A Comparative Study
of the
Ethnic Identity
of
Italian-Americans
in
Middletown, Connecticut
Before and after World War II

Madeleine Lansky
Final Paper for History 328
Immigrant City in the
United States, 1880-1924
Fall Semester, 1991
completed January 17, 1992
Perhaps Immigrant Studies is an important topic among Americans in recent years because we are realizing that such a history is one of the few features of our common national heritage. In a country where no one culture prevails, a culture of ethnicity arises. People of Sicilian extraction and their life as a people in the city of Middletown, Connecticut has been a topic of significant interest for some residents of the town, whether they be members of the community, or scholars of ethnicity, a "hot" subject at neighboring Wesleyan University, or both. While no well-known studies of Middletown's Italian community have been conducted outside of Middletown, a number of people, many of them students at Wesleyan University and even some who are concurrently members of the Italian community, have written about the topic. Probably the most well-known and extensive, as well as the first, project concerning Middletown, its Sicilians and their Sicilian homeland, is "Mel Hyblaeum", an unpublished Wesleyan Master's thesis written by Walter H. Sangree in 1952. Other notable works out of Wesleyan University are "Green Street: The Americanization of a Sicilian Village", an unpublished Master's thesis written by Joseph Lombardo in 1989, "From Sicily to America: A Study of Three Generations", a 1989 M.A. thesis by Richard L. Marino, and "Italians in Middletown, 1893-1932: the Formation of an Ethnic Community", a B.A. thesis written by Peter C. Baldwin in 1984. Also notable is a locally published booklet written by an Italian-American Middletown resident named James V. Annino, entitled Arrivederci
Melilli--Hello Middletown, which concentrates on those who immigrated to Middletown from Melilli between 1895 and 1917.

Interviews and personal experience are the building blocks of all these studies, even for Sangree and Baldwin, who are the two non-Sicilians of the group. They also build on one another. Often, the works read as though their authors are writing from a niche within community, and often seemed to be guided to some degree by sentimentality or a responsibility to the community they are describing. This study arises primarily out of interviews. The abovementioned authors having done a great deal of work concerning the beginnings of Middletown's Italian community around the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as of its development into a community from a colony. The intention of this project is to continue the evolution of this course of study by addressing issues that observations and interviews demonstrated as being currently of most interest. Written from an outside perspective that, in light of the past material and its authors' involvement with the community, now seems a necessary dimension, this study will attempt to use new information to go back over the scholarship of the past and, in the end, update information about the ethnic identity of Middletown's Italian community.

In much of the scholarship about Middletown's Italian-Americans, there exists a certain folkloric element, a romanticization of the past, that can be seen in the scenario of the immigrants who overcome a humble beginning and become a leading force in the city of Middletown. Accounts of the the ethnic life of Middletown's Melillisi take particular delight in describing how the Feast of Saint
Sebastian, a late Spring religious festival practiced here and in Melilli which venerates the town’s patron saint, St. Sebastian, and the establishing of Saint Sebastian Church, which is modeled exactly after the church Melilli, play key roles in their identity as a group. All immigration and assimilation theories aside, one wonders if the whole issue of this group’s ethnic identity, and whether it even exists, is generated more by the stories than by realities of present day. Hence, much of this study’s grappling with issues of ethnic identity will focus on the words of informants themselves instead of upon the interpretations of past studies.

Nonetheless, an explanation of what makes the Italian community in Middletown such an interesting topic of study, even for a non-Italian, Wesleyan student residing impermanently in Middletown, is necessary, and this explanation does begin at the beginning. A few Italians resided in Middletown before 1895, but by far the most famous immigrant came from the town of Melilli, located on the east coast of the island of Sicilia, near the city of Siracusa. Approximately ninety percent of Middletown’s Italian-American population trace their heritage to Melilli, whether they are third generation residents or immigrated twenty five years ago. In Arrivederci Melilli—Hello Middletown, James Annino tells the story of Angelo Magnano, who, in efforts to avoid the Italian draft, was the first of the Melilli to come to the U.S. After moving around New England, Magnano settled in Middletown in 1895. From then on, a seed was planted from which the tree of chain migration would

---

1 James V. Annino, Arrivederci Melilli—Hello Middletown (Middletown, Conn.: Self-published, 1980), printed by Magnani Press, Hartford, p.C.
blossom. Tells Mike, an 87 year old first generation American, whose parents came from Melilli:

Angelo Magnano convinced them to come to Middletown because it was a nice community. There was work. As a matter of fact, Luigi LaRosa [one of the initial immigrants] has his visa already made to go to Argentina. But when Angelo Magnano got there and he talked to the people of Melilli, he changed his visa and came to Middletown.2

People came in large numbers to Middletown from this point up until World War I, stopped for a while because of the Johnson Act of 1922, came again for a brief period between the two World Wars, and then in large numbers after World War II. As Mike's comment suggests, people in Melilli and all of Southern Italy were beginning to leave their native land, where hardship, poverty, and a lack of opportunity was the rule, in search of a better life. Originally many Melillisi left with the intention of returning in a few years after they had earned a great deal of money. Realities about the amount of money a non-English speaking migrant could earn forced many to stay in the United States, as well as did the beginning of families and the possibility of owning property in Middletown with a few more years hard work. It is the first settlement period before World War I that the reminiscent look back upon with such fondness. All of Middletown's immigrant groups, namely at the time Italian, Irish, and Polish, lived in various sections of Middletown--the Italians resided in the lower east side, between Main Street and the

2 Interview with Mike, November 25, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
Connecticut River. Recounts Buddy, who is in his early sixties, holds a position at Middletown City Hall and is a past city mayor:

I spent a great deal of my youth on Green Street. Let me say to you this: in my youth, and as I say I lived from the time I was born until I was 23 years of age on the lower east side of Main Street, and that included from the north end practically to College Street, was basically an Italian-American enclave in this community. There was discrimination against Italian-Americans; however, within 20 short years of their arrival here they became property owners. They did buy buildings on the lower east side and then made room for family members because most of the early Italian-Americans when they came lived there for protection because they had a common language; and it was a most beautiful time to live. It was family. There was total respect. We didn’t—even though we were poor—we didn’t recognize we were poor, but we were poor. We made do with a lot, but we had no regrets about it. There was total commitment, there was total respect, there were many festive occasions when the whole community would come together.3

Buddy describes this early Sicilian neighborhood much the way many people do who look back on the early days of the community. He mentions the quick success of the early immigrants, their ability to be happy where they were while at the same time striving for more opportunity. He notes several attributes about the immigrants: they’re tenacity, self-respect, appreciation for family and for opportunity, and how these qualities made the community special.

3 Interview with Buddy, December 9, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
and successful. Mike recounts how the Italian community built itself up and became successful:

Eventually, Court Street became the Italian commercial area. There were many stores; there was everything you could think of—meat markets, grocery stores, a pepper factory, macaroni factory, a barber shop, tailors. You know, there's one thing about Italians, they believe in a trade. In other words, they're carpenters, they're masons, they're tailors, barbers, musicians. And us, see, there's an Italian saying...that means "Give me a trade, and not an inheritance." Because a trade stays with you. ...So you see, they progressed because they had trades; they had a livelihood.4

Turn-of-the-century Melillese immigrants missed their Italian home but generally did not regret their move to a land of comparative wealth and opportunity. Between 1897 and 1922, with the closing of immigration, approximately 2,500 Melillisi immigrated to Middletown, and only twenty percent of this number returned to Italy. The rest stayed.5 Yet, Mike's assertion that Italians in Middletown were predominantly tradespeople is not particularly well-founded. Indeed, such was the goal, that the community would achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency, prosperity, and social mobility. More likely, because most immigrants who came from Southern Italy came to the U.S. not speaking English, and were driven to immigrate often by the impoverished lifestyle of their

---

4 Interview with Mike.
socio-economic position as farmers and laborers, Sicilians at the turn of the century were predominantly day laborers.\textsuperscript{6}

Indeed, today one can easily notice the achievements of the Melillean citizens of Middletown. The attributes about which many of the writers and informants describing the early colony in Middletown speak no doubt existed because many Italian immigrants were able to buy property and move up the social ladder very quickly. In \textit{Arrivederci Melilli--Hello Middletown}, Annino makes mention of the first Melillean professionals in Middletown, as well of the large number of Melillisi who have been mayors of Middletown or held other important governmental positions. Of approximately 45,000 Middletown residents,\textsuperscript{7} there is some disparity in the percentage of people of Italian-extraction, ranging from 35-40\% according to one town official, and 90\% according to another. The 1980 Census of Population--Characteristics of Persons Report that was issued in a City Hall publication "1991, Basic Information about Middletown, Connecticut", no category for Italian-extraction exists, they are probably considered under the category of "white",\textsuperscript{8} of which the Middletown population is approximately 88\%. One can draw from the numbers as best they can. Nonetheless, as a group they play an important role in the town, and as individuals, many became impressive successes. Such phenomena of quick and prosperous adjustment occurred even for immigrants of a later era, who came after World War II, and after the Melillisi in Middletown

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid.} p. 37.
\textsuperscript{7} Interview with Buddy.
\textsuperscript{8} City of Middletown, "1991 Basic Information about Middletown," p.9.
changed from being a colony to a community. Frank, who emmigrated from Melilli when he was 19 years old, tells of his acculteration to life in the United States:

I came in '65. I was going to school in Melilli, so it was a chain reaction, you know?. First my sister came [to marry a Melillose-American] and then my parents, and then I came because I said "Hey, everybody's comin' over here."...And I went to school. School at night and work during the day. I went to night school to get my High School diploma, and then I went to [design school] during the day and worked at night. So I got my degree as an architectural draftsman. And then I took night courses and studied appraising and design. I got into the real estate business. [Frank now owns property in Middletown and holds a position in City Hall].

**Question:** Did you know English when you got here?
No. After school I married. And there were some hard times, you know, but being young, being 19 years old, I used to have to go out and talk with some people and you have to go to school and force yourself to understand. From that point on, things just got better and better.

**Question:** Do you think Middletown helped or hurt in terms of adjusting to America?
I think Middletown was great to adjust because you don't go from a room that is ten below zero to a room that is ninety degrees. You go to a place where there is the Italian [sic.] and it's like you're blending in. You pick up little by little. It's not like going to a city where there is nothing or nobody from your background.9

Wheras studies of the past have concentrated on those who came to Middletown before World War I, a new generation of immigrants,

---

9 Interview with Frank, November 15, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
like Frank, came after World War II, primarily in the years between 1954 and 1956. The approximate 80,000 Italians who left Italy between 1946 and 1968 to go to the Americas pales in comparison to the nearly half a million who left between 1900 and 1940,\textsuperscript{10} and yet, the presence of the recently immigrated in Middletown is not one that should be ignored when studying the Italian community's ethnic identity. That there are still many people who spent their childhoods in Melilli, as well as some who still struggle to speak English instead of their native Sicilian dialect, is significant.

One gets the impression today when speaking with the Sicilians in Middletown that there are two types of Melillisi: those who spent their childhoods in Italy, and those who grew up here. While many Melillisi were born in Italy, many immigrated to the United States early in their childhoods, like Mike, who is considered an "old timer." Many were born in the United States but nonetheless were raised in Italian households. They went through school here, became familiar with English in the streets and in the schools, and, though living in an encapsulated ethnic community, interacted with America. Those who spent both their early adult lives in Melilli and then came to Middletown, the "early settlers",\textsuperscript{11} are for the large part deceased; they are the generation of yesteryear. Thus, while someone like Mike who witnessed the growth of the Middletown Italian Community through most of his 87 years saw its inception,


\textsuperscript{11} Annino, p. A.
Frank, forty years his junior, spent the first 19 years of his life in Italy. For him, going back to Melilli is significant not just because it was his parents home, but because it was his home before he emigrated. When questioned about any existing tension between them, Frank notes the differences between the two groups:

It's like when you hear people and...they tell you "You guys came from Italy when things were good. We came here when things were bad. We came over and the depression was on. And really bad. I mean, you came here and found everything fine. We were here when..." So the old generation has probably a feeling of, like, they opened the doors for us. You know what I mean? Like, "we came here, we got this thing going. It was hard for us over here because, you know, we Italians, we were the minority--the whole thing--and, you know, we had to work hard to have our input." And now, when my generation came and after, we didn't have that type of fighting to do. There was more. The Italians had more doors open for us. They say that back then they had hard times. So the problem isn't some sort of difference between people who came way back and the generation right now. There's a bit of separation.

**Question:** Do you think they're angry at you?

No, I don't think they're angry but they always remind you, though! ...There isn't bad feelings, they just want you to know. They want the respect that they're the ones that came over here back then.\textsuperscript{12}

Indeed, the experiences of the generation that immigrated after World War II and those that immigrated before have been very different. The first wave of immigrants were responsible for securing a place for the Melillisi in Middletown. Yet, there still are

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Frank, November 15, 1991.
Italians in Middletown who are struggling to adjust to their relatively new surroundings. Enza, a woman who immigrated in 1970 with her family and does janitorial work, is now in her mid-fifties. She does not speak very much English, and her use of Sicilian indicates enough that people in Middletown still speak an Italian dialect so that one can remain uni-lingual, much as some of the earlier generations of immigrants were. At the interview, Enza's co-worker Sophia, who is Melillisi but was raised in the United States, helped Enza talk about her experiences. Enza discusses the beginning of her adjustment to living in Middletown:

**Enza:** In the beginning, too hard. Over there, that's my Momma. In the beginning, too hard. **Sophia:** But she got used to it.

**Enza:** Come the day before Christmas. On the middle of January, go for work. **Sophia:** By January she already had a job. ...**Enza:** I missa becausa thats my country. Thatsa my language. Here I understand just a little bit because I no speak English good. Too hard. Over there, I go doctor, go—all places—my language. Sometimes I need to ask my daughter, my son, go to doctor [and help me with the English].

Clearly, the doors were already open for Enza to find work when she arrived; the first Melillisi to come in Middletown had a much more difficult time finding work and a place in Middletown initially. Her struggles in Middletown, working full time and raising a family of seven, are by no means diminished, however. The same goes for Giuseppe, who like Enza has difficulty with English, immigrated in

---

13 Interview with Enza and Sophia, November 25, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
here in 1962 and is the father of five children, who all were born here. He works two full jobs, in a local factory and as a janitor, in efforts to keep his sick son at home instead of in an institution, and to put his four other children through parochial school and college. Giuseppe explains how much he works to make life good for his family:

sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours—a day, I'm talking about a day! Week, you talking about eighty minimum, minimum eighty hours. After that is could be more—eighty-five, ninety, one hundred. I worka two jobs. Since the first day I come in. I pay for school. I try to get a good education for my kids. It's all I can do.14

Like a number of the immigrants who came to Middletown early in the century15 Giuseppe works in a factory. Though a road has been paved by early immigrants for success, today's recent immigrants still put a tremendous amount of time into adjusting and succeeding in their new home.

It is no doubt somewhat painful to Enza, Giuseppe and others who work so hard to have a good life in the United States, to think about the present state of Melilli. Though life used to be tremendously difficult there, and filled with opportunity here, conditions are changing. The United States in 1992 is faced with many difficult challenges, and many of its citizens are feeling the

14 Interview with Giuseppe, November 19, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
15 Annino, p. D.
effects of a nation that is no longer as prosperous as it was before, especially in the years following World War II. Giuseppe informs:

Matter of fact, a few people I know want to go back. They don't want to stay here.

**Question:** Why?

Well, it's different over there now. Why come here when can live like over here?\textsuperscript{16}

Frank also notes this phenomenon.

I grew up [in Melilli] and it was a small town. Basically, it was working in the fields. And back about thirty years ago, some industries came around and they kind of changed the economy of the city. Before there was nothing else but, you know, people had a piece of land. It was theirs or they were leasing it. They were producing and they were working on their land. And they had livelihood out of having animals and olives and almonds and grains and so forth. Thirty years ago, industry started to pop up, right on the coast, because we are about probably five miles from the sea. [The industries] changed the area and even the livelihood. ...And the problem with the industries is that there's a lot of chemicals and they damaged the area as far as the country is concerned. And so a lot of people went there because they were getting paid. Now there was a better living. [Instead of] where you work for your food and your animals and your stuff like a farmer, they'd go to work and they'd get a paycheck home. So a lot of people felt good about that....Nobody's using the land anymore so that life is more devoted into factories just like it is over here....After 1970, then it became where people didn't wanna come here anymore. Even if they had the possibility. They don't wanna come. Like, I have a brother, and he could come over here, but he didn't want to. You know, the economy got better over there, and the big gap that existed between this

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Giuseppe.
country and Italy became less. So now, the only people that wanted to come over here is to be with the family.17

Perhaps economic opportunity and family are the issues that make the experiences of recent Melillese immigrant generation different from those of the past. Whereas before, people left loved ones behind in search of a better life, now people find themselves here as much for the sake of joining their families as finding opportunity. In addition, since the closing of the "big gap" of which Frank speaks, the feature of the United States that keeps people like Giuseppe or Enza, who have not assimilated to the degree that many of their fellow Melillisi have, is their American children. Tells Giuseppe: "If no hava kids over here, say, 'O.K., when I retire, come back there.' Because, you know, born over there. But no, I can't leave my kids over here. For a visit, maybe. Not for living. My kids is my life!'18 Enza says nearly the same thing: "Now I just go for visita. Because if I stay over there---already three kids are married. Now just vacation. I have sister, a brother, but still my family is my kids."19

Fortunately for all Melillisi, communication with and travel to Italy have become much more accessible in recent years. In this way, the new generation also has it easy. They did not have to carve a niche when they got here--it already existed--and they can call and visit their old home with some regularity. Elaborates Frank:

They know what's going on over here, we know what's going on

---

17 Interview with Frank, December 6, 1991, Middletown, Conn., U.S.A.
18 Interview with Giuseppe.
19 Interview with Enza and Sophia.
over there, a lot more than we did thirty years ago. Because there's so many families. I mean if you taped all the telephones, I bet in one day there's fifty phone calls going to Melilli from Middletown. Everybody's got somebody over there. I don't think you find a family that came over and doesn't have anybody over there. We all have connections on both sides. So people from Melilli, they know what's going on in Middletown, they know what to feel about Middletown even if they haven't been here. Kind of up-to-date with telephone calls and people going all the time over there, for vacation or business or whatever.20

In fact, with population of approximately 8,000 in Melilli, there are more Melillisi in Middletown than there are in Italy. Connections to the old country--an old country that faces now many of the same changes that the United States has--have much improved. Enza does not buy olive oil at the market, her family ships it to her from Sicilia. Adjustment to the United States has become easier now that more of an everyday relationship exists between the Melillisi of Melilli and Middletown.

Probably one of the more significant ways that Melillisi in Middletown have preserved their ethics of success is through the education of their children. While the schools local to the lower east side educated a group of predominantly Italian children during the days of the consolidated Italian enclave, with the gaining of property and moving away of Italian families, the schools have achieved a different mix. Unfortunately, with present-day cuts in the nation's education budget, and with a generation of youth who are endangered by a drug culture, the quality of public school education

---

20 Interview with Frank, November 15, 1991.
has significantly dropped. Many Melillese parents are worried; they want their children to do well and succeed. Since after World War II, Middletown has had a number of Catholic schools such as The Saint Sebastian School, Mercy High School and Xavier High School. Tells Frank:

There's been problems. But I don't think that's the [only] reason [parents send their children to schools like Mercy]. One of the reason is that the education--education at Middletown High School might be just as good--but they go Mercy and they are more strict. You can't skip school without...if my daughter don't go to school--my daughter went to Mercy, I get a phone call. Or if she's not doing good in a subject, stay after school. You pay for it. It's a private school. ...The reason that so many people send their kids to private school is to kind of protect them from getting into the wrong habits.21

Giuseppe holds two full jobs to send his children to Mercy. "Everybody go there," he tells,

My wife when we first come in says, "Oh, I gotta send my kids to Catholic School." More discipline. The first [child], and after, the second one, go to Saint Sebastian School. And after they go to Mercy and Xavier School. And all the work I do the money go to the school! All the money I am making go to the school, to the Saint Sebastian School, and after Mercy and Xavier School!22

Enza has sent her children through the Catholic schools in Middletown, and now her grandchildren attend Saint Sebastian School. "Si publica school, no," says Enza. "The school no call and

---

21 Interview with Frank, December 6, 1991.
22 Interview with Giuseppe.
talk to the mother e father." She too is concerned with the discipline such schools provide for children.

At presently between two and three thousand dollars a year for tuition, these private schools take a large part of many a family budget. Says Buddy, a past mayor:

It's quite an expensive proposition in addition to paying their public obligation to maintain a public school system. So I think they do it because they're concerned about the quality of education, and they want what's best for their children, and will sacrifice a great deal.  

Yet, as Giuseppe says, many Melillese children attend them. Though not all the children enrolled are of Italian descent, they receive a Catholic-oriented education, one which entails much discipline, as well as involves the parents. Catholic schools are aware that the parents of their students put a high priority on family and on education. An article in a 1945 issue of the Wesleyan Cardinal, which discusses "Italians in Middletown", speaks of these Catholic schools, then in the beginning stages, and their connection to the Italian community: "there is good evidence that the third generation will be even more religiously minded and more closely allied spiritually and physically to Saint Sebastian's." When asked the question, "Is academic discipline the only goal, or do you think

23 Interview with Enza and Sophia.
24 Interview with Buddy.
parents wanting their kids to be involved in religion is a motivation for sending them to Catholic school?", Frank answered

Yes, definitely. I think there is an all over feeling that—in fact, sometimes they have a mass at Saint Sebastian at ten o'clock, where they invite the freshman class, let's say. So there is that Catholic-oriented...It's like they're trying to guide the kids to be Catholic, into the habit of going to church on Sunday and doing whatever the religion tells you to, you know?²⁶

The issue of sending one's children to private, Catholic school seems important in terms of looking at Italians' ethnic identity in Middletown because it is one of the key ways that parents preserve such an identity for future generations. At his interview, Giuseppe offered information about Mercy High School without having been asked. He spoke with pride as he told about his children receiving a good education and having a chance to make their ways in the world. To him, such an education is of central importance. It is worth working up to a hundred hours a week.

The most distinctive source of ethnic heritage for Melissi, as seen in studies of the past and interviews with the generation of today, is Saint Sebastian Church and the Festa (feast) di Santo Sebastiano. The struggle to build Saint Sebastian church and have an Italian center of worship, rather than sharing Saint John's Church of Middletown with it's predominantly Irish-Catholic congregation, began with the Festa and culminated in the church's erection in 1931. The celebration began in 1908 when Melissi in the lower east

²⁶ Interview with Frank, December 6, 1991.
side began to venerate a statue of Saint Sebastian, the patron saint of Melilli, which had been created by immigrant Sebastiano Marchese. Inspired by a wish to continue the tradition of the Festa, which has been celebrated in Melilli since 1414, the early Melillisi moved the statue from the veranda of Marchese’s home to a store window on Court Street. People celebrated by decorating the the lower east side, as well as the statue, and parading Saint Sebastian around the city streets, as well as by feasting on traditional foods and dancing to traditional music. The St. Sebastian’s Festa Committee was formed in 1913, and the project of planning a Festa, as well as collecting funds from the Festa to begin work on the building of a Catholic Church began.

Most informants mention the Festa without being prompted. It is an important event for the Italians of Middletown, as it is for the people of Melilli, and it is one of the ways that people in both cities continue to come together for a common celebration. Frank explains the significance of the Festa to Italians in the United States:

The main thing is the religious part of [the Festa] because people that honor Saint Sebastian, they believe in that saint, that he’s done a lot of...he receives a lot of petitions. People that they have problems and they pray to Saint Sebastian to help ’em with their problems. So they come and honor Saint Sebastian. And then the other part we have a festival. You know, we have food, celebrate. It’s a religious celebration. You know, of course you have the foods and all the goodies that kind of, you know, get the people together. That’s the idea, is that people--even if they’re people

---

27 Annino, p. J.
28 Interview with Mike.
29 Annino, p. K.
from Hartford or out of state. I mean there's buses coming from New Jersey, from Boston, Massachusetts—they come to celebrate. There's a lot of feelings toward Saint Sebastian. So having to do the same thing we used to do, we try to keep the tradition. And our kids would never know what we did in Italy if we don't do something about it. It's on a small scale. But at least it gives them a point of—when somebody talks about—they have enudi, they call them, where people run with flowers, they run from the club [The Italian Society of Middletown]. All dressed in white, run and bring flowers to Saint Sebastian. Kids that were born over here and they don't see that over there, they don't know what that is. The first time you see that; [you think] "Jesus! [what are they doing?] And it's touching. It's touching and it's impressive. Because you see some of these people and they're really crying. They're crying. Because they believe it. It's something that comes out of you, you know?\textsuperscript{30}

In his interview, when asked if he attended the Festa, Giuseppe answered "Yeah. That's tradition. Just like in Melilli."\textsuperscript{31} Sophia described what a large affair preparation for the Festa was in the early days, and how Melilinese women would begin days in advance.\textsuperscript{32} Buddy explained the "wonderful feeling"\textsuperscript{33} he felt throughout the early Italian community as it celebrated such occasions as the Festa. Mike described how, in the days before the building of the church, he was part of a Christmas Eve collection committee that played songs throughout the Italian neighborhood while collecting money for the Festa and the building fund.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Interview with Frank, November 15, 1991.
\textsuperscript{31} Interview with Giuseppe.
\textsuperscript{32} Interview with Enza and Sophia.
\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Buddy.
\textsuperscript{34} Interview with Mike.
All Melillisi in Middletown have become Americanized, but they all have undergone this process in varying degrees. Whether an individual was born in Melilli, what language she or he speaks, what generation America she or he is, where she or he received an education, and what her or his occupation is are just a few of the factors that affect the Americanization process. Buddy, one of the first Italian mayors in Middletown, views the Italian community as one which has fully Americanized:

I don't think in this day and age [the Italian community] has any special needs any longer. I think that the Americans of Italian extraction from the mass immigration of the 1890's have become totally assimilated in American culture. We certainly are proud of our ethnic background and our ethnic culture, but we are Americans. ...Our values are the same as any other American regardless of their background.35

Yet, Giuseppe, unlike Buddy, who grew up in the United States, immigrated in 1962. When asked if he considers himself an American, Giuseppe answers:

I'm not born over here. I can say I'm Italian because I'm born over there. My kids are born over here, you know? I mean, I'm Italian because I'm born over there, but I like America, too, 'cause that's my second country. You know what I mean? Cause, you know, this is my second country cause my kids is over here.36

The circumstances of Giuseppe's life have been very different from those of Buddy's. Giuseppe still primarily speaks Sicilian, he considers himself Italian and, while he may not have any special

35 Interview with Buddy.
36 Interview with Giuseppe.
needs that can be fulfilled on a governmental level, he has not "totally assimilated." The essence of the difference between Buddy's words and Giuseppe's, as well as Enza's and to a much lesser degree Frank's, experience, is that they are from different generations. The children of Giuseppe, of Enza, and of Frank are undergoing the same process that Buddy and those of his generation did to become Americanized. Yet, Buddy is the same generation age-wise as these first-generation children's parents. Hence, to look at the Italian community in Middletown as thoroughly acculturated is a bit of an over-simplification. The degree to which Melilli isi attempt both to retain their Italian heritage through elements such as religion, education, family tradition, and communication with Melilli, and to become members of an American mainstream varies with each individual greatly. Perhaps looking at how a given individual views Middletown and its value as a topic for a study, whether they focus on the early days of the community or their experiences thirty years ago when they immigrated, can be another indication of the degree to which she or he has an Americanized. For those who view the "story" of Middletown's beginnings in a highly nostalgic way are trying to reclaim something that exists no longer. Those who are unaware that, as Italians, they make an interesting subject of study, as both Giuseppe and Enza were when asked to be interviewed, live their Italian heritage in the present.

Hence, the question arises again: does the Italian-American community in Middletown have an ethnic identity? The answer is yes, but the degree to which one grasps onto that identity varies with the individual. In terms of having a solid ethnic community,
Frank points out: "It's life that brings you to this, it's not something that you create. If we come here from Italy, and we like to have certain things the way we had them in Italy, that creates the ethnic group." Yet, with the pressures of assimilation that invariably have an effect on second, third, and even fourth generation Italians, these ties are difficult ones to keep. In a country where the family unit is disintegrating, the most essential component of Italian culture, family, is in danger. Typically Americans, explains Frank, don't have this type of reunion that's really part of our culture. For myself, I bring the culture because I lived [in Italy]. The kids will have something because they lived with me, and they're gonna have some of that culture. But their kids are not gonna have as much. Because it's gonna slip away, little by little. They'll be more not Italian-American, but strictly American. Their name will be Italian, but that's about it. ...Over here I could see it happen that there's people that they are cousins and there's no closeness. People don't even know. I think it's a tragedy. I mean, don't you wanna know who your heritage, who your family come from?? And now, the way I see, it's slipping away. Melilli is slipping away. Brothers now, there's not that closeness. He's got his family, and maybe they see each other once a year. To me, this is a tragedy!  

That feature which aided Italians probably more than any other quality when they come to the United States, their love and protection of the family life, is the one which, if Italian-Americans assimilate into the mainstream American culture too much, could be lost. On the edge of such a fate, the Italian-American ethnic

---

37 Interview with Frank, December 6, 1991.
38 Ibid.
community still exists in Middletown, but it is also grappling with its own preservation.
Bibliography


City of Middletown. "1991 Basic Information about Middletown, Connecticut".


Tomasi, Silvano M. Piety and Power. (New York: Center for Immigration Studies, 1975).
Transcribed Interviews with Members of the Italian-American community of Middletown, Connecticut, U.S.A.

Conducted Fall 1991 in Middletown, CT. by Madeleine Lansky '93
The following are a group of interviews I conducted during the
Fall of 1991 in Middletown, Connecticut. As a junior at Wesleyan, I
was taking a course on the Immigrant City in the United States, and
chose to write my final paper on the Italians of Middletown, entitled
"A Comparative Study of the Ethnic Identity of Italian-Americans in
Middletown, Connecticut before and after World War II". For me
these Italian-Americans play a very prominent role in the identity of
Middletown, while at the same time retaining a distinction that
makes them seem separate from their new homeland, America.
Because I am a Religion major with Folklore and Psychology bents, I
chose to compose the paper mostly of interviews and let the people
speak for themselves. Thus, a rigid historian might not agree with
the validity of the paper. I interviewed a relatively small number of
people, and focused on social issues, such as sense of ethnic and
national identity, religiosity, and expressions of culture, instead of
probing a larger pool of people and putting them into the stricter
confines of historical time.

Information on the topic of Middletown's Italian population can
be a bit scarce. My decision to depend on interviews was not
entirely optional, as I did have at least 20 pages to fill, and the little
facts of daily life are not usually ones that are recorded. For me, the
interesting irony was to examine how such an immigrant community
grew amidst the previous homogeneity of a small, New England town.
Those wishing to find the information that does exist will have the
most luck going through unpublished Honors Theses in the Special
Records section of Olin Library at Wesleyan. The Middletown
Historical Society and Russell Library also can help. I personally
found that seeking out information from members of the community
to be the most satisfying form of research. Inevitably my goal in
writing this paper was to add to and update the writings that already
exist on this topic by discussing the immigration wave that came in
the mid-1950's and its effect on the ethnic identity of the community
as a whole.

Five informants are transcribed in these pages. Only Buddy, my
sixth informant, had been left out because my computer lost him. My
questions and commentary are represented by a "Q". Nearly
everything said was transcribed, and I added notes where the
informant's tone affected the words he or she was saying. Spacing in
the middle of interviews indicates that parts of the tape were
skipped over, or that the informant had changed topics of discussion.

Sebastian "Mike" Marino only has a few lines in these papers. His
interview with me was basically a reiteration of Annino's book and
an explanation of his role in the building of San Sebastian Church.
Mr. Marino has given a number of documented interviews on this
topic so I put the majority of my time into those who had never been
interviewed. Mr. Marino was born in Italy at the turn of the century
but came to the United States as a young boy.

Both Giussepa and Enza have been in the United States for about
20 years. Though not directly related, I find them very similar. Both
of them speak very basic English, and I find this notable because it
indicates that one can exist in Middletown on a daily basis speaking
predominantly in Sicilian. Both Giussepa and Enza immigrated in the
1930's. Sophia co-works with Enza as a cleaning woman. She is first-
generation American but was raised in a very Italian home. She
helped me interview Enza by translating her Sicilian. Then she spoke
about her own life experiences. Both of these women offered me
some very interesting perspectives on the lives of the Italian women
during this time. It was generally very difficult to find female
informants. I also found that the information available focused a
great deal on male achievements. I shut off my tape machine at the
end at Sophia's request. She explained during this time the process
by which Italian families would test the virginity of young brides.

Frank came to the U.S. in the 1950's. He was incredibly
informative about life in Italy, as well as willing to throw some ideas
around with me about the information I was collecting. He has
played a prominent role in many foundations of both Middletown
and of the Italian Community such as City Hall, The Italian Society,
the San Sebastian Church, and more.

I submit here my actual interviews with these informants for the
use of anyone wishing to continue the study of this topic. Much of
the information I collected I left out of my project but still find quite
interesting. Also, as with all immigration groups, this one is
continually evolving and assimilating, and the information recorded
here might not hold true for other, coming times in history.

Madeleine Lansky '93
MIKE

Now, the Italian people, they're electricians, they're carpenters, they're plumbers. They control the building trade. All Italians work in the building trade. They wanted to build the church as economical as possible...so for the first two weeks...So therefore, uh, uh, for the first two weeks they worked for no wages. Starting the third week,...they worked for ...half wages...because they wanted, ...economical...and people are tradesmen. And uh, so then, uh, the sand was donated. The , uh, steamshovel was free, er, uh, we just had to pay the operator ten dollars a day to operated the steam shovel and so that's how we proceeded....On december,december 8th of 1931 we celebrated our first mass downstairs.

SOPHIA AND ENZA

Q: Did a lot of people come when you came?

E: Already, a lot of people here. [speaks in Sicilian] S: A lot of people came at that time. At one point or other they couldn't come to America. All the, what do you call it? were closed. But when she came it was in the beginning. E:[to Sophia in Sicilian] S: to E--Yeah, Yeah.--[listens to E talk, with Italian co-worker Luigi joining in]---they started coming in '54. She didn't come in a group, she came with her family, OK? Just her children and her. E: My husband already come. Q: when did your husband come here E: Septembre S: and she came later E: the day before Christmas. Q: What did you think when you came? [S translates this to: How did you feel when you got off the plane?] E: I don't know because [continues in Sicilian]..... S: listens, then--She came in the evening. Q: Was it cold? E: Oh yeah! Cold, a lot of snow. Q: Had you ever seen snow before? E: No. [explains using italian that Melville is very different from Middletown] In the beginning, too hard. Over there, that's my momma [speaks in Sicilian]. In the beginning, too hard. S: But then she got used to it. E: On the middle de January, go for work. S: By January she already had a job. Q:Where? E: Eh, [speaks in Sicilian] S: that's the sewing factory. E: It's closa to my house, you know? I work over there many years. Q: Did you like? E: Oh yeah. That's my job. Cause in Italy it's my steady job. Q: So you were a seamstress in Italy? You came here and did the same thing. E: Yeah. For many years. [speaks in Sicilian]. Q: were there many Italians working? E: Oh yeah. S: [at same time]All of them! [Both laugh, including Luigi]. E: Even some born in America but still work
there.  S: Even if--like I'm of Italian descent-- I worked as a seamstress too. It was just, most of us were Italian. Either they had just come, or, you know, we lived here. I mean, I was born here and raised here. My first job was sewing.  Q: So did you speak English at work, or Sicilian  E: Sicilian

Q: Did you like Mercy High School for your children?  E: It's a nice school. My kids no hava problem. Go to school. ....It I like, for me, I like it.  Q to E: Do you think they stay more Italian?  S: No. Not at all. It's a strict school, but you mix! Like at St Sebastians, most of them were Italian.  E: Before, but now...  S: Now, they can't get enough people to pay for it. Tuitions way up high now, even in the lower grades.  E: My daughter now that she hava two kids, she sends them to St. Sebastian School. Because they like it.  S: they have a little bit more discipline.  E: Si publica school, no, the school no call and talk to the mother, father.

Q to E: What was your life like in Melile?  E: [speaks to Sophia in Sicilian] S: You tell her. [listens] The women didn't work out of the house. They stayed home.  E: [first in Sicilian, then...:] ...take care of the kids, the familia, everything.  Q: Did you sew at home?  E: yeah. Sometime with kids. [??]
Q: Did you like Melile?  E: [smiling] Oh yeah! [Luigi laughs] That's my country. That's my home. All the time, some time you know, it's going in Italy, everyday.  Q: why did you family come here?  E: Some time, thats a come over there because [speaks in Sicilian] S: Actually, for a better life.  E: My husband come here one year before my family. But still I no like. ...I've been twenty years away now. It's sad. [sounding sadder] Now i justo go for la visita. Because if I stay over there--Already three kids are married.  Q: So either you stay with your kids here, or you go back to Italy.  E: Now, just vacation..... I have sister, a brother, but still my family is my kids.

Q: It must have been hard when your mother died and you were all the way over here.  E: Oh yeah. So hard. [speaks in Sicilian] I missa so much.  Q: What do you do when you miss Italy?  E: I cry [she tears up].
Q: Do you eat a special food?  E: A speciala food, it dependede the family--no. One day it's special the other days, no no. I missa becausa thats a my country. Thatsa talk my language. Here I understand just a little bit because I no speak English good. Too Hard. Over there, I go doctor, go--all places--my language. Sometimes I need to ask my daughter, my son, go to doctor [and help me with the
English]. E: Sometimes I talk to my husband: When the kids are grown, go to Italy! Sometimes! [jokingly shakes fist out of frustration] (laughs). Q: Will you go back when you are older? E: I don't know. I don't think so (sad). I'll go for vacation S: She's got her sister and her brother there but her whole family is here..

S: We're used to our own ways. I mean, I'm Italian but I don't think I could live in Italy. Italy's different. E: Especially Melile. S: It's a small town.

Luigi explains why he likes The Italian Society: I go there a couple hours every night. Sometimes I call up my brother, sometimes we go together. I go. Sometimes I play cards. Get something to drink. You know, for a couple hours. Q: What sort of groups do women have? S with E speaking Sicilian in background: Sacred Heart. That's a ladys' club. E in Sicilian: for the women of Melile S to E: Not everybody is from Melille! S: You have to be directly descended. Your name has to be Italian. Now my name is Polish. I would be an honorary member. I could never join. It doesn't make any difference that my maiden name was Italian. Q: What kind of activities do the sacred heart people do? S: they go out together. [E talks in Sicilian] S: She says they raise funds for charity. S: I used to be an honorary member. We used to have meetings, we used to work for the cancer drive, they had bingo games. It's just a club, ya know? There wasn't anything dramatic about it. You just got together; that was it.
S: There's no Italian woman that's going to leave her house and go to a meeting every night [E seems to agree in Italian]. Q to E: Does your husband belong to the Italian society. E: No. My husband belonga just home. [laughs] Because my husband work so hard he come home tired. Justo eat, look at television, take a shower.
Q: What do the wives think of the husbands who spend every night at a club. S: Don't ask me questions like that! I'm not the right person!

S: It [the Festa of San Sebastian] was one of the major holidays for the Italian people that came back at the time my mother and my grandmother came. Q: Why do you think it was so important to them? S: There was very little to do. I mean there was no T.V. There was nothing. Every Italian holiday was a big family affair. A Christmas couldn't go by that we didn't go to my grandmother's. We had to be there Christmas, there was no two ways about it. We had to be there for Easter. Everything was family. It's not that way any more. Q: Why don't you think it's that way anymore. S: Because
everybody works, everybody's got something. I mean, you go to school, you learn different things, you mingle with other nationalities. Now my husband was Polish. Their customs are different than my customs. Q: Do you think [Italians] put that same kind of emphasis on family in Italy? S: Yes. This all came from Italy. I mean, my Grandmother had eight children. And she domincered them all. They married who she said, they did what she wanted done. I mean, if you didn't abide by her rules, you just got cut off. Qto E: Does this sound familiar? E laughs and nods her head yes. Then E talks in Sicilian; S listens and says to E: Same thing here! S to me: When she was going with her husband, he couldn't go and pick her up if nobody was home. E babbles and S says no no no. S: Now it's different. Just an example. My grandmother had so many sons and when my aunt got engaged, finally got engaged, when they went to the movies, or if he took her out, they used to make a parade, everybody. The boyfriend and girlfriend would be in front, and everybody else would be in back. One day my uncle--he was more modern, more Americanized--I was just a kid--and he took her hand. My oldest aunt went and hit him and broke his wristwatch. S: Now it's completely different. E: The boys come in cars, different places, different people, it's different now. S: I can remember my aunts, you know. And when there was a wedding, you didn't go cater, everybody cooked. [E lists Italian foods -"gelato"-]. They used to cook for days. S to E: Not now! I'm talking about when my aunt got married. S to Interviewer: My wedding was catered, it was different. I really broke all bonds with my grandmother because I didn't marry an Italian. She wasn't too happy with me. We didn't cut it off. We were close, but she wasn't happy with my choice. There was some italian guy that had gone to them and asked for my hand, so to speak. And my grandmother and my grandfather called me -- because my mother passed away they ruled the roost--if he wanted to ask me out, he should have asked ME out. I just couldn't go along with things. They were too close. So they really put up a big fuss when I got married. This one wasn't going to go to my wedding. I still got married.

Q: Do you think an Italian would feel constricted the way you seem to by the Italian ways? S: The ones my age felt the same way I did. Q: Even ones that came to America from Italy? S: They still followed their parent's--whatever you'd call it. Now it's different. E: In Italy [continues in Sicilian].....S: She says like I'm telling you. Now the kids like her daughter that came when she came, they feel the way we do. They have to live with them and they have to make their own choices. [E nods her head in confirment] She is happy that
they love each other. These arranged marriages as far as I'm concerned are for the birds. Q to E: Yeah? E with some thought: yeah.

E speaks to S in Sicilian, who says: Now she's saying, say this guy saw her and thought Oh boy I want to take her out or whatever. They'd have to go to the mother and they'd ask. If the father and mother said no, they wouldn't even tell her. Q: That's a lot of control! Both E and S laugh. E: Before, I don't like, but now, tropo libre. S: I personally think as liberal as I've gotten, I think things have gone just a little bit out of hand. I think there should be a happy medium. E talks in Sicilian to S. S: I don't wanna put that on tape. Laughing. Turn off the tape.

FRANK
November 15, 1991

Q: Why did you come to the U.S.? F: I had no choice. My family was here. You see, it all started when my sister got married to somebody that came from Middletown to Sicily. And so my sister came over here and my mother and my father, my parents, after five years, my parents were able to come, ya know? As immigrants. I stayed over there. They came over here in '63. I came in '65. I was going to school over there. So it was a chain reaction, you know, first my sister came and then my parents, and then I came because I said "hey, everybody's comin over here". Q: So you wanted to stick with your family? F: Yeah. When I came at that time I was single. So I just came. Later on, you know, we stayed in Middletown. And I went to school. School at night and work during the day. I went to night school. Q: Was it college? F: yeah. I went to night school to get my High School diploma, and then I went to [design school] during the day and worked at night. So I got my degree as an architectural draftsman. And then I took night courses and studied, you know, appraising and design. I got into the real estate business so I got my real estate licence and different types of appraising, so I thought that was good, and increasing my education in the same field. Now I am an assistant accessor for the city. Q: Did you know English when You got here? F: No. Q: That's impressive! F: After school I married. And there were some hard times, you know, but being young, being nineteen years old, I used to have to go out and talk with some people and go to school and you have to force yourself to understand. And from that point on things just got better
and better. Q: So you studied English in school? F: Well, there was not a subject, English, but I didn't take any class as per such but, you know, I just learned the subject. You know, English, Math, History, you learn it when you go to high school but I didn't take English as a second language. I just picked it up. Q: What kind of people did you go to night school with? F: Most of them were American people. American people getting their high school diploma. And they went to school at night to pick it up. You see there was adult education classes for a lot of people from other countries to learn the language, where they teach you the language. I didn't go to that class. That was kind of a an elementary type of--you know, how to say "Hi", you know, "how are you?" but I didn't go to that. I did some English before I came over here in Italy when I was going school over there. I didn't know how to speak it but it became a little bit easier for me to read it. It was easier than speaking it. Q: Do you speak Italian now, in general? F: Um Hm. Yes we do speak Italian [note we]. Q: And in your home? F: well, it's kind of a mix--we kind of make our own language. Like in between. Few words in English, few words in Italian. Everybody in the house speaks English. But my mother doesn't speak English. I speak Italian to her. My in-laws speak Italian. Q: Your wife is from Melille also? F: Right. She came over here when she was younger, though. M: Did your families know one another? F: Right. Yes they did. It's a small town so everybody knows everybody. Yeah, they came over here in 1955 [wife's family]. So I came here ten years later. And we met over here. Q: How did you meet her? F: I think it was at a dance. And, You know, I was twenty and she was sixteen. And we met. We went out five years before we got married. We met under the usual circumstances, you know.

F: We do have our Italian ways because, like I said, her parents did come from there, and of course with me coming from Italy. For her it's not a big shift because let's say you had an Italian it wouldn't be too big a shift marrying an Italian like me and for her it hasn't been too much of a difference. We adjusted, you know. For me, at that age also it was easy to adjust to the American style. Q: Why? F: Well, because if you come here and you're nineteen years old, you're still young enough to pick of some American ways. Some. I'm not saying you become an American. You get used to some of the hot dog style. Q: Do you think Middletown helped or hurt in that respect of adjusting to America? F: I think Middletown was great to adjust because you don't go from a room that is ten below zero to a room that is ninety degrees. You go to a place where there is the Italian
and it's like you're blending in. You pick up little by little. It's not like going into a city where there is nothing or nobody from your background. Makes it definitely a lot easier. In a city like this.

Q: What Italian ways that were in Mellile do you see in Middletown?
F: one of the ways that you see that it's still around is the way that families get together during certain holidays. There's a lot of family unity. Brothers and sisters and cousins. Over here, the American way, you don't see that closeness between cousins. O.K.? It's like, now you see 'em, there's no—but over there brothers and sisters and cousins, they are, it's like being one big family. I have five brothers and sisters. Three brothers and two sisters. And everybody, all of our family, all my cousins, we grew up being like brothers and sisters. There is that closeness. The family ties, it's a lot—and when we come over here that was still going on. Even if you came in this country between the families my father's sister's kids they were here when I came over here and we were close just like brothers and sisters. When I see other families, you know, they don't have that closeness. Like coming in a town like Middletown, you do keep some of the traditions. Like that closeness and, as an example, great church and you know, you go to that church and it's Italian and you have the same people that you know every time you go to church, and you know, it's not that you wouldn't know who's there. You go and there's five hundred people there, you probably know four hundred and ninety nine. So coming to Middletown has really been a big plus. For the fact that you still get some of the old tradition and you get into the American tradition without a big shift.

Q: So do you belong to Saint Sebastian? F: I belong to Saint Sebastian. I belong to the Italian Society of Middletown, and I'm a past president from the society. That's been another point of reunion for the families from Middile. Italian Society of Middletown, we have like 12 hundred members. Just Middletown. There are a lot of members, and they all have to be Italians to belong in the society.

Q: About how many do you think are from Mellile? F: They're not all from Mellile, but ninety-nine percent have heritage from Mellile. Either they came from Mellile when they were younger, or their parents came. We have at this point I'd say about twelve hundred. There were more at one time. That's also been a point of reference for people coming from Italy. Where, you know, you go to the club, or social affairs, even for Carnivale and Mardi Gras, we have the same type of holiday we did in Italy. We have our annual Colombus affair. So it gives us a reason to keep up our heritage. We have affairs there. We have our annual festival every year. We started in 1980. That was our first year that we did the festival. We try to
keep some activities that go back. We have the Feast of Saint Sebastian, and that's also something that becomes part of Mellile because the Feast of Saint Sebastian if you look in the church in Mellile, it's probably four times as big as this one, but this is a copy of that. If you look at the church, we try to copy the style of church that we have over there. And they have the Feast of Saint Sebastian over there too which is in bigger scale over there. Over here it's just Italians from Mellile, and it's just four days of really big celebration.

Q: What's it like here? What kind activities?
F: Well, we have the religious part of it. The main thing is the religious part of it because people that honor Saint Sebastian, they believe in that saint, that he's done a lot of, uh, he receives a lot of petitions. People that they have problems and they pray to Saint Sebastian to help 'em with their problems. So they come in and honor Saint Sebastian. And then the other part we have a festival. You know, we have food, celebrate. It's a religious celebration. You know, of course you have the foods and all the goodies that kind of, you know, get the people together. That's the idea, is that people—even if they're people from Hartford or out of state, I mean there's buses coming from New Jersey, from Boston, Massachusetts—they come to celebrate.

Q: And is the statue carried around?
F: The statue is carried around one block around the church. Where in the city, they carry it around the whole city. Over here, because of, I don't know, safety and not to block off all the streets. I think back in probably about fifty years ago they used to carry Saint Sebastian a lot larger scale than it is today. Because that feast started way back. They started it in a house before the church was built. And then they developed into the church and the activities that there is now. At one time they used to go around the city and they used to carry and that was probably by hand. And then for a period of time they didn't take the statue out. Now it's probably been the last ten years that, you know, the bishop, you know, he wanted to take the statue out. So actually, it's just so people feel we're having the same feast as we had in the old country, you know what I'm saying? And it is in a way. There's a lot of feelings towards Saint Sebastian. So having to do the same things as we used to do, we try to keep the tradition. And our kids would never know what we did in Italy if we don't do something about it. It's on a small scale. But at least it gives them that point of view. When somebody talks about—they have enudi, they call them, where people run with flowers, they run from the club. All dressed in white, they run and bring they flowers to Saint Sebastian. Kids that were born over here and they didn't see that over there, they don't know what that is. And in the first year that they see that over
here--there are a lot of people all doing that at the same time, all allligned. The first time you see that [you think] "Jesus!" [what are they doing]. And it's touching. It's touching and it's impressive. Because you see some of these people and they're really crying. They're crying. Because they believe it. It's something that comes out of you, you know? Q: And so Saint Sebastian is the patron saint of....? F: The patron saint of Mellile. Q: And of Middletown? F: Well, of the Italian people of Middletown. Q: And he is the saint of what exactly? F: he's the saint of--what's behind it is that he is a martyr and he got to, you know, to protect the Christians he died, and he was abused many times, you know, by the soldiers. He stood up, you know, and he gave his life in order to work for and protect his religion. Q: So he's a protector? F: He's a protector. Q: Is there a lot of devotion to the Madonna as well? F: oh yes. There is. I mean, this is the patron saint of Mellile. Of course there's a lot of devotion to Madonna. Christ and the Madonna they come first and the saints--whether it's Saint Joseph--if he's our patron we're devoting our prayers to Saint Sebastian. Whereas in other cities--say in Hartford--they have the Saint Lucy, because a lot of people from Hartford, they come from Syracuse. Santa Lucia. Q: so every place has its own saint. F: That's right. Q: What do you remember about Mellile most? F: Well, what I remember is that I grew up there and it was a small town. Basically it was working on the fields. And back about thirty years ago, some industries came around and they kind of changed the economy of the city. Before there was nothing else but, you know, people had a piece of land. It was theirs or they were leasing it. They were working on their land. They were producing and they were working on their land. And they had their livelihood out of having animals and olives and almonds and grain and so forth. Thirty years ago, industry started to pop up, right on the coast, because we are about probably five miles from the sea. So right along the coast there's a lot of industries now. They came and they kind of changed the area and even the livelihood. Before they used to work at home but thirty years ago they used to go and work in industries. And the problem with the industries is that there's a lot of chemicals and they damaged the area as far as the country [goes?]. And so a lot of people went because they were getting paid. Now there was a better living. Where you have to work for your food and your animals and your stuff like a farmer, O.K.? They'd go to work and they'd get a paycheck home. So a lot of people felt good about that. But with all those industries, they damaged a lot of the fruits and the land itself. So that people that were still into that kind of business, into the farming business, they got damaged from all those
industries. So everybody tried to get out of it. Now it's gotten to the point where there's probably a hand-full of farmers left. Nobody's using the land anymore so that life is more devoted into factories just like it is over here.
Q: Why did you come to Middletown? G: Cause my father already here. I gotta a brother and sister, you know, I got all the family. That's why I come to Middletown. Because all the people from Melille comin to Middletown. Q: Who was the first person from your family to come here? G: My father. My father come over here in 1920. The first time, anyway. He come in 1920, stay about for three years, bring with him brother and sister, y'know? And after he left his family over there, y'know, his father die, he got big family, he come back over there, and after this he left and marry, you know. And in 1954, after the World War Two--after the war anyways--started the immigration, you know, I say "Well, I wanna come back in America [1st time, I think], I gotta brother and sister over there, no?" In the summertime, you know, I call up all the kids and one by one, everybody's over here now. Still I got a brother over here anyway. Q: Do you back there often? G: I go backa twice. Well, you know, it cost a lot of money.

Q: Did you marry in Italy or in the U.S.? G: Yes. I single. I come back over there in 1962. I marry. Now I gotta five kids! Born over here, every one. Q: Do you speak Italian or English in your home. G: Home, we speak dialect. Sicilian. Q: And you speak English...? G: English but somebody---well, I try to pass anyway. I don't speak good like you, anyway. Q: What did you do when you were in Italy? G: When I'ma kids, I work in the farm. My father have farm, I work in the farm. After, they start building an oil refinery, I work in the factory--oil refinery--for a little while before I come in the United States. Q: Did you like it in Melille? G: Well, I born there, I grew up over there, you know? I like--you know what happened, is now I got a family over here, you know? Q: Do you wish you could go back? G: Go back for visit, but I don't wanna leave my kids here, no. My kids go over there, my wife take everyone and go over there. See where I born, look, you know, go Roma. My wife, she gotta cousin over there in Roma. Q: So, you're happy in Middletown? G: Yeah. Q: It's all right? G: yeah. Q: What do you think of it? G: Well, just I think I do a lot of sacrifice, for good of my family, you know, I work two jobs the first day I come in over here! Q: What's your daytime job? G: I work at a factory. And after that I work over here [janitor at night]. Q: So how many hours do you work a week? G: A sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours--a day, I'm talking about a day! Week, you talking about eighty minimum, minimum eighty hours. After that it might be more--eighty five, ninety, one hundred! Q: Why do you
work so hard? G: I gotta five kids and my wife a never work. Cause
I gotta one boy, he's a sick. He's twenty one, and he's in bed all the
time, she take care of him, you know? Otherwise...Well, I gotta work
two jobs causa my wife never work.

Q: The younger one go Mercy High School. You know Mercy High
School? Private School. Anyway, everyone go there. That's why I
work two job, because it cost a lot of money. Cause he start at Saint
Sebastian School. Cause my wife when we first come in says, "Oh, I
gotta send my kids to the Catholic School". More discipline, more--
you know. The first one [child], and after, the second one, go to Saint
Sebastian School. And after they goto the Mercy and Xavier School.
And all the work I do the money go to the school! (laughs) All of the
money I am making go to the school, to the Saint Sebastian School,
and after Mercy and Xavier School!

Q: Do you ever attend the Festa? G: Yeah. The Saint Sebastian
Festa? Q: What do you think about that? G: Well, it's tradition, you
know? You have the enudi--you know the one who run--have you
ever seen that? Q: Where people run for the statue? G: Yeah!
Everybody's dressed up with the white clothes. That's a tradition,
you know, it come from Mellile, come over here. Q: Is it exactly the
Q: How do you think you'd feel about Middletown if all those things
didn't exist? So many Italian people and the Festa. How do you
think you would do here? G: Well, you know, before the Italian
people live all down Main Street, you know, you got so many street
but now it's Italian people is more all over, you know? Before--I
don't know--somabody told me, my daddy told me, before when you
got Italian people in one section, you know what I mean? You put on
lights, you [I don't understand his phrase here], just like in old time
in Mellile. Q: Oh, at Marchese's [the creator of the statue of Saint
Sebastian who immigrated to Middletown in the turn of the century]
house? G: Yeah, Marchese. Q: On Green Street? Before the building
of the church? G: Well, I was said before. Q: In general? G: In
general. Before all the Italian people from Mellile were in one
section, you know? Now, not down Main Street. All over. Q: Did
your father like it when they were all in one section? G: Well, you
know you say to everybody "Hey, How are you!!" Q: Just like in
Mellile, huh? G: Just like in Mellile! All the people--especially the
old generation, you know, it's a ritual. Come for the seventh hour
[did I transcribe this phrase correctly?]. Q: Do you think people from
Mellile miss Mellile a lot? G: Well, you know what happen. Now all the people gone. Now most of the people is born over here. Italian-American, you know? Cause, right now nobody comin here no more. Q: Why not? G: Well, I don't know, sometimes the immigration change a lots. You know, matter fact, a few people I know want to go back. They don't want to stay here. Q: Why? G: Well, it's different over there now. Why come here when can live like over here? I know a few family come back [to Mellile] Q: Are there any things you see Italians doing in Middletown that are the same things Italians do in Mellile? [G confused by question] Like things that have carried over from there to here? G: I can't understand that. Q: Like, even though people are here, they're still Italian. G: Yes. Q: What do you think makes them still Italian? G: Well, like myself. I'm not born over here. I can say I'm Italian because I'm born over there. Like myself. My kids are born over here, you know? I mean, I'm Italian because I'm born over there, but I lika America too cause that's my second country. You know what I mean? Cause, you know, this is my second country because all my kids is over here. Q: So it's because your kids are here that America's your country? G: Well, all my kids are here. But I lived over here for thirty years now.

Q: Does your wife like it here? G: Well, like, yes. But still--because got a father and a sister, you know, [she's] got relative. The father call once and a while and [G makes a mock weeping sound, then laughs]. Q: She misses here family a lot? G: Oh yeah. M: Would she like to move back to Mellile. G: If no hava kids over here, say, "O.K., when I retire, come back there". Because, you know, born over there. But no, I can't leave my kids over here. For a visit, maybe.

Q: But now for good? G: Not for living, no. Q: You're kids are really important to you, huh? G: (smiling) Yes! My kids is my life. Q: I see many immigrants working really hard for their kids. G: Oh yeah. Well, I told you. I worka two jobs. Since the first day I come in. I pay for school. I try to get a good education for my kids. It's all I can do. Q: What do you think your kids will do when they're all grown up? Well, I gotta nice kids. You know, no give no problem, no trouble. Everybody home. But the one who married, no! (Laughs). All the rest. Manny's almost twenty-three and he's at home. The other of my daughters is twenty-two--still at home. I lika keepa home! Keepa with me. But the married kid go! Q: So the family stays strong? G: Unity, you know? The family gotta stay together. Don't want one over here, one over there. You know what I mean? My daughter the one that's married every Sunday come home. My wife say: "Maria, you come over here and eat today because you
look too thin!" (he giggles). She tells her to come over all the time.
And every night, she call her.
FRANK
December 6, 1991

Q: Is going to Mercy a big deal for Italians? F: Yes. Q: Why? F: That's actually a Catholic oriented school. And there has been some problems in the past with the Middletown public high school. There's been, you know, some fights and, you know, some racial problems. But not now. There's been some problems. But I don't think that is the really reason. One of the reason is that the education is--education at Middletown High School is just as good--but they go to Mercy and they are more strict. You can't skip school without--you know, if my daughter didn't go to school--my daughter went to Mercy--I get a phone call. Or if she's not doing good in a subject. Stay after school. You pay for it. It's a private school. So you pay for it but there's a lot of good factors, you know?--if you could afford it. Q: But it seems like people who don't even have very well paying jobs--some people have two jobs to send their kids to Mercy--it's really important to them. F: Let's put it this way. Let me just give you an example. My son went to Xavier. Which is the same thing. And the reason why he went to Xavier was because his class, there's about 15 boys in his class, and every one of them went to Xavier. So he went to Xavier to be with his friends. And I said "Wait a minute, that school's gonna cost me twenty-five hundred dollar a year! And if you go to Middletown High School it not gonna cost me anything." "No! I wanna go over there, all my friends are over there!" So, why we do everything is for the kids. I struggle myself to send him to Xavier. But I don't regret it because if you're nota good student, you go to Middletown High School and you could get lost. You could very well be a senior and don't know how to read. You know what I'm saying? At the same time, you could be top of the shelf. You could be better than any student coming out of Xavier or any other school. There is the opportunities. The reason that so many people send their kids to private school is to kind of protect them from getting into the wrong habits.

Q: Do you think parents want their kids to be involved in religion [Catholicism]. Like, is that a motivation for sending them there? F: Yes. Definitely. I think that is an over-all feeling that--in fact, sometimes they have a mass at Saint Sebastian at ten o'clock, where they invite all the freshman class, let's say. So there is that Catholic-oriented, uh... Q: putting it in the new generation? F: yeah. It's like, they're trying to guide the kids to be Catholic, into the habit of
going to church on Sunday and do whatever the religion tells you to, you know? Q: Why do you think there has been such a long streak of Italian mayors? F: I don't see any other reason that Middletown--it's ably populated by Italians. So if you have a Garafalo running, and he's well known in the Italian community, he has a certain number of votes guaranteed. Not that every Italian is gonna give them the vote. But most of the Italians get a vote. Also, don't forget, that in the last few years, there's been two parties, the Republican and the Democrat. Now, whose the party going to represent for mayor, to get a better chance at election? They gonna present an Italian. So, regardless of who's gonna win, they gonna present two. So, one Italian's gonna be a mayor. I think there have been a few elections where it's been an Italian against and Irish or an Italian against someone else, and it's been the Italian that's won the election. Because there's so many Italians that it's so easy to win the election if the Italian runs against another nationality. There's close to 30,000 Italian-descended people in Middletown in a town of 42,000. So that is a hell of a majority. Q: What percent of the Italians are Mellilese? F: I'd safely say ninety percent. Safely.

Q: If family members decided to stay in Mellile, what were reasons that they usually stayed and didn't immigrate to America? F: Probably up to about twenty-five, thirty years ago, very seldom you had a family that had the possibility to come over here. Most of the family that had the possibility did come. And the few that didn't come at that time it was because they had farmland and they just didn't wanna leave it behind. Like my father had a farm over there--he had a lot of land--and we didn't economically suffer. We were, you know, average, middle class, like we are here. We didn't improve by coming over here. Because it's like a chain reaction. My sister came her, my mother came and then I came. A lot of people came and--they immigrated to this country because there was not too much work over there. But it's not automatic that anybody coulda come over here. They had to be approved by the immigration office. And there were some strict regulations to come over here. It wasn't open to anybody. Nobody couldn't just get up in the morning and say "I'm leaving, I'm going to America." You couldn't. Q: What were the regulations like? F: See, there was different steps. As an example, if you went to Italy--even now, not anybody could come here--and you get married with somebody over there, you could come here right away. Within two months you could have your immigration approved. As long as there isn't any problem, like
you've been arrested for different stuff, you know. So, the closest the relationship, the better the chance that the faster you come. So, if somebody came over here in Italy thirty years ago, theirs husbands got married and they could come within a month or two. Now that person that got married, she coulda called the parents, and the parents could come quicker. But the parents, if they had any other kids, now they could call the kids to come, all right? If you live in this country and your brother lived in Italy and you wanted to have your brother come over, between a brother and brother, and brother and sister, things were not too good. You had to wait a long time. Right now, if I have a brother, and I want him to come over here, right now things are shut down. You won't be able to come. The immigration is very difficult right now. Q: The possibility of immigration changes in waves? F: It changes in waves. Q: Who controls it? F: I guess the economy controls it. It's controlled by the government to see if they need anybody or they don't. Right now, it's pretty much shut down. But there was a streak of people coming, that they had brothers and sisters, and it was, I think, in 1954. There was a tremendous amount of people came between 1954, 1955, 1956. And most of them, they had brothers and sisters over here. They wanted to come before, so they had the paperwork all ready. Maybe for five, ten years. And also, that was right after the war, you know? Italy, 1945, after the war, you know, the economy was not too good. O.K.? So a lot of people wanted to get out of there. They had all this paperwork done by they couldn't just come. In '54, things opened up. As a matter fact, if I talk to people who came here in less than forty years, a lot of them came around that time. Q: How long did that streak last? F: In 1954, '55, a lot came, and then it slowed down, but it lasted a good ten years. Until about 1965 or '70. And then after 1970 there hasn't been much coming anymore.

F: After 1970, then it became where people didn't wanna come here anymore. Even if they had the possibility. They don't wanna come. Like I have a brother, and he could come over here, but he don't want to. You know, the economy got better over there, and the big gap that existed between this country and Italy became less. So now, the only people that wanted to come over here is to be with the family.

F: Immigration opened up the doors for a good ten years and there was a large number of people. Q: Why did they open the doors? F:
I would say it has something to do with after the war, there must have been an agreement. It's unbelievable that it's nothing by individuals but power--state level. I mean, this is government stuff that probably--right after the war they must of signed an agreement: O.K., we'll have so many people come in. There were quite a few people. And I'm talking about just from one city. Everybody from Mellile came over here. But it happen not just over here, because in New Britain you get people from another part of Sicily. You know, you go to New Haven, and there is a lot of Italians there, from Calabria or near Naples. If the beginners come in one section, everybody follows that person. You go to each town that you go to where there's a lot of Italians, you go to Bridgeport, you go to New York--you probably see more people from Palermo in Bronx than you see in Palermo. Why'd this people came over here? What was the reason? Because if I was here, and my brother came, where would he go? He's gonna come to me.

Q: I have a theory to try out on you. In a thesis [Marino] I read on this topic, the author talked about the Southern Italian agricultural economy, how life was hard. He said that life was so hard that basically, you didn't really reach out to your community, you stayed within your own family and really only trusted your family. And then he went on to say that the whole phenomenon of an Italian community--really depending on each other--happen in America when the foe was more America rather than other Italians. Do you understand what I mean? F: Yeah. That's probably right, up to a point. There is some truth to that. As far as families in Italy stand among themselves, you go back quite a few years for that to be true. Let's put it this way: that is not something that happen during my lifetime. So what he's saying in that book is probably something that you go back fifty years ago. O.K.? Where families were really sticking amongst themselves and didn't trust anybody. As a matter of fact those were the times when somebody--you, being a young girl, in order to get married you had to stay in a closed family. So that's what he's talking about. That's way behind my times. But there's some truth to that.

Q: I ask, because I'm trying to figure out if there's an Italian way and an Italian-American way. Are they different? F: I would say so. Don't you think that there's an Italian way, and an Italian-American way, but the Italian-American way, that's actually an American way? But because he's an Italian, and he's doing it the American way, it's called the Italian-American way. But I think that a lot of people, their parents came over, they were young, and had
kids over here, all right? As an example, you get my kids, that they are Italian descendents, but they grew up here. And they Americanized themselves. They're going to have very little of Italian culture in them. For myself, I bring the culture because I lived there. The kids will have something because they lived with me, and they're gonna have some of that culture. But their kids are not gonna have that as much. Because it's gonna slip away, little by little. They'll be more not Italian-American, but strictly American. Their name will be Italian, but that's about it. Q: So is this idea of an ethnic community a real thing or is it an illusion? F: Uh, it's not an illusion. But it's life that brings you to this, it's not something that you create. I mean, it's like, if you come here from Italy, and we like to have certain things the way we had in Italy, that creates the ethnic group. But the second generation, the third generation, they gonna lose that. That's not gonna stay with them. Because my kids right now, they've seen what I've, you know, what we eat, the kind of, you know, how we have our holidays. On the holidays, it's a custom that, you know, the whole family, we all get together. I believe that the following generation, they're not gonna do that. I don't think they're gonna do that! We always say that, you know, brothers and sisters, we all get together, one holiday we all go there, the other holiday we all go here. Even our cousins. And I could see they being Italian, but the next generation down, they're not doing this. They don't have this type of reunion that it's really part of our culture. Q: How do you feel about that? F: I couldn't live without (sounds sad). To have this way--we grew up this way. To my kids it probably don't mean anything. But to us, because we had all this reunion and we just carried it over here, so not to have this is like we missing something. But for the young people, what is there to miss? For the new generations? Q: Do you think it's a tragedy that this is the case? F: I think it's a tragedy to lose it because I hate to see when a son of mine a cousin of [his] and sometimes, because there's no that closeness anymore, everything starts to spread out, and you're gonna be fifteen, twenty years old and you're gonna say: "Oh! We're cousins!" You find out, where, I grew up, I knew who my first cousin, second cousins all were. I knew who my relatives were. Where over here I could see it happen where there's people that they are cousins and there's no closeness. People don't even know. I think it's a tragedy. I mean, don't you wanna know who your heritage, who your family come from?? And now, the way I see, it's slipping away. Mellile is slipping away. Brothers now, there's not that closeness. He's got his family, and maybe they see each other once a year. To me that is a tragedy. Q: Do you see any way of
stopping it? F: I wish I, I wish I knew [sounds sad, bewildered]. It's unfortunate that the only time that people think about stopping something like this is when something tragic happens, and then everyone come together. But until something tragic happens, there is no need of each other like that, you know? Everyone runs their life, and there is not that closeness. Probably you consider them as a neighbor, I mean, today you see 'em, tomorrow you don't. You don't care anything about it. To me, I think that is what keeps harmony, what keeps people happy too. You know, because there is times in life when you need somebody close to you. And you could have friends or you could have boyfriends or girlfriends, all kinds of relationships, but nobody like somebody who actually has your own blood. There's nobody like that! Sometimes when you most need some affection like--the only one who can give to you is a brother or a sister or a cousin. Someone who comes from the same family. But, if you're introduced to somebody who's your cousin but you haven't seen them for forty years, could you be close to that person?

Q: What replaces this in people's lives? If they don't have this family thing to the degree that you do, what takes it's place? F: I don't know, that's a good question. I think people, they get very involved into--I don't know if it's part of the economy, the life the way it is, and people getting involved to just work and you know, try to survive. Maybe back then, money and the economy was not as important as it is today.

Q: But life in Sicily was hard. F: It was hard! But money was not important. It was not important that you couldn't go out and buy a car or suit. I mean, a main reason not to do--people lived for what they had and just for--you know, by having a small house, having one room and probably having the whole family staying in one room. They didn't look for anything--they didn't work four jobs trying to, "O.K., I'm going to go out and buy myself a palace." Maybe now people are involved in too many things. Q: Is that an American way, do you think? F: I don't think it's an American way. If you go to Italy, like I say, things are the same.

Q: Could you tell me anything about the Sacred Heart group? F: Sacred Heart? I know that there's an organization, but it's just a organization within the church. They don't have only one. They have the Sacred Heart Society, the Holy Name Society, the Daughter of Sons of Italy Society. It's just a group of ladies, that they run some church affairs. I don't really know what kind of affairs they run, or what is the principal purpose of having the society. Q: Is it at
all similar to the Italian Society? F: No, not really. This is more a religious meeting, you know? It’s like the one we have the Saint Sebastian committee, you know we have the Feast of Saint Sebastian, and the Sacred Heart is just another committee. The Italian Society is a place where Italians can get together, and they also used to get some financial support, some moral support, you know, some different kinda help. Q: Do you think if a woman wanted to join she could? F: Oh, we have woman. Q: Oh! I thought it was a fraternity. F: See, it’s a mutual benefit society. The reason why it’s called Mutual Benefit Society is at one time, when people were sick, they used to get so much a week to help them out because they were sick and they couldn’t work. And for people who have died--up to today we have a sort of a life insurance, all the members when they die, their families get two thousand dollars. The Garibaldi--well, the Italian Society--it has a different scope than the Sacred Heart does.

F: If you ever put this thing [paper] together, I’d like to read it. Q: O.K. F: And maybe suprise myself with some of the stuff that comes out. You don’t realize--you never talk about it, you know?
....What I’m saying is not the fact that everybody would agree, but it’s my point of view. And it’s interesting, because if you be talking to three or four different people, and you get my point of view and their point of view, there’s gonna be somewhere that we all probably gonna say the same thing. You know, you get somebody like Mr. (Mike) Marino who’s been here for so many years, and he’s talked to hundreds and hundreds of different people, and different ideas--so you get a different picture of the Mellilese than from me. Because, you know, I came from the old country, and grew up there. So I have a different picture than somebody that came here when he was two years old. He grew up here! I have something that I remember about the other country, but some people don’t have anything, they just remember the country through what the parents used to tell them. And it’s not the same thing.