

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Fascism in Italy Project

Interview #1

O. H. 445

MARIO A. VECCIA

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

April 17, 1986

MARIO A. VECCIA

Youngstown State University Italian language professor, Dr. Mario A. Veccia, has been employed by the university since 1968. On September 22, 1919, Mario was born to Modesto and Maria Teresa Veccia in a small town near Naples, Italy. Mario was educated in Italy. During World War II, between the years 1941-1944, he served in the Italian Army holding the rank of second lieutenant.

On July 24, 1947, Mario married his wife Olga. He continued his education after the war and graduated in 1948 from the University of Naples, Italy, with a Ph.D.--Dottore in Lettere.

Various organizations in which Dr. Veccia is active include: St. Luke Catholic Church, American Classical League, American Association of Teachers of Italian, Ohio Educational Association and the National Education Association.

Dr. Veccia and his wife Olga have two children: Robert age 33 and Theresa age 27. Presently, Mario and his wife reside in Boardman, Ohio. Traveling and stamp collecting are of special interest to Dr. Veccia.

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INTERVIEWEE: MARIO A. VECCIA
INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese
SUBJECT: Education, Armed Services, Anti-Semitism,
Italian immigrants in USA, Personal experiences
DATE: April 17, 1986

C: This is an interview with Dr. Mario Veccia for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Fascism in Italy Project, by Elisa Calabrese, on April 17, 1986.

Can you tell me about your childhood, a little bit about yourself, and your family?

V: I was born and raised in ~~Baia Latina~~, a small town in the province of Caserta. The location of my hometown is about halfway between Rome and Naples and not far from Montecassino. It was a small town, rural. The town has changed from prevalently rural to a town hosting a few small but productive businesses. The population has remained about the same; there are approximately three thousand inhabitants. A lot of the people I knew moved away from the town and quite a number of them are now living and working in Canada, the United States, Switzerland, France, and England.

C: How many sisters and brothers do you have?

V: My family consisted of my parents, two brothers and two sisters. I'm the oldest of five children. One of my brothers, the second born, died in 1972. At the present I have in my hometown one brother and two sisters.

C: How was it growing up in Italy? When you were a child what schools did you attend?

V: At the time that I was growing up I do remember my hometown as being without electricity or running water. To travel from one place to another was an adventure. When we were

growing up, I suppose, my parents had already made up their minds to send all five of the children to schools beyond the elementary level. It meant that we had to get away from our hometown, to places where schools would be available. Transportation to get there, mind you, was not available. We had to travel by bicycle, go to the next town to get a railroad ticket to go forty kilometers away to Santa Maria Capua Vetere, the old "Capua" where Hannibal rested his army before renewing his attack on Rome. We had to get out of town to attend high school, college, and university. It was a very expensive and painful process but we had the rare opportunity of an education.

Maybe what was really important is that we started becoming aware of what form of government Italy had, who ruled, and how things were conducted in Italy. Of course, I was too young to realize the difference between a democratic form of government or other sorts of government, or a dictatorial form of government as I know today. When you're about ten or eleven years of age I think you are only concerned about going to school from nine to one o'clock in the afternoon, doing your homework that at times would take seven or eight hours a day. We had no reason to be concerned about how things were handled in Rome. At school we started being exposed to the youth organizations of the fascist party that was in power at the time. From history books we learned that the fascist regime had taken power in 1922. We accepted as a fact that the youth organizations were part of the growing process or expanding process of the fascist party. In order to attend school at any level, one had to belong to the youth organizations. We grew up at a time when almost everyone was a "Balilla," a name derived from a young boy that in 1748 incited the "Genovesi" (inhabitants of Genoa) to rebel against the Austrians. At about fourteen years of age, almost everyone would become a member of a different group of a youth organization. Naturally no one could become a so-called "Camicia nera" or fascista until he was at least twenty-two or twenty-three years of age.

Military service, of course, has always been compulsory in Italy. It may interest you to know that in order to provide the number of recruits needed by the military, the Italian government had the "Liste di Leva". It meant that at birth all boys were automatically registered for the draft. At about seventeen or eighteen we were called for a physical. If one had no illnesses that prevented him from being enlisted, he was automatically called to serve. These things as far as I can remember, existed before and during Mussolini's regime.

The fascist party came into being after World War I. The reason that the fascist party was allowed to become the

ruling party must be found in the political and the economic conditions of the country.

World War I really caused a pitiful state of affairs: Turmoil, strikes, lack of services, lack of food. Unfortunately, even today Italy must depend on imports of prime materials needed for its industry and on imports of food supplies. The conditions were right for anyone with guts to take over. Besides the fascists, no other party except the communists were trying to gain control of Italy. Between the two of them, fascists and communists, I think the ones that were more aggressive happened to be the fascists.

The fascist party had its beginnings in 1919 in Milano and culminated with the March on Rome ~~October 28, 1922~~. I remember the date very well because my son was born on October 28, 1952. The form of government in 1922 consisted of a constitutional monarchy. Casa Savoia, the ruling family, was really unable to control the situation so they were ready to accept any party that could establish some sort of order within the peninsula. Mussolini became the man of the hour. I think that anybody that does something in support of his country, deserves to be called a patriot. Of course, you can exaggerate being patriotic, and this, perhaps, was Mussolini's downfall. The conditions of Italy which had cleared the way for the fascists had also given the fascists the authority to do something that nobody else had done before. I never remember voting until 1946, after World War II.

Elections disappeared during Mussolini's régime and this deprived the people of the right to express their own wishes.

C: Were you ever deprived of expressing yourself?

V: Not in that sort of way. Perhaps I didn't feel the need at the time because of my age. The only time that we became aware of things, the way they really should have been, came later on, and too late.

Italy was never a unified country until 1860, a little over a century ago. Of course, there were so many reasons that caused the lack of unification. Maybe the Popes had a lot to do with that. They had a kingdom of their own. The other state which existed in Italy were mostly controlled by the Austrians, either directly or indirectly. The Austrians actually held within their own empire a portion of the peninsula, Trieste, Trento, what is known today as Lower Tyrol. Trieste represented for Austria the access to the Mediterranean. At the end of World War I, in 1918, Italy

regained control of that portion of Italy. With that, the unification of the peninsula was accomplished.

Mussolini eliminated quite a number of problems. He restored order and gave a little bit of respect to Italy. Later on, of course, power went to his head, as it normally happens with dictators. The war in Ethiopia in 1935 was the beginning of his downfall. In the meantime, he had succeeded in doing some things worthy of notice. Among the accomplishments I would include an extensive and successful fight against malaria and tuberculosis. Cities are flourishing today that he started where swamps were claiming an enormous amount of lives. The help that Mussolini needed to bring to conclusion the Ethiopian War, he got from Hitler. That was probably his biggest mistake because from there on he started digging his own grave.

C: When did you serve in the military?

V: I served in the military during World War II. I was drafted in 1941 and served in the regular Italian Army as a Second Lieutenant in the infantry. I attended the officer training school, and after six months of successful training, I was assigned to one of the divisions operating in Greece. I was there until September 1943.

C: One aspect of Mussolini's regime deals with anti-Semitism. The history books seem to say that there was anti-Semitism in Italy with Mussolini's regime before Hitler occupied Italy in 1943.

V: Not in a strict sense. It is true that Mussolini would do anything to please Hitler, but I do not recall any open actions against Semitic people. There was no such open thing. However, I do recall that when one applied for a government job, the applicant needed a document showing that he or she belonged to the Aryan race. I do not recall people being excluded from jobs in private industry if they were of a different race.

C: Were the Italians included in the Aryan race?

V: Yes. I don't remember the Jewish race being mistreated. Even during my military service I do not recall any act that was intended to interfere with them.

I do remember one personal experience dealing with the Jews. In 1943, we left Greece for concentration camps in Germany. I didn't make it to Germany because I happened to get sick on the train that was taking us there and I was left behind in Hungary. When the SS took over control of Hungary in March 1944, they started rounding up Jewish people. We did see from the window of our

our jail Jewish people being taken away in trucks. That was our first, clear knowledge that something unusual was going on. Whether special camps existed strictly for them we did not know.

C: Did you ever meet Mussolini?

V: I never met him, but I saw him. One day in 1935 or 1936, there were two divisions of "Camicie nere" leaving for Ethiopia and they were inspected the same day by Mussolini and the king of Italy, Victor Emanuel III. We didn't go to school that day. A bunch of students and myself went to Capua and we saw the inspection by the king and by Mussolini within the same day.

Another occasion was before 1940 when Mussolini delivered a speech in Capua. Many students and I went over to Capua to listen to his speech.

C: What about a man by the name of Farinacci?

V: I remember that name, but the one that sticks in my memory more than others is Starace. He was the one who lasted longer than others as the secretary of the fascist party.

One man close to Mussolini, who received the highest military decoration, was Muti. He was awarded a gold medal. He was a young person and I believe a very brave one.

C: What about Ciano?

V: He was Mussolini's son-in-law and his minister for foreign affairs.

Among the things that come to my mind, in November 1935 there was a day that women donated to the country their wedding rings.

C: When you returned to Italy after the war and Mussolini was out of power then . . .

V: Mussolini was summarily executed in 1945. A new form of government came about in 1946 through election, when we were supposed to decide whether we would continue with a monarchy or choose a republican form of government. That was the first election after Mussolini had eliminated elections. There were accounts that the republican form of government had not actually won; however, there is no evidence that anyone tampered with the elections' results.

C: How was the atmosphere when you returned?

V: The atmosphere was really depressing. There was poverty everywhere. Everything had been destroyed. My home was partly destroyed. That was the general situation.

C: Is there anything that you would like to add?

V: I did serve in the Italian Army and I do not regret it because it is everybody's duty to do something for his country, whether one likes it or not. That was the mentality that we grew up in. If one does not do something for his country, nobody else will do it. No mercenaries can do things for one's own country.

C: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW