Roccorasso. For five years I worked in a hotel in Roccorasso. I served Mussolini's children. In fall, Mussolini and his family came to stay here. I remember they served a big dinner to him. They called the place "Mussolini's Place" where they served him dinner. Many important people came to this dinner.

When the war was really bad and the Americans moved toward our town, the king wanted to give the reign to his son. The son said, "It's too late now. I can't repair what you've done. You have to run away." The prince went to Portugal. I think he is still alive. He is probably around my age. Then Mussolini was caught [in 1943] and the Germans started to throw dynamite on my town. Before they threw dynamite, they gave us twenty-four hours to leave the town. There was a blackout in the town and I went to my mother's. While I was at my mother's, the Germans broke into my house. At the same time, the SS were rounding up the men in the town.

I left my town and I went to Sulmona with some other members of my family. I went to stay on a farm, but the only way I was allowed to stay was if I cleaned the manure out of the barn. I didn't have a choice; I had no place to stay. I hid in the barn with my family because

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if the German soldiers found us they would put us in  
a concentration camp.

CA: Thank you very much for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW