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Work All My Life Italian Immigrant Women's Experiences in Post-World War II Schenectady

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“I Work All My Life”:
Italian Immigrant Women’s Experiences
in Post-World War II Schenectady

By

Lia D’Ambrosio

Senior Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Honors in the Department of American Studies

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ABSTRACT

D'AMBROSIO, LIA "I Work All My Life": Italian Immigrant Women's Experiences in Post-World War II Schenectady

ADVISOR: FOROUGHI, ANDREA

Immigration has been a topic of extreme interest within American history since its very beginning. From its earliest years, the United States has attracted large numbers of immigrants. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mass immigration commenced often as a result of deteriorating economic conditions in the countries that people left and the promising economic situation in America, where industry developed rapidly and laborers were needed. Italians were one of the largest and most notable of the many groups who emigrated from their homelands in search of opportunity and better lives, and they continued this practice well after the early waves of mass immigration ended with the outbreak of World War II. However, little is heard of the difficulties faced or successes found by these more recent Italian immigrants. The experiences of the Italians who immigrated as part of earlier mass migrations waves have been well documented, especially those of Italian men. Yet, scholarly literature has paid significantly less attention to the experiences of Italian women who immigrated after World War II, and they too are deserving of recognition and study. Focusing on Italian immigrant women of post-World War II Schenectady, this thesis uncovers the hardships endured and the successes achieved prior to immigration, upon arrival in Schenectady, and throughout their childbearing years by examining their roles in the workplace, in the family and in the Schenectady community.

Using interviews conducted for the purpose of this research, the thesis follows ten Italian women's life journeys: from weathering wartime adversities in their homeland through following family members who had already immigrated to settling into Schenectady and its

Italian community to working within and outside of the home in order to help support their families and provide the next generation with improved opportunities. From all of these women's life stories, it is clear that relationships and interactions with other Italian women at work and in the neighborhood played an essential role in these women's lives in the city.

One woman's journey, that of Vita Serafini, helps portray the general roles filled and experiences typically encountered by Italian immigrant women in the middle of the twentieth century. Through Vita's account, dreadful experiences with poverty and German military brutality are seen in Italy during World War II. By following Vita's journey to Schenectady, her reasons for immigration are clear; numerous members of her family were already settled in the area and opportunities were plentiful in Schenectady compared to Italy's devastated condition. But opportunities were not just handed to her. Vita's journey demonstrates that continuous work both in and outside of the home was necessary to maintain a satisfactory lifestyle. Her life also shows that despite difficult times back in Italy and as she and her family settled and established a home in Schenectady, she was able to integrate herself into the Italian community and with Italian women who shared similar experiences to find small daily pleasures through socializing.

Vita's interview, along with the nine others that were conducted for this thesis, fills a gap in what is known about post-World War II Italian immigration. Each of the women's stories confirms the typical path Italian immigrant women of this time period traveled. Because of the gender of the informants selected, a woman's perspective regarding the Italian immigration experience is seen, shedding light not only on Italian family dynamics and women's typical roles, but hardships endured and entertainment enjoyed.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1927, Vita Isopo was born in the small village of Fontechiari in Lazio, Italy. (See Figure 1.) Vita was born and raised in a hill town with close to one thousand inhabitants. Their village was a tight knit community that relied on agricultural success in order to survive and make a living. Growing up without running water or electricity was one of the many hardships Vita endured in her early years of life. To survive, Vita walked barefoot into the village with a basket on her head in order to bring products she had produced into town to sell, or to bring home goods that her family needed. She tended to the sheep, chickens and cows, and spent time her free time with the other *contadini*, peasant farmers, who lived in Fontechiari. Wine making was another critical aspect of Vita's life in Fontechiari and in the fall, Vita, her siblings and the rest of the village would help with the harvest. Aside from living in a poor community and barely scraping by with agricultural work, the first decade of Vita's life had limited hardships. With the start of World War II in 1939 conditions in Italy changed drastically, and Vita's life became occupied with worries of war and the changing conditions German occupation brought to her community's countryside. Vita tried to continue on with her normal life, began seeing one of her neighbor's, Michele Serafini and tried to ignore the atrocities of war, but that was nearly impossible. Under Mussolini's orders, Italy officially entered the war in 1940, and Vita's life in Italy would never be the same. Michele was enlisted into the Italian army and had to leave Fontechiari to go fight under Mussolini. In 1944, German troops were making their way through the countryside, trekking through Fontechiari killing all livestock, ruining crops, and forcing Italians to give up their homes to the German troops, Vita's home included. Conditions in the Italian army under Mussolini's rule were so poor that they forced many Italian men, like Michele, to desert and return home to protect their families. With the war's end in 1945, the

devastation that was left in Italy forced Vita's father to begin preparing the legal documents to make the voyage to America in hopes of finding better living conditions. Two years later her family's papers were complete and Vita's father and mother left Italy, and settled in Schenectady, NY, leaving Michele and Vita behind. Knowing she would have to leave for America, she found herself pregnant and unable to marry Michele or she would lose her ability to immigrate. Vita accompanied her mother on her first voyage over, completing the necessary paperwork and returning to Italy four months later to get married and have her baby. A year following, married, and with her 6 month old child, Anna, Vita left Michele behind serving in the military and made the voyage to New York by herself, in hopes of finding better life.

Arriving in America was scary, yet exciting for Vita. She had family already settled in Schenectady, so she wasn't starting her new life completely alone. When Vita arrived, her extended family was already making a place for themselves in Schenectady. Family, friends and the Italian community in Schenectady made the transition easier for Vita, but that is not to say that her life became easy. Vita was lucky to have her mother around to take care of Anna while she worked long hours at her first job in a glove factory. Making very little money, she never spent a penny on items that weren't necessary, barely making enough to put shoes on their feet. Learning English was another obstacle that Vita struggled with daily. Vita worked hard and saved her money, so that when Michele arrived five years later, they would have enough to start a home on their own and raise a successful family.¹

Today, Vita is 84 years old, lives in a nice home and has five successful children and many grandchildren who will have success in their futures. Vita and Michele made the transition into American life, learned English, worked long hours, helped other Italian immigrants,

¹ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

continued Italian traditions and brought aspects of Italy into the community of Schenectady. Vita and Michele are only two of the many Italians who came to Schenectady after World War II. Many other Italian women had to take leaps similar to Vita when they arrived in Schenectady, yet few know these women's stories. Many people are unaware of the influx of Italians who came to America after World War II and the experiences they had adapting to American life. By listening to the stories of women like Vita, light will be shed on Italian immigrants of her time and will help to understand Italian immigration to America on a broader, yet more detailed scale.

In attempt to fill in what we don't know about Italian women's experiences, this study examines the lives of Italian women who entered America after World War II, by focusing on the particular experiences they had starting a life in Schenectady, NY. Since the beginning of the United States, immigration has always been a topic of interest, and studies of its patterns, and people involved are numerous. The United States of America has been known as the 'melting pot' of cultures for years upon years. Even today, America continues to have a population from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups due to mass immigration that commenced in the 19th century and has continued to bring in foreigners and create a unique "American" identity.² Focusing on specific cities and industrialized areas of the United States, correlation among groups of immigrants can be seen in where specific groups decided to settle. Reasons for trends in settlement include job opportunities in factories and the influence of Chain Migration. This thesis will develop and broaden previous studies of Italian immigration. This thesis will focus on the Italian immigrant women who came to Schenectady after World War II and will illuminate

² Andro Linklater, *The Fabric of America: How Our Borders and Boundaries Shaped the Country and Forged Our National Identity*, (New York: Walker & Company, 2007), 2.

the difficulties experienced prior to immigration, upon arrival in Schenectady, and throughout their participation in the workplace, in the family, and within Schenectady's community.

In the United States, the initial waves of mass immigration are well known to all; Italians known as being a critical part of mass immigration waves. Italian emigration was predominant in the late 19th century when conditions in Italy were too harsh to remain living in. But while hundreds of thousands of Italians came to the United States prior to World War I during the initial waves of immigration, few are aware that Italians have continued to come overtime in waves similar to the first, but with different magnitude. After World War I, the passage of new legislation regarding immigration policy significantly slowed the number of immigrants entering America.³ Humbert Nelli notes the decline in Italian numbers, "Italian immigration declined precipitously from 283,738 in 1914 to 49,688 in 1915 (the first full year of war) and all the way down to 5,250 in 1918."⁴ But emigration did not stop there. The years following World War I, between 1919 and 1927, Italy was trodden with war, and as a result, the number of Italian emigrants reached 2,900,000 people.⁵ American immigration restrictions kept the number of Italian immigrants limited after the war and numbers that were seen in the first wave of Italian immigration were never reached again. Although Italian emigration slowed down again at the beginning of World War II, conditions Italians were forced to live through during war, once again presented motive for emigration.

Italians first started emigrating at the end of the 19th century when Italy gave its citizens a host of reasons to leave, and America provided incentives to come. As described in *The Italians*

³ Humbert S. Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics: The Italian Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 154.

⁴ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics*, 153.

⁵ Giuseppe Lucrezio Monticelli, "Italian Emigration: Basic Characteristics and Trends with Special Reference to the Post-War Years," in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, eds Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engle (New York: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc, 1920), 8.

of New York, it was “Industry versus Agriculture”⁶ when it came down to motives for emigration. At the end of the 19th century, agricultural production slowed, Italy’s economic stability began to decline, high birth rates were leading to over-population, malaria infected mosquitoes prohibited peasants from cultivation and the newly unified country’s imposition of excise taxes forced many Italians (especially Southern) to seek alternative transnational lives.⁷ Because of these driving forces, the first wave of Italian immigration began in 1891 lasting until 1900, during which the United States saw nearly 600,000 Italian immigrants enter its borders. The second wave of Italian immigration brought over 2 million more immigrants, World War I and the Immigration Act of 1924 slowing down the flow.⁸ Eighty percent of these Italians were from poverty stricken Southern Italy⁹ and came to America during the heightened period of industrial development in hopes of finding success.¹⁰ Three-quarters of these Italian immigrants who came in the years known as the “second wave” of Italian immigration settled in urbanized areas of New York, Schenectady being one of their targets.¹¹

During the Second World War, conditions in Italy became comparable to those that first motivated emigration in the late 19th century. Italians experienced extremely harsh conditions under the fascist regime and witnessed brutalities that would make them want to flee for America. The invading German troops and the living conditions that they imposed on the natives left the Italians with nothing but hope for survival and escape. Germans destroyed bridges, dams and main roads, and planted minefields and barbed wire, leaving the country in

⁶ Federal Writers’ Project New York, *The Italians of New York: A Survey* (New York: Random House, 1938), 36.

⁷ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics*, 20-23.

⁸ Francesco Cordasco, “Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,” *Theory into Practice* 20, no. 1 (1981): 59, ebscohost.com

⁹ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics*, 43.

¹⁰ Federal Writers’ Project New York, 3.

¹¹ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics*, 47.

complete disarray with no regard for the Italians living there.¹² German troops also plotted to flood marshes near Rome to hold the allied forces back, creating a terrain nearly impossible to navigate and also creating an epidemic of malaria.¹³ With this, conditions in Italy worsened. Erhard Geissler and Jeanne Guillemin state, “The deprivations of war increased the health risk to the population in the area, and those risks only increased as southern Italy became a battleground.”¹⁴ Aside from being affected by war zone occurrences, Italians civilians were also directly affected by German acts of brutality. In 1944, a German massacre of Italian men, women and children occurred in Sant’Anna di Stazzema, Italy. Over 500 people were killed without care, and the Germans continued to burn the corpses, stables, homes and animals of the defenseless Italians.¹⁵ Italy during World War II was a place where no one wished to be. Atrocities occurred daily, and when the opportunity of emigration presented itself at the end of the war, Italians did not hesitate to flee. These conditions that Italians were subjected to during World War II are similar to the conditions that first encouraged Italians to immigrate at the end of the 19th century and help account for trends in Italian immigration.

While conditions in Italy pushed Italians to leave their country, stories about America, industrialization and success depicted the new world as a fresh start. Especially for the peasants of Southern Italy, America was surreal and a pleasant part of their imagination that lingered in their minds. In Carlo Levi’s 1947 *Life Magazine* article “Italy’s Myth of America” he explains the opportunities peasants saw in America. Levi states “The mythical America, both real and unreal, rooted in fact and fancy appears in popular songs and poems in a variety of guises: a

¹² Erhard Geissler and Jeanne Guillemin, “German flooding of the Pontine Marshes in World War II Biological warfare or total war tactic?,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 29, no. 1 (2010): 3, ebscohost.com.

¹³ Geissler and Guillemin, 12.

¹⁴ Geissler and Guillemin, 13.

¹⁵ Parco Nazionale della Pace di Sant’Anna di Stazzema, “The Slaughter: 1944, August 12th,” <http://www.santannadistazzema.org/>.

definite place where men work for a living, as a place of refugee escape, as a fairyland, as a land, even as the very edge of the known world.”¹⁶ Italians knew that they would still need to work to make a living in America and they would endure hardships, but that never stopped their eyes from glazing over at the thought of dollar bills, swimming pools, big bridges, big cities and other modern commodities of the new world.¹⁷ Italian emigrants eventually returned to Italy with more than enough money to support their peasant farm working families, allowing them to afford more than they ever had. This projected images of America as a land of riches, making more Italians long to leave their poverty-stricken country. Boys like Iannace in Michael La Sorte’s semi-autobiographical book, “La Merica” found themselves ignoring the warnings that relatives brought home about America’s hardships and held onto romanticized images of the new world.¹⁸ But even without idealistic images of America, poverty, disease, plague, overpopulation and economic hardship that manifested Italy were enough to convince Italians that America would be better off.

In the early nineteenth century, Italy’s economic conditions presented Italians with a life of hardships that shaped a way of life prior to emigration. In Italy the majority lived as *contadini*, tending to crops and animals in order to get by and make a living. Many survived by eating beans and potatoes in hopes that one day they could immigrate to a world where they would be “better off.”¹⁹ Women like Vita would begin a lifetime of intense labor around the age of 10, and would continue this type of exhausting labor, known as *la fatica*, even after escaping

¹⁶ Carlo Levi, “Italy’s Myth of America: In their barren provinces the peasants dream of the U.S. as an enchanted land of big cities, riches and gold teeth,” *Life*, July 7, 1947, 92. Googlebooks.com

¹⁷ Levi, “Italy’s Myth of America,” 90.

¹⁸ Michael La Sorte, *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 8.

¹⁹ Michael La Sorte, *La Merica*, 1.

Italy.²⁰ Keeping close within their villages, Italians developed strong social relationships with those whom they related to daily. Friends, neighbors, and close relatives helped each other out during the tough times and created a kinship of support while dealing with strenuous labor, illiteracy, poverty and government authority.²¹ These Italians handled what the economy served them, and are described by Barry Moreno as follows, “Italian peasants were regarded as conservative people, fiercely devoted to their villages and provinces, as well as to their ancient customs and dialects—people who scarcely ever traveled beyond their native regions and in spite of their troubles, were genuinely content to live out their lives in the same manner as their forefathers.”²² Yet, however content they were with their lives in Italy, during disease and economic downfall, especially in the aftermath of a destructive war, kinship ties and traditions that they formed could not keep them rooted in Italy and instead followed them on their journey to a potentially more promising life in America.

However, starting a new life in a foreign place was not all rumor had made it out to be. Romanticized images of streets paved with gold and rivers of milk were soon shattered when Italians realized that life in America was not going to be as easy as they had hoped. The temptation of “varnished doors and brass doorknobs” that the *americani* (returned migrants) built into their new homes as a “daily advertisement of the riches that might be waiting across the Atlantic” let new Italian immigrants down when they finally arrived in America.²³ Despite dreams not matching the reality that they encountered as new immigrants, with a hard work ethic they consented to living the American life for they knew it would have better opportunities than remaining in Italy. The conditions that Italians had dealt with in Italy set them up to achieve new

²⁰ Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 15.

²¹ Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 17.

²² Robert Moreno, *Coming to America: Italian Americans*, New York: Barron’s Educational Series, Inc, 2003), 21.

²³ Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 18.

goals in America. As can be seen with Vita and Michele, Italians worked hard to establish themselves in a new world. Italian men and women used the skills they learned back in Italy to compete with other groups of new immigrants. Vita, who learned to sew and launder clothes at an early age, quickly put these skills to use, initially working at a garment factory and then switching into to a clothes-laundering job. Michele on the other hand worked the farm and labored with his hands when he was not a *Carabinieri*, or Italian policeman. Michele's skills translated into becoming a skilled carpenter and starting his own construction business.²⁴

Italians faced racism and discrimination in the early years of immigration and had to rely on their Italian community to stay strong and support each other, much like they did back in Italy. Silvano Tomasi describes the necessity of cultural support: "The painful experience of social rejection taught the newcomers to transcend their family clannishness and to join with other families from the same province in the home country, who shared the same dialect and patron saints, in order to find personal security in the strength of the group."²⁵ More than ever Italian ethnicity and traditions were necessary for survival in their new world. Italian immigrant males began taking in other Italians who could not afford to live back in Italy and adopted them into the labor force through a system known as "The Padrone System."²⁶ Still struggling outside of Italy, the "Italian willingly 'underfed' himself, since, in many cases he was still eating better

²⁴ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

²⁵ Silvano M. Tomasi, "The Ethnic Church and the Integration of Italian Immigrants in the United States," in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, eds Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engle (New York: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc, 1970), 165.

²⁶ The "Padrone System" is a system of labor distribution that existed in Italy and was then used in America. "Padroni" would pay for those who could not afford travel fees to America and would provide them with work, room and board wherever a need for laborers was found. The majority of "Padroni" sought to aid fellow countrymen, however some did exploit and enslave them. Luciano J. Iorizzo, "The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution," in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, eds Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engle (New York: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc, 1970), 54.

than he had in the old country.”²⁷ As a member of the Federal Writers’ Project explains in *The Italians of New York*, “Their low economic position, aggravated by dependence upon old traditions and a pathetic ignorance of American demands, resulted in isolating them from the social, economic, and political life of the new [American] community.”²⁸ Nevertheless, reliance on Old-World life helped them pave a way in America for themselves and their future generations in Italian-dominant communities.²⁹

Schenectady, NY, known for being the birthplace of the Edison Electric, or GE in 1886 and home to Schenectady Locomotive, was one destination that European emigrants targeted because of the jobs and opportunities that they would find available. Robert Pasqucci notes an Italian immigrant presence in Schenectady as a result of these industrialization opportunities: “Mass Italian immigration to Schenectady, by contrast [to Poles], was a twentieth century phenomenon, starting a decade after the Polish and continuing for ten years longer. By 1920, Italians had become the most numerous immigrant contingent in the city.”³⁰ Immigration slowing due to World War I and newly enacted immigration laws left Italian immigrant settlement from mass immigration largely completed in 1920.³¹ At this point, Italians found themselves dispersed throughout half of the wards in Schenectady, dominating the population of the Third Ward and areas surrounding General Electric, a community already established for those, who in future years, would linger in.

Despite outnumbering other European immigrants, Italians in Schenectady faced issues similar to Italian immigrants elsewhere in America. The refusal to rent to an Italian immigrant

²⁷ Luciano J. Iorizzo, “The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution,” in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, eds Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engle (New York: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc, 1970), 56.

²⁸ Federal Writers’ Project New York, *The Italians of New York*, 51.

²⁹ Federal Writers’ Project New York, *The Italians of New York*, 51.

³⁰ Robert R. Pasqucci, *Electric City Immigrants: Italians and Poles of Schenectady, N.Y., 1880-1930* (New York: State University of New York at Albany, Dept. of History, 1984), 14.

³¹ Pasqucci, 47.

because of their “race” was not uncommon in the Schenectady community.³² Re-establishing what they could from life in Italy, Italians created a community within Schenectady where they adapted to American life by using Old World experiences and traditions. As Pascucci chronicles, Italians in Schenectady used the “Padrone System”, and dealt with harsh labor conditions, worked for low pay, and ate as little as possible, while using the church and other Italian community support to make a decent living in a new world. As in other parts of the United States, Italians developed traditions and neighborhoods specific to their ethnicity. Italians also developed societies for Italians who emigrated from particular Italian regions; for example, Italians emigrating from Lazio, the region of Rome, developed *La Societa Laziale* in the 1930’s.³³

What is known about Schenectady after 1930 and World War II is scarce compared to what is known with the help of Pascucci’s *Electric City Immigrants*. Although General Electric was not as strong of a pull for immigrants in the 1950’s as it was when it was first established, changes in GE’s labor force still made Schenectady a popular destination. As stated by Gerald Zahavi, “Schenectady was an ethnically diverse city of approximately 96,000 in the 1930’s.”³⁴ Suggesting that immigrants were not deterred from making Schenectady their home. After World War II, efforts from labor unions, made GE and Schenectady even more attractive to immigrants, for opportunities for women and minorities, were being opened up.³⁵ Since 1886, Schenectady had been providing immigrants with opportunities to escape hardship, and although

³² Pascucci, 30.

³³ Pascucci, 55.

³⁴ Gerald Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954,” *The Journal of American History*, 9 (1996): 517. Ebscohost.com

³⁵ Gerald Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954,” *The Journal of American History*, 9 (1996): 520. Ebscohost.com

earlier push and pull factors made Schenectady a city of higher demand for immigrants, those factors never completely diminished.

In addition to employment, the existence of a well-established Italian community that grew from earlier waves of immigration also provided incentives to come to Schenectady, especially through what is known as “chain migration.”³⁶ Italians have continued to settle in Schenectady, seeking relatives who have immigrated before them, starting new, and continuing to create communities within Schenectady. The majority of Vita and Michele’s family can be located within a twenty-mile radius of Schenectady. Today, societies such as *Laziale* still exist, Italian family business names can still be seen scattered across the city, and the Italian Church still congregates its community for important religious and Italian community events. Schenectady is home to second, third and fourth generation Italians and the legacy they have left, yet little has been said about how these Italian traditions and families transformed and how Italians immigrants, specifically Italian immigrant women, experienced living in Schenectady throughout its history. For this reason, the Italian immigrant woman’s story is further uncovered.

What is known about mid-century Italian immigrants in the United States and specifically in Schenectady, New York is limited in its scholarship. While historians, sociologists, economists and anthropologists have written ample volumes of work on the first and second waves of immigration and the roles that were upheld by Italian immigrants during those periods, little research has been done during the period after World War II. Even less scholarly work has

³⁶ “Chain migration” is defined as a process of immigration built upon networks of familial social relationships to construct communities that can reflect cultural norms of one’s homeland. This mainly occurs as a result of family members or neighbors in contact with others from their homeland. In the case of Italian immigration, *paesani*, or neighbors from local villages, would encourage other *paesani* to immigrate to the same city because of job opportunity or other attractions, creating village chains or social networks. Diane Vecchio, *Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women: Italian Migrants in Urban America*, (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2006), 24.

been completed on the experiences of Italian immigrant women during this period. Instead, historians have taken the following approach at examining Italians in America.

Italians in America have been studied mainly in regard to three periods, two of the periods distinctly referring to the earliest Italian immigrants. Beginning in 1880 the clear trend of Italian immigration was set, with 900,000 Italians arriving in the United States before 1900.³⁷ The scholarly focus on this trend is probably due to the freshness of immigration to the Italian people during those times; as Michael LaSorte states, “The first exposure to the host country was the most trying and turbulent period for the immigrant as he strove to make a functional adjustment to his new environment.”³⁸ Hence, historians have looked at large number of Italian immigrants into the United States prior to the start of the 20th century and have described it as the “First Wave” of Italian immigration. Malaria, plague, overpopulation, and economic downturn are well known contributors for Italian emigration during this 20-year period and numerous historians have gone into depth explaining the significance of each push factor.³⁹

With the turn of the 20th century, what is known as the “Second Wave” of Italian immigration then begins. Most scholars explain that this influx of Italian immigrants lasted until the First World War when emigration was halted, and then immigration was further reduced with new immigration legislation passed. However, historian Francesco Cordasco shifts his periods slightly, stating, “The second period extends from the excluding legislation of the 1920s across World War II and into the mid 1950s.”⁴⁰ While Cordasco asserts that the second period of immigration continued through the mid 1950s, little detail is given to the latter half of the time

³⁷ Francesco Cordasco, “Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,” *Theory into Practice* 20, no. 1 (1981): 59. Ebscohost.com

³⁸ Michael LaSorte, *La Merica*, IV.

³⁹ For example, see Michael LaSorte’s *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience*, Federal Writers’ Project’s *The Italians of New York*, and Humbert S. Nelli’s *From Immigrants to Ethics: The Italian Americans*.

⁴⁰ Francesco Cordasco, “Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,” *Theory into Practice* 20, no. 1 (1981): 58.

frame. Regardless of the end point, scholars agree that during this period the number of Italians entering the United States rapidly slowed.⁴¹

The third period of Italian immigration is characterized through the famous Italian Americans who were recognized in Italian American immigrant history after the “Second Wave” of immigration, usually dating from post World War II through the 1980s.. The shift from the study of immigrant Italians to Italian Americans suggests that after the “Second Wave” Italian immigration was very limited. However, these periods cannot completely describe the story of Italians in America; it is not fair to just skip over those who may have experienced hard times and struggles when they immigrated in the 50s. The push and pull factors for immigration choices of those who came in later times should be explored, as well as the difficult times encountered when establishing families, jobs and a home in a new community. Part of this lack in scholarship may be due to the third wave’s proximity to today, as Francesco Cordasco believes: “The third period, still evolving, is dominated by the progeny of American born Italians, well into third and fourth generations.”⁴² But while this may be the case, who accounts for the 6,400,000 Italians who emigrated from Italy between 1946 and 1968?⁴³ Where do Italian immigrant women stand among these statistics?

Within the three periods mentioned previously, historians have also covered a general set of topics or themes. Scholars tend to include the push and pull factors of immigration in the first and second waves and then immediately skip to Italians experiences becoming adapted. However, the themes that arise do not tell the complete story of the Italian experience in America. While scholars insist that their work is well rounded, discrepancies are clearly seen

⁴¹ For example, see Francesco Cordasco’s “Italian Americans: Historical and present Perspectives,” Humbert Nelli’s *From Immigrants to Ethics: The Italian Americans* and Giuseppe Lucrezio Monticelli’s “Italian Emigration: Basic Characteristics and Trends with Special Reference to the Post-War Years.”

⁴² Cordasco, “Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,” 59.

⁴³ Monticelli, “Italian Emigration: Basic Characteristics and Trends,” 8.

within the scholarship. For example in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, Silvano Tomasi and Madeline Engel compile documents that claim to “present a complete picture of the Italian experience.”⁴⁴ They speak of the famed “Padrone System”, role of religion, assimilation into American society, and of course labor experiences in New York City, and while these are all necessary themes to focus on, other topics are missing, mainly those concerning women.

Historians have also looked at the first years of Italian immigration, and some have made gender analysis central to their studies, investigating male-dominated characteristics of Italian immigration, or Italian immigrant and Italian American men’s success in politics, industry, media and sports.⁴⁵ However, most leave women and children nearly absent from their analyses.

Today’s most recent literature on Italians in America is concerned with the children of those first immigrants. Thomas Ferraro, author of *Feeling Italian* explores the more recent aspect of the third period of Italians in America, focusing on entertainment and Italian Americans in the media. Since this kind of literature is more recent, there are slightly more representations of women intertwined, but the immigrants of the time period when famous Italian Americans are making their mark are still absent. The first sentence of his first chapter reads, “The southern Italian peasants who came to the United States during the Great Migration (1880-1917), first as sojourners, later as settlers, to help build and run the industrial cities were the

⁴⁴ Tomasi, *The Italian Experience in the United States*, vii.

⁴⁵ For those who consider women and gender explicitly, see Guglielmo, Jennifer. *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1940*, Diane Vecchio’s *Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women*. Maddalena Tirabassi, “The Meaning of ‘Americanization’ For Italian American Immigrant Women in the 1930’s and the 1940’s.” Kathie Friedman-Kasab, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity, and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1970-1924*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996). For those who focus on Italian men’s success in the US, see Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), Michael LaSorte, *La Merica*, Carlos Cortes, “Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons,” *Italian-American Literature* 14, no. 3/4 (1987): 107-126. Jstor.org

proudest of peoples.”⁴⁶ This completely fails to recognize that there may have been Italians who immigrated at later periods in time who have also contributed to what America knows as an Italian American. Other more recent scholarship has included details on violence and the mafia’s role in American communities, focusing especially on Italian American men in film.⁴⁷

Michael LaSorte sums up the trends in scholarship concerning Italians in America, stating:

Other books and articles have examined transatlantic Italian emigration from a number of points of view and have employed various data sources and methodologies. There have been numerous statistical analyses as well as historical surveys and monograph studies of Italian colonial life. And there is substantial critical literature in Italian and English. Taken together, these publications represent an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the entire process of migration. But a number of lacunae continue to exist. More attention should be directed to the individual. Much can be learned by turning the lens on the immigrant himself and allowing him to tell his own story without conceptual encumbrances.⁴⁸

LaSorte is aware of the numerous broad studies that have been completed on Italian immigrants, but feels the individual story would be more compelling and would add a different dynamic to what is already known. However, even LaSorte only hopes to turn the lens on the immigrant “himself,” once again presenting a male-oriented version of Italian immigration.

Similar to LaSorte’s approach to further understand the Italian experience, this thesis will look at the individual’s experience and use the immigrant to fill in the gaps where case studies, or statistics are broad and not descriptive of situations. Where LaSorte brings in the personal experiences of immigrant males prior to World War I, this paper will bring in an alternative group of Italian immigrants whose experiences have been be acknowledged by few. Instead of

⁴⁶ Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 9.

⁴⁷ See Carlos Cortes, “Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons,” *Italian-American Literature* 14, no. 3/4 (1987): 107-126. Jstor.org

⁴⁸ LaSorte, *La Merica*, IX.

focusing on the male-dominated topics in the Italian experience like LaSorte has and Tomasi and Engel do in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, it will shift to women's work and roles. As an alternative to concentrating on first and second periods of Italian immigration and then Italian Americans in modern day, it will fill the gap in between. Instead of looking at broad characteristics of Italians who have settled in major cities across the United States like many historians, such as Wayne Moquin, who has compiled anthologies that shed light on the Italian populations of numerous major U.S. cities, this thesis will be more specific. This study will help shift from community studies written on some of the largest cities in the United States such as Chicago, Milwaukee, New York City, San Francisco and Boston, to Schenectady, a mid-size city where a large number of Italians have immigrated, but have been overlooked, and will hone in on the experiences of women in a time period that has been glanced over.⁴⁹ Broad research and conclusions are common within the Italian experience, so narrowing the scope to uncover what has yet to be fully explored will be beneficial in further understanding the Italian experience.

Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta have compiled an anthology *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, yet only two of the included works focus on America, and only on two specific cities. Scholars Jennifer Guglielmo, Miriam Cohen and Kathie Friedman-Kasaba have written about Italian immigrant women's experiences, yet only through the early third of the 20th century.⁵⁰ They've done significant research on Italian women's roles in the garment industry and in being midwives in New York and in other industrialized cities, yet little on other jobs women may have had and nothing following World

⁴⁹ Wayne Moquin, *A Documentary History of the Italian Americans*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), viii.

⁵⁰ See, Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*. Miriam Cohen, *From Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City 1900-1950*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, *Memories of Migration*.

War II. Guglielmo gives us a head start on how to think about the Italian women experience giving us insight on their everyday feats.

This complexity [of life in America filled with dysfunction, pain, alienation but also support and cooperation] is especially evident in women's relationships with one another. Daily activities – caring for children, shopping, preparing food, taking care of relatives and friends, earning wages in factories, caring for boarders, managing tenement buildings, taking in homework, serving as midwives, and running grocery stores – were exhausting and debilitating. These responsibilities also led women to build community with one another in ways that differed markedly from men. By performing such work, women fulfilled cultural roles as caregivers, but they also built relationships between individuals, families, and institutions that extended their lives beyond the scope of their immediate families.⁵¹

Jennifer Guglielmo, Miriam Cohen and Kathie Friedman-Kasaba's cultural research will help make conclusions and support what is discovered in regard to Italian immigrant women's experiences between 1945 and 1960. The research of scholars of Italians in America's has concluded that reasons for Italian immigration are widespread and the ways Italians were forced to adapt to living America and the traditions brought forth from the Old World are a strong part of Italian American society, but these conclusions are mainly captured through the male experience and from the male's point of view. It is now time to extend the research further and examine a specific community of Italian immigrants during a time period that has not been given much attention and a gender whose experiences have been neglected.

The following chapters include a comparative analysis made between scholars' research on Italian immigrant women during the first and second waves of immigration and a collection of oral histories by Italian immigrant women who came to Schenectady after World War II. By using a collection of oral histories of Schenectady's Italian immigrant women from that time period it will be easy to determine whether Schenectady's Italian immigrant women had similar

⁵¹ Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 117.

experiences as Italian immigrant women in other industrialized cities, and the cultural changes in terms of education, family life, work life and social life. In order to find women who met these criteria, it was important to have a strong relationship with at least one woman from this particular community. This first contact was necessary to help facilitate discussions with other Italian immigrant women in the Schenectady area. After speaking with these women, they too were able to suggest a number of other women who had encountered similar experiences.

In order to obtain information pertaining to the women's experiences in these categories, a number of questions were created as a guideline to hit all the important subjects. Since participants were not always warm to respond to specific questions asked, a general approach was also taken. The first approach used with participants was to ask about their general experiences in Italy and in Schenectady, or they were simply asked to share anything about their younger years of life, in both Italy and Schenectady. If these did not foster much discussion, the interview went into specific questions about each subject. For example, asking about typical jobs done at home and by whom, what kinds of jobs were worked outside of the home for pay, were they involved in the local church community, what other people did they work alongside, were they educated etc. However, the ultimate goal was to allow a free flowing interview that touched upon as many of their experiences as possible. The interviews will capture and represent the stories that are missing concerning those Italian immigrant women who came after World War II and the accounts will show how they suffered in different and similar ways as their prior ancestors.

Backing up these oral histories, newspapers and other Schenectady county documents such as city directories are used to provide additional evidentiary support for the women's stories. Through the examination of newspaper clippings we can see the involvement of the

Italian community within the grander picture of Schenectady. Particularly, marriage notices and announcements of church events will be of interest. City directories will be of help when analyzing the make up of ethnic neighborhoods within the city and will also note the ethnic backgrounds of businesses in Schenectady. Modern literature written by the daughters of Italian immigrants, like Mary Cappello's *Night Bloom* or Helen Barolini's *A Circular Journey* will also be useful. These texts provide us with Italian American women's views about their immigrant mothers, and show that fictional writing regarding Italian immigrant women was much more common. These primary source accounts will be useful to relate, back up and help to better understand the new collection of oral histories from Schenectady's post-World War II Italian immigrant women.

It is evident that scholars have looked at and critiqued with a hard eye the characteristics of Italian immigration before and after World War I, but then lose sight of the Italian experience over time. Today, a library can be searched for references of Italian Immigrants and Italian Americans, but the results yield content from the initial Italian immigrant experience or from more recent Italian American born ancestors who wrote about experiences as a daughter of a first generation or second generation Italian American family, very little in between. This project will help fill in that deficiency of Italian American women's history by focusing on the city of Schenectady and the changes that can be seen in the Italian immigrant woman's experience after World War II and through the 1950s.

CHAPTER 2: ITALY DURING WORLD WAR II

The women who have told their stories to develop this thesis are similar in a number of ways; one common denominator being they all were living in Lazio or Campania, two specific regions of Italy during World War II. The older women in the collection can remember first hand the brutalities of war, whereas the younger women can recall the stories their parents told them of being a child during harsh times. All in all, these women share their experiences in Italy during the war, and enlighten us about the severity of their living conditions and why starting fresh in Schenectady was rewarding. Comparing women like Ersilia who was born in 1925 and Antonietta who was born in the midst of the war in 1943, it is easy to see that Schenectady brought opportunity and escape from their shockingly similar experiences in Italy's south central regions of Lazio and Campania during World War II.

Before and throughout the duration of the war, the majority of Italians were working as *contadini*, peasants or farmers. These Italian *contadini* lived in a purely agricultural society, using what they could from the land to survive.⁵² As learned from a number of the women who shared their stories, living in Italy was not trouble-free. Olga Ferri, who experienced the war as a small girl of age ten, recalls the limited resources she had growing up, "Well, ya know, it wasn't bad. But we don't have all the facility [like] over here [in America]. We didn't have no water in the house, no power, no stoves, no, so we had to use the fireplace, had to go wash clothes down the crick or down the river."⁵³ Italian women did not feel sorry for the living situations they were presented with. Instead, it was a lifestyle that they handled until opportunity could bring

⁵² Michael La Sorte, *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 1.

⁵³ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

them across the Atlantic. Living in poverty, without electricity and without running water was what they knew; however, with the coming of the war, living with nothing grew more difficult.

In the years before the war, Italy had already begun to undergo changes in terms of government and lifestyle. Under Benito Mussolini's rule, Italy was turned into a single party, totalitarian regime, and Italians praised Mussolini for his role as leader; however, that did not last long.⁵⁴ In September of 1939 World War II broke out, following the German invasion of Poland. Joining the Axis, Mussolini and Italy entered the war alongside Nazi Germany with territorial ambitions of expansion into North Africa.⁵⁵ Many Italians did not approve of Italy's alliance with Germany and refused to obey rule under the fascist regime.⁵⁶ While many Italian peasants were unaware of the specifics of Mussolini's fascist itinerary, they still held contempt for his actions and role in the war because those community members who were enrolled in the army were not keen to carry out orders on behalf of Mussolini and his alliance with Nazi Germany. Italian disagreement and desire to escape wartime conditions that were brought upon civilians, proved fascism and Mussolini's unwanted entrance to the war on the Axis side were undesired by many.

Being allies with Germany presented Italian military officials with a challenge. Italians were ordered to deport Jews to concentration camps in Germany and those who disobeyed German law were also captured and taken to Germany.⁵⁷ The first half of the war under Mussolini's rule was difficult for Italian soldiers, and with the fall of Mussolini, conditions

⁵⁴ "Benito Mussolini," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition* (November 2011): 1. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁵ Gustavo Corni, "Italy after 1945: War and Peace, Defeat and Liberation," in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Riotte (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 258.

⁵⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Italy."
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005411>

⁵⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Italy."
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005411>

worsened. To begin the war, Italy's engagement with Germany was favored by few of the Italian population. Skeptical of Mussolini's leadership, shortly after the failure of military advances in Northern Africa and allied troops landing in Sicily, Italy's Fascist collapsed, putting Mussolini out of control.⁵⁸ Suspicious of Italian motive, German troops were sent to occupy Northern and Central Italy, while the newly appointed Prime Minister Badoglio settled a cease fire and surrendered to Allied troops.⁵⁹ During this time, many Italians had first hand experiences with German troops and brutalities caused by the German occupation of their hometowns. On top of encountering warfare and violence daily, Italy was also subjected to worsening economic conditions, and Italian peasants of central Italy had to make do with what they knew about working the land.

In the two areas from which the women interviewed came from, Caserta and Sora, German occupation and presence was hard to ignore. (See Figure 1.) Both areas, closely bordering the line distinguishing Central Italy from Southern Italy were soon occupied with German soldiers in pursuit of restoring Mussolini's fascist regime.⁶⁰ Oppositely, Allied troops were approaching from the South after their landing in Sicily, in hopes of eliminating German troops and winning the war.⁶¹ Italians were presented with experiences good and bad while soldiers whose language they could not speak or understand occupied their country. In terms of Italians treatment by German troops, it is easy to say that presence of American troops relieved fearful Italians. Olga Ferri recalls Americans arriving in her hometown, "Oh the soldiers, we were by a well getting water, and they go by with these big trucks and they had a bunch of candy

⁵⁸ Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 746.

⁵⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Italy." <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005411>

⁶⁰ Philip Morgan, "ITALY'S FASCIST WAR," *History Today* 57, no. 3 (March 2007): 40-46. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁶¹ History.com "World War II Ends (1945)," <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/page2>

and they used to throw Lifesavers at us, give us matches.”⁶² Because of the harsh economic and agricultural conditions, Germans sought to exploit Italians while they marched through their hometowns.

Conditions in Italy, especially in rural Italy, were poor prior to German occupation, many Italians focusing on the family in order to live decently. Italian peasants (*contadini*) made up the majority of Italian workers. These *contadini* lived in farmhouses in the countryside, often living among extended family and multigenerational homes or neighborhoods.⁶³ Vita Serafini, age fifteen at the beginning of the war, recalls, “before it was a big family. My father was [of] ten brothers, ten kids. When the grandma make the table, we had a big table!”⁶⁴ Other women like Italia Capoccia and Luigina DiLegge were of eight children all living in the same home and continuing to live together even after marriage.⁶⁵ Large families were not uncommon, especially when extra hands for working the land were necessary. Girls and women, no matter their age took on responsibilities in the home, did back breaking work in the fields and tended to the animals. Both Vita and Olga explain their roles working the land, both beginning agricultural work at early ages. At nearly age ten, Olga remembers working alongside her sister; “We used to help out a lot, my sister and I. My sister was much older; she was ten years older than me. We’d go gather the wood to cook with; ya know to make a fire. We go get water. We took care of chickens, and we had a pig, a sheep and a goat.”⁶⁶ In her teenage years, Vita similarly explains,

⁶² Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁶³ Dario Gaggio, “Before the Exodus: The Landscape of Social Struggle in Rural Tuscany 1944-1960,” in *The Journal of Modern History*, 83 No. 2 (June 2011), 323. Jstor.org

⁶⁴ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁶⁵ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer. Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁶⁶ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

“We work on the farm, make the hay, make wheat to make flour and macaroni, [that] we eat, that’s it.”⁶⁷ Other women share their stories of walking down to the creek to wash their clothes “scalzare”, meaning without shoes.⁶⁸ Elia Remembers, “We don’t have no clothes, we don’t have no shoes, we don’t have nothing. We have a really really bad time.”⁶⁹ Situations like these were common throughout Italy, and the war only perpetuated their impoverished lifestyle as they continued to live in similar or worse conditions through German occupation. Poverty was no joke to these women and it was inescapable in Italy. Santina DiCocco can also recall living with her mother, her father, her siblings and a cousin in Italy. At the age of ten, she was living amongst her extended family performing tasks to help in the home during the war. Even with the presence of German soldiers, she too would get the wood and prepare fire to make macaroni.⁷⁰ With the continuing invasion of German soldiers, women continued to take on these responsibilities, and additionally had to cater to German soldiers’ demands in order to survive.

