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Oral History: Kathleen Iannello

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Oral History: Kathleen Iannello

Abstract

This research essay captures the reality of what it means to assimilate into American culture as an Italian and how the dynamic of identifying with a certain heritage has changed throughout the years. For my project I interviewed Kathleen Iannello, the granddaughter of two Italian American immigrants. By talking with Kathleen I was able to gain a sense of the hardships and sacrifices her family made and connect them to the information I had learned in class.

Keywords

Italian American, immigration, Americanization, Oral History

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | Italian Language and Literature | Oral History | United States History

Comments

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Abby Finan

Professor Perry

Oral History Project

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Oral History Project

There is a quote from Sue Monk Kidd in the living room of my grandparent's home that reads, "Stories have to be told or they die and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we are here." Going into my interview with Kathleen Iannello, the granddaughter of two Italian American immigrants, I couldn't help but think of this quote and its relevance in documenting the history of previous generations. As students in the First Year Seminar course entitled, "Italian American Immigration: Faith, Family, Food and the Moon", we have been able to examine and analyze the in depth aspects of the lives of Italian immigrants and their journey as new civilians in America. Each part of their lives, starting from their departure from close family and friends in Italy, to their journey to America and the new lives they created here are critical aspects in explaining why Italians have been able to maintain and cherish the traditions and beliefs they've held for centuries. During our interviews with an Italian American, we were able to step back into the past for a moment and get a taste of what it was like to hear the stories from parents and grandparents about their experience as outsiders in an overwhelmingly new society. In my interview with Kathleen, I was able to get an inside look into the life of a family that reflected many of the immigrant stories we discussed throughout the semester. Ranging from a difficult farming life in southern Italy to maintaining their faith in a community characterized by contradicting views, the story of Kathleen's family seemed strangely familiar as I reflected back on the accounts of immigrants I read about in class. Hearing about the hardships and

dynamics of life that characterized the Iannello family made the information I had learned in class come to life as I got to listen to a first hand account of life as an Italian American and realized the importance of documenting her story in person.

As I prepared for my interview with Kathleen, I didn't know what to expect; this was going to be a personal interview with someone I had never met before and in my mind I knew it could be difficult for her to open up to a stranger. However, when Doctor Iannello greeted me at her door saying, "I'm too excited to speak with you today, I've been looking forward to this!" I knew this was going to be a great conversation. Sitting back in her chair with a big cup of coffee in her hand, we began. It started with the first question which asked about the region her family had immigrated from and the reasons behind that. Kathleen explained that when her grandfather was 14 he immigrated to the United States with his brother from the southern region of Italy known as Calabria. The Iannello family struggled to maintain a stable life working as farmers in the south of Italy. As we talked about in class, southern Italy is classified by its arid and mountainous landscape that makes it almost impossible to farm crops successfully. Along with the droughts and harsh landscape, southern Italy also felt the pressure of the Northern domination that began to dictate their lives. Powerful northern leaders, including King Victor Emmanuel II, used their rule to to manipulate the corruption and poverty that defined the south. Northern rules implemented taxation on southern Italians that robbed them of their earnings, leaving them with barely enough to put food on the table. Southerners also faced conscription that forced them to participate involuntarily in war for a country that was hard to call home. Although southerners were a strong willed people they lacked the support to organize and maintain a revolution against the northern power. Characterized by a long history of rebellions and banditry southern Italians were not able to gather the support they needed to achieve a better

life for themselves. Feeling the effects of hunger, poverty and exploitation southern Italians looked to America as their escape and chance to finally make a life for themselves and their families.

When it was time to leave their life in Italy behind the Iannello family departed for Ellis Island in New York City where they would take their first steps on American soil. Kathleen was unaware of their exact document forms but stated that with a background filled with poverty they were mostly likely placed in the steerage class of the ship. As we learned, steerage is the lower part of the ship that is located right next to the steering equipment. This meant that conditions were extremely cramped and unsanitary. Passengers could spend up to 15 days on these ships, making the spread of diseases, such as pneumonia, extremely common. In the interview, Kathleen explained how hard it was for her to imagine the stress and agony that filled her ancestors journey to their new home. Through the examination of multiple films and readings we were able to dig deeper into the harsh reality that was Ellis Island. Also known as “L’isola della lacrima” or “the island of tears”, Ellis Island was the make it or break it point for immigrants who came from all over the world. Kathleen’s grandparents had to undergo several forms of investigation ranging from physical to mental health examinations. Immigrants classified by certain issues or disabilities were marked with different letters and symbols and placed in hospitals where they had to wait for days or even weeks to hear whether or not they would be able to stay in America. Kathleen’s grandparents were fortunate enough to make it through the inspections without a problem and were finally able to begin their lives as Italian Americans. The Iannello family settled in New York City where they lived for a few years until moving to northern New Jersey where they accumulated family members from Italy into one large household. Kathleen talked about how living in New Jersey was comfortable for her family

because many other immigrants, especially Italian, had settled in the area as well. “I think it helped us to forget we were outsiders and made us feel at home,” she stated when talking about assimilating into American life. As described in “La Storia” and “Christ in Concrete”, having the family as the center of their lives was evident in the Iannello family. Being with all of her relatives in one home reflects the importance of the family in Italian culture. Based on readings in “La Storia” and “Christ in Concrete” it was not uncommon for aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents to live together in one household. Kathleen couldn’t help but smiling as she recalled the memories of living in that house with multiple other family members. The noise, the aroma of food and tight knit family dynamic was lessened when Kathleen moved with her immediate family to upstate New York where she began her life in an entirely new community. Living in New York was the first time she felt the effects of having an Italian background in an American community.

When Kathleen and I began to talk about her childhood growing up as an Italian American that is really when our conversation gained its momentum. She said she distinctly remembers the feelings of being different from the other kids in her community. “It wasn’t so much a feeling of prejudice as it was feeling different from everyone else,” she explained when I asked how life in New York and being away from her extended family had changed her sense of identity in America. Simple things from “different” foods they used for cooking such as artichokes and squid made Kathleen and her brother stand out from the others. Being an outsider as a child was especially difficult for Kathleen because she got the sense that her ways of living were wrong. She went on to explain how even her religious identity was perplexed. As an Italian American Catholic living in a town with only protestant members, it was hard not to stand out. A distinct memory she recalled of this was the after school activities held on Wednesdays by the

Protestant churches. Since she and her brother were Catholic they would be the only two kids left in the school waiting for the bus because they couldn't attend the sessions. While this was not an intentional way to isolate Italians, it did make them stand out against the crowds and added to their feelings of being out of the ordinary. However, in some areas the discrimination towards Italian American Catholics was much more scrutinizing. Many Italians, especially those living in the south, continued to hold onto their superstitions and practices of Catholicism that were different from those in America. Concepts such as the "evil eye" or their earthly relationship with the saints made Italian Americans stand out from the rest. Their lives in the south were difficult and they looked to the universe as an explanation of their fate. These practices were looked down upon by American citizens who had practiced their religion by strictly following the bible and had trouble accepting the idea they would be associated with this type of "wrong" behavior. The tension between Italians and Americans increased as Americans continued to look for reasons to mock and subordinate the immigrants. Kathleen recalled a specific event in her high school where one of her teachers would make snide comments about Italians and "jokingly" refer to them as "wops". I could sense Kathleen's feeling of embarrassment as she recalled going home and telling her father each day about the remarks made by her teacher. Eventually, his anger towards the teacher built up and he addressed the school in an attempt to fire the teacher. When talking about the incidents Kathleen said, "I guess I didn't know how to react to it at the moment," she explained, "but it never felt right." Whether it was aggressive remarks at school or firing someone from their job because of their Italian background, the prejudice held against Italian Americans was a harsh reality that was difficult to ignore.

For many immigrants this caused them to eliminate the desire to "Americanize" and adjust to the American way of living. Sayings such as "mannaggia lamerica!" expressed their

frustration with the way they were treated in their new home. However, Kathleen's family, for better or worse, tried the best they could to assimilate and absorb the American culture. They knew that in order to do business and adjust to their new lifestyle they would have to sacrifice some aspects of their old life to make it in America. Kathleen expressed her disappointment in the fact that she can't speak Italian today because her grandparents had only allowed her father to speak English in the household. From being completely fluent in Italian to only remembering a few phrases, the desire to Americanize was extremely evident in the Iannello family. Kathleen believes that socialization is inevitable in any culture and the fact that her family had the desire to assimilate made the process that much more efficient and effective. However, there were some parts of their lives that they refused to sacrifice; their religion and family traditions. Although her family was raised in a "white, Protestant community" her family did not convert from Catholicism and attended church a few towns over. "I think holding onto our religion despite the fact that it made us outsiders showed how important it was to us and we really relied on the church to help us trust in our lives here," she explained when I asked why maintaining their religion was something that was not affected. We went on to discuss the family celebrations that took place growing up in an Italian American family. Kathleen happily recalled walking into her grandparent's house in New Jersey and smelling her grandmother's foods. The variety and amount of food that they had on feast days is one of the most vivid memories for Kathleen. Throughout our course we have learned how food in the Italian culture brings people together to celebrate and connect whether that's talking over a large feast or teaching a grand child how to make sauce. Food was more than a necessity for Italians, it was a way a life and continues to be cherished through generations. Kathleen was so thankful she had learned to cook from her

grandmother and mother because it is one of the few traces of her Italian heritage that she has left.

We moved the conversation towards Kathleen experience with her education in America. She has been a very successful in her education receiving several degrees from various schools including Penn State University. Kathleen took her education into her own hands and defied the standards her family had for her in education. She distinctly remembers her aunt's reaction to her telling them she was going to get a degree in political science rather than being a nurse. They thought that jobs other than nursing or working as an assistant were not meant for women but Kathleen did not let their opinions influence her drive and is now working in the political science department at Gettysburg College. Although she is not anything along the lines of a famous politician I believe that her courage and persistence reflects the characteristics of one of her own Italian American heroes, Mario Cuomo. She admired his support for immigration into America because he shed a positive light on an issue that has been and continues to be a relevant in our nation. Cuomo was not afraid to challenge the conservative beliefs at the time by taking a more liberal approach. He was one of the Italian American men we had learned about in class and he really stood out to me in the way he showed how Italian Americans could be great and successful. I think that both Kathleen and Mario Cuomo embodies what it means to work hard and take advantage of the situations you are given in life.

Reflecting back on my interview I am amazed at how much I have gained from talking with Kathleen and connecting her stories to those we read about in class. I was able to get a first hand account of how important it is to hear the stories of these immigrants and their families because they truly reflect the dynamic of our nation and the citizens that live here. To say that the lives of these Italian immigrants were difficult would be an understatement but the success

they created out of their hardships is what made their stories that much greater and more important. I think these interviews have caused each of us to take a moment to reflect on the stories of our own families and appreciate the opportunities we have here. Immigration is an issue that continues to challenge the dynamic of our country and I think it is important for everyone to understand their backgrounds and the challenges they face. After all, if it hadn't been our ancestors it would have been us that had to make the move and risk the comforts of familiarity to create a better life for ourselves.