

University of Illinois at Springfield

Norris L Brookens Library

Archives/Special Collections

## Giuliana Menichetti Memoir

**M526. Menichetti, Giuliana** (1885-1977)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 58 mins., 11 pp.

### ITALIAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Menichetti discusses immigration from Italy, work as a seamstress, Italian families, Catholic Church, living in Riverton and Springfield, and her husband's work as a coal miner.

Interview by John Bucari, 1972

OPEN

See collateral file

Archives/Special Collections LIB 144  
University of Illinois at Springfield  
One University Plaza, MS BRK 140  
Springfield IL 62703-5407

## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by John Bucari for the Oral History Office on October 11, 1972.

Mrs. Giuliana Menichetti discusses coming to the United States from Italy, living in Riverton, Illinois, and some of the difficulties she faced as an Italian.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

The manuscript may be read, quoted and cited freely. It may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois, 62708.

Giuliana Menichetti, October 11, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

John Bucari, Interviewer.

Q: What year did you come to the United States?

A: It was January the 9th, 1905. I was married in 1904.

Q: So you were married in the old country? Then you came over here?

A: No, my husband came first. Because I had to go to Pennsylvania to marry a nice boy, I tell you the nicest looking boy you ever seen, and good. My father didn't like his father, they grew up together and he didn't like his father. Well, his father didn't like my father. But he wrote to my dad in Germany to get the consent to get married, and then instead he wrote to me and sent me some money. But my father said, "No!" So I sent him back the ticket and the money. And in the meantime my husband was in Riverton, he wasn't in Pennsylvania. He was in Illinois. My cousin was working and told him that Giulia Roscietti was in the United States. Then my husband came to Springfield to buy a ticket, to bring me to America from Italy.

Q: Was your husband a coal miner? Did he work all his life in the mines?

A: He worked all his life, since I was 21.

Q: I would like to ask you some questions about yourself. You were a seamstress? Did you take in work and made clothes for a living?

A: I was a dressmaker. I was a tailor, too, for the men.

Q: Were you first located in Riverton, Illinois? Then what year did you first move to Springfield?

A: The same year, 1905, and the same month, January. I remember well when I first came to Springfield. When I saw the city I thought, "My God!" Because there was about two feet of snow and the top was all black. That was because there were trains all through the city, and smoke at that time was bad. But they smoke no more. In half an hour it would fill one inch.

Q: Was the area in which you were living right around here? The same house?

A: No, we lived in a company house in Riverton. That was because the mine was in Riverton, Illinois, and my husband worked there. When we were there the company houses were real new and we rented one. Riverton had sidewalks made out wood, and when you walked, they would bounce up and down. I was in this dress and a lot of people were in the streetcar going to Riverton. I looked and looked, there was young ladies and old ladies, the young girls were coming back from high school, because Riverton didn't have a high school. I looked and looked at myself and said, "My God, that's the way they dress?" They were looking at me.

I was ashamed of the way I was dressed. I was dressed the way I did in Italy. I made my own clothes, and they were looking at me. I asked my husband why they thought I looked funny. I said, "Don't you see how they dress up?" They had clothes for everyday and school.

Q: Do you think the people might have looked at you or against you because you are Italian?

A: No, because I never talked and they didn't know. They just looked at the way I was dressed. I had a dress that was about to the knee or four inches below, and a sleeve that was round. So was the collar on the jacket. The people looked at me because they didn't have clothes like that at that time. Because the people were poor, they didn't find clothes like that in Springfield.

Q: You were a seamstress, you had nice clothes because you made all your own clothes.

A: Yes, it cost me nothing to make them, just for the goods.

Q: When you moved to Springfield, in January of 1905, you were still a seamstress. Did you do most of your work for Italian women?

A: No, mostly for teachers. Except in Riverton, there weren't many teachers. So when I came to Springfield, there were the high school teachers too. When we moved to Springfield, my daughter started to Springfield Business College. Most of the Italian people were from south Italy. After I would work for one week on some material, they didn't want to pay me very much. I would say, "You can give me what you want." They would want to pay almost nothing. I thought, "What can I do?"

The colored people would give me \$4 to \$6. They would give me gingham, and I said, "I don't charge that much." They gave much better than anybody. The teachers, when they saw my daughter's dresses would ask, "Who made your clothes?" She said, "My mother." They asked, "Would she sew for somebody else?" Then they would bring me the goods and ask if I could make them a dress. They would pay me, I didn't even have to ask. Most of them would pay me \$5. If I had to do tailor work I would charge about the same, but I did ladies work better.

Q: Did you have a lot of Italian friends here in town?

A: Yes, but they came to me because, first I had the kids, and then I had my brother who had shell shock from the First World War. So I stayed home and I didn't care if I had to go out.

Q: When you went out for groceries you usually came right home?

A: Yes, there was a grocery store right across the street.

Q: What was the name of the store?

A: Yacobonski's. They called me "Mama" and would make me laugh. (laughter) And I am telling you the women were old fashioned in the way they cut meat. Then one time I asked for chalk steak. Chalk steak is round steak. The boy, about 15 or 16 years old looked at me and asked me, "What do you mean chalk steak?" I said, "The next time you ask when you buy the steak, ask for a piece of chalk steak." They had to ask me how to cut the steak and I told them that they needed a saw not a knife. I said that they could use it for soup, roast, and you can use it for chalk steak.

Q: Was the mine in which your husband worked a Peabody mine?

A: Yes, and it was close to Riverton, Illinois. That was before we came here because the mine there was shut down. Then here in Springfield, it was Peabody too, but it is closed, Number Two. One time at New Jones, it was at Devereaux Heights. Then he worked at Number Nine at Langley and then when he took sick he was here in Springfield.

Q: Do you recall anything about the Italian consulate here in Springfield?

A: Yes, but I don't want to get into that. Even now you don't know—but people would go to the consulate for assistance, like if they had black lung. My husband had black lung and almost died and I didn't know where to go for help.

Q: Was the Italian consulate for Italians who were not yet citizens of this country?

A: Yes, but my husband was, I was single when he went to the consulate to get the papers, and it was like today—people got their citizen papers even though they couldn't read. My husband was like me, I can take the newspaper and maybe I can read a whole page. Lots of times I don't make a mistake, but I never did go to school. Anyway people got papers almost two years later. He got his citizen papers in Pennsylvania in 1902.

Q: the Italian consulate was mainly for Italians not yet citizens. Where was the consulate located?

A: I don't know. Because I don't go anymore. I am suppose to go to the Boston Insurance.

Q: When you were living in Riverton, Illinois, did you know a family by the name of the William Frascos?

A: Oh, yes. They owned a Riverton store.

Q: They had the Italian-American Store in Riverton. Can you tell me something about the store?

A: They started the business without knowing too much about how to run it.

Q: Where were the Frasco's from in Italy?

A: They were from Abruzzi. When they started in Riverton, there was William Frasco and Arquilio Egizii.

Q: Were the Egizii's from Abruzzi?

A: Yes, and Arquilio Egizzi spoke real good Italian. But the Frascos, oh boy, did they kill the language. (laughter) The first time I went into the Frasco's store--they had the goods store. Dora Frasco, who had just married William, was in the store. I asked Dora, "Dora, what's in that jar over there?" She said, "Noi non li'usiamo. Tu non mangi." [We don't use that. You don't eat it.] She didn't want to tell me what the jar was.

I went home and told my husband that Old Man Frasco had a new granddaughter and she doesn't know anything about selling. Instead of showing me the jar and telling me it was good stuff, she didn't want to sell me nothing. They were artichokes in the jar, and there were sweet potatoes. But she said that we didn't use them--meaning Italians didn't eat the sweet potatoes--but she should have sold me the jar. Well, I didn't say anything because she didn't know how to sell the things.

Q: Do you remember the year the Frascos moved their store to Springfield?

A: They came here before 1922. But we would trade with this Lithuanian store. If they didn't have the food, we would go to Frascos for the Romano cheese, and a lot of the Italian stuff. Compared to the other people they were pretty good.

Q: What about the Catholic Church here in Springfield, did you have any bad experiences with it?

A: I was in a family way, some of the children were big, others were small. But one night when my husband was here after supper, this friend of his came by and asked him why he didn't fix his children's shoes instead of sending them out to the shoemaker. My husband said that he didn't know the trade. But the visitor said that my husband had two hands like him and that my husband should try. Well, one night my husband was trying to fix my shoes. He was at the kitchen table, and there was a pitcher of water on the table. Pretty soon somebody knocked on the door. My husband opened the door and it was the priest. It was

after supper and was dark, and the priest asked if he could come in and talk. The priest was going around asking for some coal, and he was asking my husband because he worked in the mines. The priest wanted two tons of coal and he asked us for some. But it happened that there was a strike at this time, or it had just finished, because my husband had started work and had not yet been paid. My husband asked how he could give the Church the coal when he had not yet been paid. The priest was looking at the shoes on the table. The man who had talked with my husband didn't go to church even though he was Italian.

Q: Was the priest Italian?

A: No. But the priest said that we should give him the first paycheck and that we should wait and have the second paycheck. Then the priest went to the table and picked up the pitcher and sniffed it. Maybe he thought it had wine or beer, I don't know what. My husband asked, "Father, are you thirsty? Do you want a drink?" "Oh no," said the priest. Well, the priest failed in that part. My husband said that he would give him the second paycheck but he had to have the first one to feed his children. Well, the priest went and asked the Frascos in Italyville--it was called that because of the company houses. The priest told the Frascos that he didn't want to see any of the Menichetti family in his church again. The Frascos asked Joe, my husband, why he didn't let the priest have the paycheck for the coal. Joe said that he had to have the money. The priest said not for us to come to his church, even if someone died.

Well, when I had the baby I had the flu. The baby was a blue baby, when he stayed flat he was fine, but if he raised up he got blue. We didn't know, and not even the doctor knew. My baby couldn't nurse, so my baby died. But for six months or seven months he lived. Until one morning when I was ready to fix him, he died in my arms. My God, he died just without a sound. I sent one of my daughters for the priest and when she found him, he refused to come with her when he learned her name. He shut the door in front of her like a dog. My daughter waited a little bit, then knocked again. She waited and finally came home. I told her to go back and get the priest and not to get off the front porch until the priest came with her. The priest's housekeeper told the priest that the baby had died and if he didn't go baptize the baby, it would be his fault not the parents. She told him that the father worked in the mine and the mother was home alone with the child. He said, "No." He finally came but when he arrived the baby had died. But when the priest arrived I told him the baby had died. I asked him why he had waited to come. He came too late for the baby was dead. I didn't say anything, it was too late. When the funeral was held all the Italians were there. There were the Frascos, and others with their children. When we were ready for the funeral the priest was late, and the boy who was suppose to help him was all ready.

My husband never did know until the funeral that our son was not baptized. His friends and relatives at the funeral asked him why the priest was late and it was because the baby had not been baptized. The parents of the altar boy found out that the child had not been baptized

and did not want their child to take part in the funeral. [This is an approximation of the story. Majority is unintelligible. Ed.]

End of Side One, Tape One

Q: There was an Italian consulate here in Springfield, what was the function of the consulate? Was it for the Italian miners or what?

A: It was for all the Italians. If you had questions about going back to Italy you would go to the consulate. When we went back to Italy we wrote to the consulate in Chicago.

Q: The consulate helped the people who did not speak English. Do you remember the length of time the consulate was here in Springfield?

A: No. I would see him lots of times, but we had no need to go to him for help. He didn't understand me. I had a brother in Chicago who had shell shock and I would have to send him money. It was Judge Shipp who helped us keep track of the \$900 for the care of my brother. But the judge took the money from us. For about three years I was really mad. But I couldn't speak English so we had a hard time proving that the money was for my brother. Finally Judge DuBois helped us get the money for my brother.

Q: What was wrong with your brother?

A: He had shell shock from the First World War. When he was shipped to Germany I never heard a word from him. When the war was over all the men were coming back except my brother. I wrote there and everywhere and nothing came about. I spent a lot of money to try and find my brother. But he was my brother and I had to try and find him.

We found my brother in Jacksonville Hospital, where he was for fifteen years. When we found him Judge DuBuois asked us why we wanted to keep him with us. The doctor in Jacksonville told me that I was crazier than my brother. So I said, "You want to lock me up to?" The doctor asked how I would take care of my brother and still feed my children. The doctor said that as soon as I took my brother home he could kill one of us. But I said that I was not afraid of my brother. I told the doctor that I could take care of my brother and if I wanted I could take my brother's pension from the doctor. The pension for my brother I would take and deposit in the courthouse.

I paid the bond company and the lawyer and I never saw the money. When I went to court to get my brother signed over to me, the courthouse was full of people. They were laughing. They could have been laughing at me or at Judge DuBois. My brother was in a government hospital at that time.

Q: Was the Italian consulate around at that time?

A: Yes, but he couldn't help us and we didn't go to him because we didn't have money.

Q: Do you recall the Italian consulate's name?

A: I believe the name was Picco. Anyway, the doctor in Jacksonville kept the checks for my brother. So when we had to send money to my folks in Italy, \$25 a month, I couldn't send the money anymore. What was I going to do? Well, I remember that at that time my husband was working in a coal mine and there was a French boy who was hurt and had to retire from the coal mine. He told my husband to go and see a man that could help us get my brother and the money from the government.

My husband went and saw the man and then Joe--who used to make wine, two or three barrels every year--took some wine to this man. This man took down our name and the facts. Well, they told me if I wanted to go to Jacksonville with them I would be all right. My husband told me that I had better go. So I went with them to Jacksonville and we talked with the judge, the doctor, and to my brother, who asked, "Why don't you take me home with you? Why do you want to let me die here?" The men asked me why my brother was here, because he had a good memory. But not today, it was too late. If we had another hour we would have been able to take my brother home. We had to come back. I told them that after my brother is out, don't worry about him. I did not wait to say anything to the man about my brother because the office was full of people. The man told me that he was doing me a favor by helping, because he was not getting any money for doing this type of work. But when I came to get my brother I was satisfied with myself. My husband had gotten a lawyer to help us get my brother if the hospital did not release him to us. The hospital in Jacksonville called and the doctor asked, "Mrs. Menichetti, are you ready to come and get your brother tomorrow?"

They thought I would not be able to care for my brother but I told them I was a dressmaker and tailor and that I would not have any problem with him. But I did tell my brother that I was tired and that I had worked making so many dresses. But my brother wanted to come home with me and he would make me cry, so I took him home. The man in charge told me he wasn't paid by the government and I looked at him and asked how much I had to give him for releasing my brother. He told me nothing and I thought not. He was smart. I gave him some money and he was to be satisfied. I was glad I gave him the money. And you know how much the government gave me to care for my brother, wash his clothes and such? It was \$45 a month. When we went to California to see our youngest son and one of my cousins in San Jose, we stayed a week or more. I told them I got \$45 a month and they told me that I was crazy. Friends of my son had the same and they were paid \$120 a month for the same type of care. They told me they were telling me the truth. They also told me to go home and write Washington and ask for more money.

Q: Do you feel that since you were unfamiliar with the English language that this man might have been taking advantage of you?

A: Sure.

Q: And there was no way you could have gone to the Italian consulate because he would have wanted some money, too? Whatever happened to the consulate in Springfield?

A: You mean John Picco? They killed him on the streets. Why we don't know. Some said it had to do with the bootlegging. He was from Piedmont, Italy, and his wife and he lived in Langley. They killed him.

Q: He had something to do with it and he doublecrossed them somehow.

A: Yes.

Q: Did they have any children, do you remember?

A: No. No children.

Rest of interview is inaudible and in Italian.

End of Side Two, Tape One