



## Exploring Diversity in Pennsylvania History

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The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania  
with THE BALCH  
INSTITUTE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

**Rural Roads, City Streets:  
Italians in Pennsylvania**

**Oral Sources and the Tools of History  
Student Reading**

### ITALIAN IMMIGRANT INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

Note: These excerpts are categorized under the four themes listed below although aspects of any one of them may also fall in one or more of the other themes. These excerpts have been extracted from longer interviews. Excerpts taken from interviews were left in their original form except for minor grammatical or syntactical alterations to improve readability or to clarify meaning.

Collector's Notes and interview excerpts are taken from the author's dissertation (Savereno, Joan Lynn. "Private Lives, Public Identities: The Italians of Reading and Berks County, PA, 1890–1940." University of Pennsylvania, 1996) as well as from interviews conducted by Joan Saverino as part of the Italian American Oral History Project, directed by Joan Saverino, at the Germantown Historical Society.

#### TRANSCRIPTION KEY

...	deletion from transcript
<u>work</u>	underline indicates word emphasized by speaker
[son]	brackets indicate word inserted by author
JS:	initials of person speaking
// //	indicates interruption of speech by another

#### A. Life in Italy, Leaving Home, and the Trip to America

##### Excerpt 1: Maria Prioriello Battisti

Source: Tape 3, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 13 September 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Maria immigrated to Reading, PA in 1923 at the age of 25. She learned English primarily on her own. The following transcription excerpt is not corrected for correct grammatical construction.

Note: Maria's statement that there was no toilet on the ship is not correct. Although they were primitive, toilet facilities existed on ships.

MB: Then, on that boat, the people lived like animals. It was big, like a cellar. The bed[s], the *cuccette*, [were] all on top [of] each other. There was no toilet. There was no dining room. They just go outside of the boat, and sit there. No chairs, the people sit on the floor. I was scared. This is why I no go back. [laughs] I was scared. And I was sick. We take about twelve days. Yeah. I was sick all the time, I don't eat nothing, I just suck lemon. Yeah, we land[ed] in Boston...not New York. We land there, it was like a jail. All was divided--that place--with [an] iron fence. All the people come this

way, come this way [gesturing]. And my brother-in-law was in the front, was a big line, then my sister, then me. And he passed, he was near-sighted, you know. And yeah, [he wore] thick glasses. They just look at him, and they push him outside. Then my sister she pass, but when she saw her husband was outside, she turn back and go with him. I pass, then I go out that way, through one line there. I thought they just want [to] see his eye, want to ask him, you know. And I was wait and wait and wait. I wait all day long. Little by little all the people disappeared, everybody go where they supposed to go. But, we must go to Philadelphia. Finally I was all alone. It started [to] get dark and I was scared. I don't know who to ask, everything was closed. I was like a [laughs] poor soul there. Finally, this worker for the immigration [agency], I don't know where she come from. And, she said, "Why don't you go, take a bus to go to [the] station." I said, "I wait for my sister." But she talked to me in Italian, see. "No more buses, and no more sister," she said, "You must see the way where you go," and they don't come out no more, you know. "Well," she said, "That's the last bus. Take this one and you'll go to Philadelphia." I get on the bus, and I see one he come from [my] same town, a relation, you know. He was come in America, but he was here before, come home, and then come back here. And I say, "Carl, don't you look for me? I was all alone there." I start to get mad with him, because he was with us all the time. "Well," he said, "I thought you go with your sister." Well, we go on a bus, get off and go in a train. Just happen, in the front of us was a couple. And they talk Italian. "Oh," he said, "these people, they talk Italian. I want to ask them where they go, because that train go [to] Philadelphia." And he ask in English to them. [They] said "We go to Reading." "Oh my goodness," he say, "Maybe you can go with them." Because he [Carl] don't come to Reading. He stop in Philadelphia, go to Camden. And he ask them if they take me on Penn Street, 328 Penn Street, to my sister. "Oh yeah, oh yeah," they say. Well, it was all night long, we go. [laughs] It was in the morning, it start to get, you know, *l'alba* [dawn]. And they take me in 328 Penn Street [present location of The Peanut Bar restaurant]. I thank them and I bang the door. Then they go away. Bang the door, they sleep, there was a store there. My brother-in-law come and my sister then. Because they don't know when we come. They [referring to Italian officials] just call before--it was a quota. They call when [there was] some space--you put the application in. Some space on some ship, they call you: "You must come tomorrow, you must come Monday." You have no time to write, to do nothing. They [meaning her sister and brother-in-law] don't know we was coming. Then I stay with my sister [Teresa Granieri].

**Excerpt 2: Rosa Bolognese DaDamio**

Source: Tape 68, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 6 May 1992.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Rosa was born in 1910 in Palmoli in the current province of Chieti, in the Abruzzo region. The family was separated for many years because Rosa's father, Giuseppe, had immigrated to Reading, PA where he found work as a laborer on the railroad. Rosa's father immigrated to Reading, PA, and found work on the railroad. He returned to Italy in 1919 with the intention of staying. But conditions in Italy as well as the fact that her brother was almost draft age (eighteen) prompted the decision to bring the entire family to Reading. Rosa is incorrect in her statement below, "we lived under Mussolini at the time..."; Mussolini did not become prime minister until

October 29, 1922, after his famous March on Rome. Due to the terror wrought by the *squadristi* (youth gangs) in her town before 1922, for all practical purposes, in Rosa's mind and perhaps that of her family, Mussolini was already in power.

The interview segments below are all taken from Tape 68 as listed above but do not run consecutively. Tess, the consultant's daughter, was present during the interview.

RD: Well, what happened was my father, may his soul rest in peace, he came to America. He went back and forth to make money, you know. Then...he was going to come back and stay [in Italy]. Well, we lived under Mussolini at the time and it was real bad times, so he said, "Let's go to America" which was the greatest thing that ever happened. So we came...my father see he was a [American] citizen...he took out his citizen papers and you could bring your wife and children...over. So we came over... in 1920...and thank God that we came to this beautiful country because, well in our town we had no factories no nothing. You had to live by what you raised. And if you had a bad year well, it was just too bad. The neighbors would help one another. I know my mother, God bless her, would help one another. See, we had a little money because my father would send us money. Like, my father sent me a pair of shoes that, you remember, they were button on the side. And my girlfriend...was about eight years old, she said..."Rosie, just let me try them on." And I said, "Well you can wear them to church." Well, you'd think she had a million dollars by wearing these shoes to church because we had these clumsy shoes that were hand made, you know.

JS: Do you remember before your father came to this country, what did he do in Italy to make a living?

RD: I Italy? //J: Mmm mmm.// Well, he was a farmer...Everybody was a farmer. There was no factories, no nothing.

JS: And did he own any land?

RD: Oh yeah. We owned a lot of land because like I said, my father was here and he would send us money. We owned the prime land in our town. It was called *la radicine*. [laughs]

JS: And what does *la radicine* mean?

RD: I really don't know...but that was the name of ...our land, you know... We had a well...in our town that time there was no water in the house. And I don't know if you ever saw these...mules with two barrels on the side?...and they [other villagers] would get the water from our well. And which we gave it to almost everybody, you know.

JS: ...Well...do you know when your Dad first started coming to this country to work?

RD: Well, I'll tell you, he left me when I was nine months old and when he came back I was nine years old... When my father came home I didn't want have anything to do with him. Then I used to say to my mother, "Why don't we have a father like the rest of the people?" And my mother, God bless her, she used to try to explain to me that my father was in America making money for us. That's why we had more than other people. //J: Mmm hmm.// But I couldn't understand why I didn't have a father. [chuckles]

JS: And did your father...so your father never came back to visit from the time you were nine months to the time you were nine?

RD: Right.

Tess: He did Mom. He did go back and forth.

RD: Yeah, but ...yeah, he came back. I must have been maybe like two or three years old, very, very young. But when he came back that I was nine years old...//Tess: to get them// I didn't want him to be my [father] //Tess: because she didn't know him.// because I didn't know him. But then when I got to know my father, I adored my father. Yeah, I loved my father [chuckles] God love him. [chuckles] He was such a nice man. He was trying to tell me that I was his father, [sic] but I couldn't understand why he wasn't there, but then my mother tried to explain that he was here making money....And my mother, she helped a lot of people. There was a woman, she had a club foot. And every Sunday we'd make homemade spaghettis [sic], and I'd bring it to her. And here she got on her knees and she kissed my mother's feet And my mother picked her up and said, "I don't want you to do that." And she said, "Without your help, I couldn't survive." And you know what, I'm here...70 years, 71 years, and that woman is always on my mind. Every night I think of it. We used to call her "La *ciuparelle*" because she used to walk lame. She had a club [foot] and then her foot were all sores and stuff. And my mother gave her some cloth to put around [it]. Who had cloth? She used to sleep on the floor and she had a...stone for a pillow. And my mother gave her cloth to put on this stone, you know, and stuff like that. JS: Did this woman live by herself?  
RD: Yeah,...it's funny, you know, 70 some years and every night I go to bed she comes to my mind. I could just picture her when I used to bring these spaghettis. She used to make the sign of the cross and talk in Italian to thank, well to thank my mother more than any. Maybe that's why I appreciate this country so much because I've seen these things...//Tess: Cause you, you had it good there, you were happy there.//R: We had it good, yeah, thank God because of my father....

Collector's comment: Emigration resulted in families being torn apart. People realized that at best communication would be limited to letters or visits from *paesani* (fellow townspeople) with news of loved ones. In excerpt below, Rosa described her grandparents' distress before the family left for the United States.

RD: My grandfather and my grandmother--my grandfather on my father's side--see he used to come and eat with us and everything. And my grandmother on my mother's side, her name was Rosa and I'm named after her. Rosa. And I remember when they [her parents] went to Rome. The children didn't have to go to Rome. You had to go to Rome before you came to America to do certain things. And we stayed with Grandmom and, oh God bless her, she just cried and cried. She lost two daughters and three grandchildren all at once. And she just kept crying and crying. Me, I was a little girl and I was anxious to come to America, you know. Never realizing. Now, that I'm a grandmother, if I would lose her [indicating her daughter] and three grandchildren--can you imagine the hurt? And then my parents, they never went back to Italy. They should have. They never went. And my grandfather--we called him *Taton'*—oh, the tears and the tears when we left. Because he used to come and eat with us, you know. [Note: *Taton'* is the Abruzzese word for grandfather.]

### **Excerpt 3: John Fusaro**

Source: Tape 2. Germantown Historical Society Library.

Interview Date: 25 May, 1999

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: John is alert and spry with a strong voice. He claims that he was born in 1898. He emigrated from the village of San Sosti in the Cosenza province of the region of Calabria, Italy. His memory seems to be failing when it comes to providing much detail or elaboration about his immigration to Philadelphia, PA, to settle in the neighborhood of Germantown.

Fusaro: My name is John Fusaro. I was born in San Sosti, Italy. I came here to the United States in 1907. I was then only nine years old. I came to Germantown with my mother and sister. I went to start working when I was fourteen years old. Four dollars and twenty cents a week. That was in the spinning mill. I then started working in the police department in 1919 and retired in 1952.

Saverino: Can you tell me a little bit about your town in Italy? Why did your family decide to [immigrate]?

JF: We were so poor that we had to make some kind of a move. My mother and sister came with me. We were lucky to get here, to tell you the truth...My father died in Brazil when I was a baby, and I don't even know who he was. He went there to make a little money to send home. But then he died and that was it. Mother had to take over and it was really rough. She used to go up in the mountains for lumber, for firewood. She'd come down with a big load on her head. Six cents when she got down. It was a tough way to live. So we were really tickled to death to get here.

JS: How did your mother manage to come and how did she arrange to come?

JF: Well, she had a sister and a brother living here, in Germantown, and they sent her the fare for the three of us...

## **B. Work Life**

### **Excerpt 4: Maria Prioriello Battisti**

Source: Tape 13, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 19 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Maria Prioriello Battisti remembers the stories that her sister, Teresa Prioriello Granieri, who immigrated to Reading around the turn of the century, told about the living conditions of groups of single men who were moved by the railroad from place to place to work.

My sister used to say to me, the people, Italian people, Polish people, they work for the railroad, they sleep in a box car in the railroad. With little stove outside, with little pot there, they cook some beans. [Their life] was hard.

### **Excerpt 5: Joe DelCollo**

Source: Tape 23, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 1 February 1991.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Joe DelCollo's father was an immigrant to Reading, PA, and Joe described his father's work experience around 1910 or 1911:

My Dad was out of work, the Oley Street Mill closed up...And he was just walking around looking for a job and there was a guy having a building [built]...and he said, "Hey John,"--they used to call Italians all John--"Do you want to work?" He said sure. He worked all day. At the end of the day he said you come to my store and I'll pay you...and my Pop went upstairs to get paid. And he kept him waiting around, waiting around, and waiting around, till finally at the end, he says, "Hey John, How 'bout a nice hat?" My Pop said, "I don't need a hat, I need money for the kids." He didn't get a nickel, he got a hat for his wages.

#### **Excerpt 6: Charles Carabello**

Source: Tape 15, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 29 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Throughout the state of Pennsylvania, Italian immigrants started their own businesses and engaged a clientele beyond the Italian community. In this interview with Charles Carabello, a child of immigrants, he remembers his immigrant father's barber shop located at 338 South Third Street in Reading, PA.

When he would work in the barber shop, he would start out say approximately at eight o'clock in the morning, so he could catch the trade that was coming down Third Street from Hendel's Hat Factory and from the [Reading Abattoir] and from the Planing Mill that was down below us. I guess he was probably still working at nine or ten o'clock at night. There were no certain hours. He would start when they wanted him, he would close when they wanted him. And I remember the holidays at Christmas, he always had a flask of wine, and at the end of the shave or the haircut, he always treated them to a glass of wine.

#### **Excerpt 7: Delvisio Franchi**

Source: Tape 66, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 22 April 1992.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Interview Location: consultant's home.

Collector's comments: As one of the most recently arrived immigrants, Italians were the least favored and were often hired for the dirtiest and lowest paid jobs. In this interview Franchi said that even as late as the 1930s most of the Italian workers at Birdsboro Steel in Reading, PA, were employed as chippers.

Nobody did that kind of work because chipping was a dirty job, and it killed them. They got dust in their lungs and they got silicosis. But they only put the Italians there.

#### **Excerpt 8: Charles Carabello**

Source: Tape 14, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 29 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: In excerpt #7, Charles Carabello described how his mother, Maria Maccione Carabello, contributed to the family income by taking in boarders. In excerpt #8, he describes how she took home piece work from the garment factories. Such strategies were not uncommon for immigrant women and families.

In the early days, my mother was a very busy woman. It [was] the only way they could make expenses meet and whenever a relative came to America from Italy, they would house him for maybe a dollar a month. We had a home which would house maybe one, two, three, four, maybe four or five people. And my mother would not only feed them but wash their clothing and everything else.

**Excerpt 9: Charles Carabello**

Source: Tape 15, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 29 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: See excerpt #7 above.

My mother, she worked...So I'm not very much in accord with the idea that mothers [are] out working and the children are not raised right and that's why they have become impossible. I don't agree. My mother worked all day...she was only at home at night. Left in the morning early sometime before we even got up. My father, of course he did work in the home because he was a barber but nevertheless we got out and went out to do our own things such as carrying newspapers for the *Reading Eagle*, going to the market [to] carry baskets and all that...My mother worked in many factories, she worked in the old Penn Pants factory which I mentioned before is the (R.N. Palmer) candy company in West Reading. I remember going with my little wagon during the First World War picking up bundles of soldiers' pants to bring home for her [to] sew. She would do sewing on certain parts of it. The next day I would take them back and then pick up a new bundle so she could do them at home. Goodness knows what she got a day, if she made a dollar a day, I'd be surprised...besides the Penn Pants, she also worked for a little while out at what is now the Oritsky's as I mentioned. Oh and there was a clothing manufacturing company behind where the *Reading Eagle* is now. The second floor known as Noecker's [it was Nogar, manufacturer of men's clothing]. I remember she worked there for a little while. I can't describe everything that she did but goodness knows, she worked and she worked very hard.

**Excerpt 10: Charles Carabello**

Source: Tape 9, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 29 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Out of necessity, Italian children often worked for pay to help their families. In general, they were expected to turn over wages to parents. Charles Carabello's first job was during the mid-1920s at the Penn Pants Factory, first located near the Penn Street Bridge in Reading, PA:

CC: Well, my first job was a pants factory where they made nothing but pants practically for the American soldier...And I worked on the second floor there, pressing certain bits of trousers, I was fourteen but I lied. I told them I was sixteen and I know they didn't believe me, but I got twenty-five cents an hour, twelve dollars a week. That was big money for my family...Whenever we got our salary we took the whole darn thing home, period. And if we needed anything we got it but we never spent a cent of our salary.

**Excerpt 11: Letizia Marino Fiorini**

Source: Tape10, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 16 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Letizia was the daughter of Italian immigrants. 1917, Letizia began working at a knitting mill in Riverside, a suburb of Reading, PA, three blocks from her home, from the age of sixteen until her marriage at age twenty-two.

LF: I went to work, I made good money during the first World War and Pop paid his home off in Riverside in three years' time...If I needed, wanted a dress, they'd go along with me and buy it...but I didn't keep any money. That's the way we were brought up. I helped Mom and Pop out.

**Excerpt 12: Herbert Lorenzon**

Source: Tape 28, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 19 June 2002.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Herbert Lorenzon is the son of Emilio Lorenzon who immigrated to Chestnut Hill, a neighborhood in the northwest corner of Philadelphia. Emilio and his two brothers, Agostino and Charles, started the Lorenzon Brothers Contracting company in 1914. The three emigrated from Poffabro in the Udine province of the northern region of Friuli.

In this section of the interview, Herbert Lorenzon describes how the immigrant brothers worked to start their own business:

Herbert Lorenzon: ... they worked hard and they did everything themselves, like when they were building the buildings across from here they excavated by hand, quarried the stone right out of there and then started building.<sup>1</sup> They went up to the first floor and they started needing some money to buy like lumber and things like that. So they went up to the Chestnut Hill Title and Trust and Mr. Disston was the trustee up there. He's from the Disston Saw people... And he came down and he said, "How did you get all this built?" He said, "We did it all ourselves." He said, "You go up to the bank and tell them how much you need and you've got it." And so they had a good start and, you know, their honesty and hard work, they got their good start in life up here. And that was very important to them all; their name was, you know, so important to them...

Joan Saverino: ...Did they already have a contracting company when they built those homes?

HL: No. No, they just built and they, of course, didn't have access to a lot of people for the whole building business because they did all their own [several words unclear]. They did the masonry and they did the woodwork and everything else, so they didn't know how to get customers, so they would just bid the stonework. And that's where they started out, with stonework...But they were all pretty much accomplished in most of the trades, like [chuckles] the building trades anyway.

**C. FAMILY LIFE AND COMMUNITY LIFE**

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<sup>1</sup> He is referring to 7909–7911 Ardleigh. The practice of using the stone that was uncovered during the initial excavation to build the structure was common practice.

**Excerpt 12: Vincent Cianciosi**

Source: Tape 23, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 1 February 1991.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Vincent Cianciosi grew up in Reading as the child of immigrants.

Well I remember in those days when a woman gave birth...they'd make a basket of whatever it was. Fruits, vegetables, cooked, and a chicken. In those days it was live chickens. To help the family. Not only relatives but friends around. They'd bring a basket.

**Excerpt 13: Charles Carabello**

Source: Tape 15, author's own collection.

Interview Date: 29 November 1990.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: *Compari* were treated like kin and visited each other regularly. Charles Carabello spoke of the importance of godparents in this excerpt.

They [immigrants] regarded being a godfather or godmother more important than being a brother or a sister. As you know, St. John was credited with baptizing Christ, right? And the Sicilian expression was "He's my *compare* because we have the same John between us." And that person, you elect, he is chosen. You don't choose your brothers and sisters, so it's more of an honor to be a *compare* because he baptized your children, than it is to be a brother or sister...They were always honored, they were always invited to this or that event. And then, even more important than that, if you had a brother who then baptized one of your children, not only was he your brother, but he was also a *compare*. And you regarded that part higher than being his brother. That did happen to my father, his brother Anthony. We always greeted them. We knew who they were. When they came in, we kissed their hand in sincere benediction, you know.

**Excerpt 14: Umberto Tucci**

Source: Tape 23, author's own collection

Interview Date: 1 February, 1991.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Tucci was interviewed with other members of the Victor Emmanuel Society, a fraternal organization in Reading, PA. He described the news that traveled back and forth from Italian hometowns to communities in the United States.

Another thing that was the center of the social activity was...there was a great deal of communication by letter from here to Italy. And when somebody received a letter, it was just like a newspaper. Everybody wanted to know what was going on over there and this and that. The unfortunate thing that I never liked was, of course, even the gossip got into those letters.

**Excerpt 15: Sister Francis Joseph (Rachel Scarpello)**

Source: Tape 1, Germantown Historical Society Library.

Interview Date: 22 May 1999

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Rachel Scarpello grew up as the child of immigrant parents during the 1920s and 1930s in the neighborhood of Germantown in northwest Philadelphia. Italians in Germantown. Below, Sister Francis describes the centrality of Holy Rosary Parish in many of the Italian community's life.

I was very closely associated with Holy Rosary Parish. That was the center of my life, my family's life. [The] parishes . . . had social activities, even as a child. I was in all the processions . . . crowning of the Blessed Mother, all that business...Father Nepote had a big impact on my life. I admired him, I was proud of him. He was an intellectual, and he was sent to Holy Rosary Parish, which was really just a shrine in the big Miraculous Medal [St. Vincent's] Seminary...But the mass was in Italian. The people loved it, because they could understand.

**Excerpt 16: Norman Giorno-Calapristi**

Source: Tape 11, Germantown Historical Society Library.

Interview Date: 5 March 2000.

Collector: Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Collector's comments: Giorno-Calapristi is the grandson of immigrants who settled in the neighborhood of Germantown in northwest Philadelphia. In the excerpt below, he describes the entertainment that took place as part of the annual festival (*fiesta*) of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on July 16. He refers to his immigrant grandfather Luigi Giorno who was the founder and band leader of the Germantown Community Band whose members were Italians in the community.

After the *fiesta* of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel...they would have fireworks, very elaborate firework displays, imported from Italy, that would show the Italian flag in the air, and comical things. They would have *carrozze* [carriages] with a little donkey and different things...This would go on in the skies of Germantown. And Grandpop [Luigi Giorno] would start the band with the Royal Italian March...and...the Italian flag would appear in the sky [laughs]...And then the American National Anthem, certainly. They would always play the Star Spangled Banner after that. And the people would just relax in this park. This was the highlight of the Italian people's existence...We lived for music and feasts.