

## Oral History Interview

Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Dina Santomaggio (DS)

Interviewer: Domenica Diraviam (DD)

Date: June 9, 2019

Place: Davie, FL

Transcriber: otter.ai (edited by Domenica Diraviam)

This is an oral history of Dina Santomaggio. It is being conducted on June 9, 2019 at her home in Davie, Florida. It concerns her history the daughter of Italian New York, her repatriation experience to Italy as an adult and her current sense of identity within the Italian American community.

Domenica Diraviam 0:03

This is Domenica Diraviam. This afternoon, I am interviewing Dina Santomaggio. We are in her home in Davie, Florida. Dina, thank you for participating and sharing your oral history as part of the Italian American community. Would you please start off telling us your name, birth date, and your earliest memories?

Dina Santomaggio 0:10

Dina Santomaggio. December 6, 1942. My earliest memories are, I guess it was a little child, I go shopping with my father. We'd go walking, maybe a mile or so into the Square, Getty Square, which was the shopping center, and then we'd stop along the way on the way home to at the bakery and the butcher. And then we'd go home, and we'd have lunch together. My father, my mother and myself.

Domenica Diraviam 0:55

And so where did you spend your childhood?

Dina Santomaggio 1:02

My childhood was mostly spent, we had, in our grocery store. We had a business, we had a grocery deli, and we all the family, it was a family store. And my childhood was mostly spent there. Or outside playing with neighborhood friends.

Domenica Diraviam 1:20

Tell us the details about your family. Who is your family made up of? And when did they come to the United States?

Dina Santomaggio 1:26

Okay. My father came to the United States in 1920 at the age of 16. And then he went back in 1927, to marry my mother. And they both came back. And they lived in Yonkers, New York. And my father worked as a factory worker, and my mother was a homemaker. I had two brothers, older than myself. And I was the baby. My oldest brother was 16 years older than I am. My second brother was seven years older than I was. And as I said, I was the baby. At the age of four, we bought the grocery store. And then we moved into a house. Before that we were living in an apartment. Most of my time was spent, as I said, in the grocery store, going to school or playing with friends outside.

Domenica Diraviam 2:32

What are the stories that your family shared about what brought them from Italy, and how they felt about being in the United States?

Dina Santomaggio 2:39

Well, my father came from Italy, because there was no work there. He was a fisherman. And at the age of six, he had his own little fishing boat. And there was no no money. My mother was one of seven children, and they were sharecroppers. So they didn't have any money, either. I'm, I remember my mother saying that when my sister who died previously, she died as a baby. Um, all they had to the name with the \$10 for the doctor. And then baby died, my mother's arms. Then, my brother Junny had a heart conditions so he had to be pampered also. He was not expected to live, but he lived to be 29, at which time we had open heart surgery, which didn't go so well. Did not go well. And he contracted an infection, which eventually he hemorrhaged to death. So it's only my older brother, and myself. And my mother and my father. Two years after my brother Junie died, my mother died. And then I went to Italy for the first time in my life, my father, my father did not accompany me. And I met my husband. And within several months later, when I went back to be married my father come accompanied me. And it was his first trip back in 50 years. And he was very disillusioned. He still remembered it as, as it was his childhood days, and everything had changed. The people were not the small children. And the friends were not as friendly as they used to be.

Domenica Diraviam 4:46

So let's talk about each person's first trip and the way changed your view of who you were. So you mentioned when your father went back. How did you see yourself as far as being Italian before visiting Italy and once you visited Italy,

Dina Santomaggio 5:08

I think once I visited Italy, I kind of became more Italian than I was growing up. Because it seems to me that as I was growing up the, it wasn't the right thing to be Italian. You had to assimilate and become American. And I guess my parents kind of wanted to be American. As I remember, my father always read the newspaper. And they became American citizens. And they were really working for the American dream. And hard work kind of got them quite well, I

would say, comfortably along the way. And but of course, was hard work for everybody.

Domenica Diraviam 5:56

And are you and your brother different in your appreciation of your culture and ethnicity?

Dina Santomaggio 6:03

Yes, I think I was more more appreciative of Italian than my brother was my brother definitely was more American. Even though his wife was Italian, but he still, I think he never wanted to go back. He never went back to Italy, never visited and never wanted to.

Domenica Diraviam 6:30

And what was your communication with Italy, growing up with your relatives?

Dina Santomaggio 6:36

Not really very much. My mother was kind of illiterate. So she would write the letters, but I would have to address them. And she only had a first grade education. But she did okay, she wrote the letters to his sisters and her brothers. And you know, I would have to address them for her. And if anything came that, we always had to translate for her. Even though like I said she was an American citizen, but she really didn't have much of a real grasp of the American language. Or the English language, whatever we want to call it. She was very, very proud that I went to college, I was the first first one in our family to get a college education, or actually, I was the only one. And she was very proud when I became a teacher.

Domenica Diraviam 7:35

How was the neighborhood in which you grew up?

Dina Santomaggio 7:39

The neighborhood in which I grew up was strictly Italian. It was all Italian because all our neighbors were Italian, we all knew each other. In the wintertime, the kids would all play outside and you know, have snowball fights. And then my mom would have everybody come into the back of the store. And she'd make hot chocolate for everybody in all the mothers are there with the kids, we'd have a big social event. It was a lot of fun. And it was safe then to be outside. But like I said, we all knew each other. We're all neighbors, and we all helped each other. There was no questions asked.

Domenica Diraviam 8:22

Were their relatives within your community or just....?

Dina Santomaggio 8:26

I had no relatives, my parents had no relatives here. In fact, many years later, I found out that these people that go into not those are really not related at all. It would just friends and my parents and we used to call them aunt and uncle.

Domenica Diraviam 8:44

Did you grow up using Italian or English in the home?

Dina Santomaggio 8:48

Both? We used both. But like I said it was more emphasis on English because then there wasn't a lot to be Italian. The English everyone had to speak English you know you're in America speak English. Now I'm so happy that everything is bilingual, trilingual and what lingual. The more the merrier.

Domenica Diraviam 9:15

Do you have specific stories from your parents' childhoods or from your parents' arrival in America that stand out with you?

Dina Santomaggio 9:26

Well, the one big story that my mother always told was my father convinced her to marry him because he said when you come to America, you're going to be in this a woman of leisure and you'll wear a hat. And my mother got here she said, "damn it, I didn't know everybody wore hats in America". They very rarely spoke about their families, honestly, in all honesty, there was very little. And I regret that, I regret that I don't have the background of their families growing up. And I regret that we've never went back. My mother went back twice before that, before I went - for short visits, but it was always just this is her family. And that was it. But, you know, it was really not something that... I regret that we never did as a family. And I regret that I never met my aunts or my uncles or my grandparents, I have no no recollection of my grandparents at all. Not even knowing their names. And I regret that.

Domenica Diraviam 10:42

And where are your parents from in Italy? And what was your impression when you first went to their home place?

Dina Santomaggio 10:50

My parents are from Senigallia. And my impression was well, when I met my mother's sister, my aunt was a very strange impression. Because she was so much like my mother and I had just lost my mother. Her mannerisms, her voice, everything was just like, passing my mom all over again. They were very hospitable. They took me in, you know, really, really appreciated. I really appreciate staying with them. And I felt that I... Well, when I went to visit my husband's part of Italy, which is Abruzzo, I felt like I was going into the Third World sometimes. But when I was in Senigallia, which is really a commercial commercial, would you say? It's more civilized, I felt at home, I felt very much at home.

Domenica Diraviam 11:55

Did you find that it was similar to the way your parents portrayed it? Or did they just never really talk about it?

Dina Santomaggio 12:03

They never really talked about it. One thing that was very interesting was my cousin, Primo, took me to where my father had grown up. And the house where my father had grown up was now a hotel. But, on the tree, there was still the uh, what do you call it, where you hitch your horse. And he said, "That is where your grandfather used to hit his horse". And it was still there. So that was impressive.

Domenica Diraviam 12:37

And how or what are some of the songs or sayings or dialectical expressions from your childhood that you remember? Any?

Dina Santomaggio 12:55

Well, I was very impressed when my mother went the first time she brought back to record, La Rotunda. So I always wanted to go see the Rotunda thinking it was something really impressive, like a museum or, it turned out to be a nightclub, so I never really got to see it. I was impressed with the song. And uh the usual songs 'O Sole Mio and what are the ones? I don't know. Lou Monte's you know, the usual but then again, we didn't even do that much of culture. We were always so damn busy working, working, working that there wasn't time for relaxation that much.

Domenica Diraviam 13:42

So describe how you are now with your ethnicity. How would you describe yourself culturally?

Dina Santomaggio 13:51

Culturally, I think I described myself more American than I do Italian. Yes, I am. Italo-American, but the American seems to win out. I still enjoy the Italian culture, the Italian food. I like to go back there and visit. I love to go to Venice. I love to go to museums in Milano when you know, I'd love that area. But I don't like the farm area.

Domenica Diraviam 14:28

And what life events have led you to feel this way.

Dina Santomaggio 14:32

Living there. Living there was a nightmare. I lived there for two years. And there was an absolute nightmare to the point that when I went back after maybe three, four years, I couldn't remember anything. I didn't even remember the street I lived on. And my in-laws was still living there, which is sad. But it was a nightmare. It was a completely different way of life. I had brought up to be independent and here I was dependent. I couldn't even move without having to check in with my in laws first. I didn't like that way of life, to the point that I left.

Domenica Diraviam 15:18

So share the history of what led you to move to Italy, where you lived, and what the daily activities were when you were there.

Dina Santomaggio 15:32

Okay, the history of why I went back, went to live in Italy; I got tired of saying, "Wait, wait, wait", to my husband every time. He would go every year and come back and say, "We gotta move. We gotta move. We gotta move." Excuse me. So eventually, I decided, well, I never met my grandparents. Maybe we should move so that my children will at least have grandparents. Didn't turn out that way. But physically, they had grandparents. But that was it. But then I became a, I don't want to say slave, but I had no more independence. I felt like I had no independence. Every time I had to do something. I had to be checked out by everybody. And no matter what I did wasn't right. They told me I didn't know how to raise my children. They told me I, because I did not use physical abuse. Uh, the way of living having just every day, you know not knowing if you can have enough water days to take a shower or wash your dishes or because of the water supply was limited to electricity was limited. It was a whole different way of life. And I was disillusioned because I was told that when I got there, I'd have a job teaching and whatnot. And finally I got one offer for teaching and it was less than \$1 a day and I told him I was not looking for poverty, I was not on that poverty level. And I didn't need their handouts. So they told me, "Well, you should be satisfied because as long as you get your foot in the door." And I also really didn't like being called 'l'Americana'. No matter where I went they, you know, they tried to snow me under because they said, "Oh yeah, 'l'Americana'". Well no. No, they don't snow me under.

Domenica Diraviam 17:38

Do you have any specific stories that you want to share from that time? Maybe a positive memory?

Dina Santomaggio 17:51

Very few positive memories? Very few.

Domenica Diraviam 17:56

Did you get to know your own family, your own side of the family better as a result of being a closer proximity?

Dina Santomaggio 18:03

Yes, I did enjoy meeting my mother's family. And we are still very close. There's one cousin that we are still extremely close. I met, I guess, I had a couple of friends; enough to see that I enjoyed being with. Then again, it was, you know, criticism. No matter what I did, it was the American style, you know, so they didn't accept that.

Domenica Diraviam 18:40

And since then, how have you grown in your Italian American understanding - since returning from Italy?

Dina Santomaggio 18:47

Well, since returning from Italy, I think I've gotten a broader understanding mainly because of experiencing other Italian functions - through my daughter, who is very, very much Italian, a lot more than I am. And I enjoy those functions. And we enjoy going to the Italian American Club and we enjoy going to their functions. And going to see Italian movies. And I think I've grown very recently even more to enjoy my Italian culture.

Domenica Diraviam 19:30

So describe your immediate family and maybe how each of your children identifies culturally.

Dina Santomaggio 19:38

Okay, my immediate family is my husband who is still in the Italian culture. After 50 years, he's still very much Italian. And there's myself who again, as I said, is more American. And then my three children, my daughter, who was the oldest, and is very, very, very much into Italian culture, to the point of wanting to get her PhD in Italian culture. And then my son, Fernando is 40, 5 years younger. He's sort of on the fence; he'll take either way. I mean, he enjoys Italian culture as much as the American culture. But he's very, he sways either way. And then there's my youngest son, Thomas, who couldn't care anything about the Italian culture. He hated his life in Italy, and he still hasn't forgotten it. The two years were torture for him. To the point that when he came back, when we came back to the United States, and the first night, he woke up and he hugged me, and he kissed me and he said, thank you so much for taking me back to my country.

Domenica Diraviam 20:53

And what years were they that you lived in Italy?

Dina Santomaggio 20:55

92? 82? 1982 to 85.

Domenica Diraviam 21:07

And will you please also tell the years that your parents immigrated to the United States?

Dina Santomaggio 21:13

Okay. As I said, my father immigrated 1920 at the age of 16. My mother immigrated in 1927. She was 23. My father went back to marry her. And my husband and immigrated in 1969 and I have been born and lived here for my entire life.

Domenica Diraviam 21:40

Did your parents come through Ellis Island?

Dina Santomaggio 21:43

Yes.

Domenica Diraviam 21:44

Do you have any stories relating to that?

Dina Santomaggio 21:47

Well, they never spoke much about it. But I do have their name on the plaque. I had their name - my brother and I - had their name engraved and it's on a plaque in Ellis Island and when I went to visit Ellis Island and I saw the little trunks, the steamer trunks. I remembered that we had one of those at home. It was brutal. It took them 30 days to come from Italy to here.

Domenica Diraviam 22:16

Can you describe the home you grew up in in Yonkers, New York?

Dina Santomaggio 22:20

I grew up in an apartment. It was railroad apartment. We had uh, we didn't have a full bath but we had a bath inside, and was uh three bedrooms, kitchen. And that was about it. And then for baths we used to go to the bathhouse which was a couple of blocks away. And you paid your 25 cents or 15 cents and got a towel in the bar soap and you took your shower.

Domenica Diraviam 22:53

And then when you open to the grocery store?

Dina Santomaggio 22:55

Then when we opened the grocery store, we bought the house. We bought the house and then we had everything. We had the bath, a full bath we had, seven rooms I think it was. It was a big house was a two family above the grocery store.

Domenica Diraviam 23:13

As a result of being in the business or just being Italian American did your family engage in activities such as canning or cooking?

Dina Santomaggio 23:24

[Chuckles] Well, my father would make his own wine. You know he he made his own wine and my mother used to make her own tomato sauce and her own anisette also. And she did her own cooking, of course. And then we had a big deli that we used to make a lot of sandwiches for factory people and we delivered them hot, cold. Everything. We made our own sausage. Wemade eggplant parmigiana. Anything you wanted. My mother would make it for you.

Domenica Diraviam 24:05

What was your favorite food memory from growing up?

Dina Santomaggio 24:14

I enjoyed the pastries at Easter time. The Easter bread that my mother used to make. It was a cheese bread. It was more of a spicy cheese bread. And the friends would come and they's share. They'd sit around drink their wine, they eat the bread, you know and enjoyed it. And at



Christmas time was the fruitcake. Well, one person made the fruit cake. My mother was not into baking too much. But the pizzelle. Always the pizzelle, we always had the pizzelle.

Domenica Diraviam 24:52

And not to hop around. But will you share the story of your trip to Italy where you met your husband?

Dina Santomaggio 25:00

Well, as I said, My mother had just died, and I was quite depressed. And my brother had married a woman who was from the same town, from Avezzano. And, so I was feeling very depressed. So my brother said to his wife, "Why don't you my sister go to Italy for a trip?" I was supposed to go previously, twice before. But once before, my brother had just had open heart surgery. So he could go, so I gave up mine. And the second time I had booked the flight. My mother was diagnosed with cancer. And I was told she wouldn't make it. So I didn't leave. So that was twice before. So this was my third try. And when I got there we met on the Sunday [sighs]. And that Friday, we were engaged and I came back to the United States and went back in December to marry him. The wedding was enjoyable. It was different. It was a house wedding. And it caused some problems trying to get the paperwork through, but you know, the almighty dollar always wins out. You slip the 20 and you get whatever you want. [Pause] But we are legally married. We were legally married.

Domenica Diraviam 26:32

And once you came to the United States as a couple, did you notice that changed your standing in the Italian American community?

Dina Santomaggio 26:41

Oh, wait a minute. He didn't come as a couple. I came back. But it took him three months to get his body over here. Because the crops had to be taken care of. And mommy and daddy couldn't be left. So he came back and he stayed a whole 12 days. And I had to send him back because he was severely depressed. And the doctor advised me, he said, "You have two choices. Either you send them back or he's going to end up in an institution." He wouldn't eat, he would not... so he went back and after a few months, he sent for me to go get him. So I took the chance and went back again. And then he came back and he decided that okay, this was where he's going to stay - except every year was the same story. He would go at Christmas time. And it was the same story. I would stay here with the kids. And the story was, "We gotta go back. We gotta go back. You don't know what you're missing. You don't know what's good." So, finally I gave in.

Domenica Diraviam 27:54

Okay, well, I would like to collect a couple of anecdotes so if you have a favorite story from your childhood, a favorite memory from your childhood. Then, a favorite memory from before you left Yonkers and a favorite memory after. We'll start with your childhood.

Dina Santomaggio 28:16

As I said my I favorite memory from my childhood was just going with my father every morning just to go shopping. I felt so important. He'd take me shopping then we'd come home. I, I still remember, I used to sit in my highchair and he'd cut up the little cheese and bread and and talk to me about it. You know, my favorite memory leaving Yonkers...

Domenica Diraviam 28:45  
moving into the suburbs...

Dina Santomaggio 28:46  
Well, I felt that I've enjoyed living in the suburbs. I enjoyed living in the suburbs, I felt it was a different way of life. I think I had more friends. Eventhough I was working I still seemed to enjoy it. I enjoyed it more. And I think my children were definitely enhanced by it. I think that it was a much better way of life than living in the ghetto.

Domenica Diraviam 29:16  
So your hometown of Yonkers had become

Dina Santomaggio 29:18  
a ghetto

Domenica Diraviam 29:19  
a ghetto by that point. And that's the transition that typically, you know, we move from these ethnic enclaves into the suburbs. And then from there, so a memory from that point anyone in particular or no?

Dina Santomaggio 29:31  
Yes, I think Liz, my very best friend Liz, who was very much like Mother Teresa, and will always be Mother Teresa to me.

Domenica Diraviam 29:46  
And then a memory after your return to the United States from Italy.

Dina Santomaggio 29:55  
Okay, after I returned to United States from Italy, it was kind of was a hard life, but we made it. My children and I, we got through it, we made it. And we moved into a nice area in the suburbs, I guess you would call the suburbs, or as some of us call this redneck country. But I enjoy it here. It's quiet, and peaceful. And that's the kind of living I like.

Domenica Diraviam 30:27  
What are your aspirations for returning to Italy or visiting places of Italian culture in general?

Dina Santomaggio 30:38  
My aspirations of returning to Italy, I have no no desire to return. Unless, I go back, and I do

touring. I wanted to tour the museums. I want to tour Venice, but I want to go as a tourist. No ties.

Domenica Diraviam 31:00

Are there any other details or anything about your upbringing at all that you would like to have shared or archived?

Dina Santomaggio 31:10

No, I as I said, we worked very hard, but I guess it was worth it. Looking back now, you know, I really didn't have much of a childhood or teens. But I guess now I'm financially free. I have financially reap the harvest. And now I'm just going to retirement and if I grow root on the couch, well, that's my business.

Domenica Diraviam 31:42

Well, thank you very much for your time. And this concludes our interview.

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