No matter their age, these women could recall seeing the first German and American soldiers pass through their villages. Few stories shared were happy ones, yet those who were young found experiences to be “fun” because they were too young to realize the threat of the advancing German troops. These women experienced both complying with and disobeying the Germans who were ordered to massacre Italians across the country as punishment because they were considered “accomplices of the partisan.”⁷¹ While none of the women from the Caserta and

⁶⁷ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁶⁸ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁶⁹ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁷⁰ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁷¹ Paolo Pezzino, “The German Military Occupation of Italy and the War against Civilians,” *Modern Italy* 12, no. 2 (June 2007), 176.

Sora areas saw massacre first hand, they were still subjected to the cruel and ruthless actions of German pillaging and occupation, and indirectly affected by hearing accounts of massacre far away. While lucky to have avoided tragic massacre, the lives of these women were still endangered by mines, bombs and guns.

More often than not, women were left alone in the home during the war. This is because their husbands, fathers, and brothers were also integral members of the community and had to participate in the war. Elia Lecce's husband was captured by German troops and held captive in Morocco for a number of years. With the allied landing of Sicily, and the newly appointed Italian Prime Minister's secret surrender of Italy to the Allies, many Italians abandoned fighting alongside Germans. However, the new Prime Minister, Badoglio, was expected to remain in the war and fight against Nazi Germany, thus creating a new clash between previously allied militia.⁷² The Germans invaded and deported the Jewish population to Auschwitz, and the Italians who refused to fight alongside the Germans were captured and taken to Germany to be used for slave labor.⁷³ This led a number of Italian soldiers deserting their officers, who then fell subject to being recaptured by the German army.⁷⁴ Enlisted in the Italian army, Michele (Vita's husband) traveled to Rome to fight for the Germans and then deserted like many others after the change in command. Michele was then subjected to capture by German troops who recognized him even in civilian clothes as a deserter. Unaware of where Michele was being taken, he jumped out of his captors' van in a recognizable city then proceeded to walk through the

⁷² Philip Morgan, "ITALY'S FASCIST WAR," *History Today* 57, no. 3 (March 2007): 40-46. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁷³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Italy."
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005411>

⁷⁴ Philip Morgan, "ITALY'S FASCIST WAR," *History Today* 57, no. 3 (March 2007): 40-46. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

mountainous terrain more than twenty kilometers to make it home to Fontechiari.⁷⁵ With husbands and men away, women were left to fend for themselves as Germans entered their homes.

The women acknowledge numerous accounts of theft, robbery, and mistreatment. They also emphasize the immediate danger of mine fields and bombs that were dropped by Germans and how they became part of normal life. As Paolo Pezzino describes in his article *The German Military Occupation of Italy and the War Against Civilians*, it was not uncommon for destruction of civilian villages especially in four particular regions: Apulia, Campania, Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna.⁷⁶ Italian women from these areas such as Ersilia DiCarlo, Vita Serafini and Santina DiCocco, can recall the behaviors that Pezzino explains as common for German soldiers. Pezzino describes the actions German authority took as “a systematic policy of extermination, pillage, piracy and terrorism.”⁷⁷ Italian women all over the country had to handle the abrupt demands of passing German soldiers. Ersilia, who was in her late teens at the time, recalls how horrible the German’s were “erano brutti i tedeschi.”⁷⁸ She continues, “I remember everything from the war. We used to hide all of our stuff from the Germans because they would come and take what ever they wanted. These were the Germans, the bad ones.”⁷⁹ Concerned and threatened by Italian partisan activity, Germans ended up retaliating against Italian civilians.⁸⁰

Italian women were important in filling both combat and non-combat roles which are recognized in Dan D’Amelio’s article “Italian Women in the Resistance, World War II.”

⁷⁵ Vita and Michele Serafini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, November 13, 2011. Audio recording in possession of this writer.

⁷⁶ Pezzino, 173.

⁷⁷ Pezzino, 177.

⁷⁸ “erano brutti i tedeschi” translates to “they were nasty/terrible, those Germans” Ersilia DiCarlo, Interview and traslation by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady NY. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁷⁹ Ersilia DiCarlo, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady NY, January 8, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁸⁰ Pezzino, 177.

D'Amelio states, "Although the majority of women partisans functioned in non-combat roles, a significant number had already been in the action."⁸¹ While many women were known to have resisted the war by being more active and assuming hands-on roles in partisan bands, other women resisted in small ways, mainly to keep their families safe. The women who shared their stories from Sora and Caserta fit in with the large group of Italian women who helped in non-combat roles. Small forms of resistance were seen in a number of the women whose homes were occupied by German troops; sometimes these encounters resulted in near death experiences. Antonia Rotondi, interviewee Maria Rotondi's mother-in-law, was forced to make a split second decision risking her life to save her family.

Having reached a semi-state of starvation, many Italian families attempted to subsist on whatever resources they had on their farms.⁸² Germans went from farm to farm across villages like Sora and Fontechiari confiscating whatever they could from Italian civilians. Antonia and her family were one of the unlucky farms raided by German troops. Antonia Rotondi had merely a cow to support her family, using its milk until she would kill it for meat; instead of giving up their means of survival to the invaders, Antonia resisted. Maria describes what happened next: "the sergeant came up to my mother and he pulled a gun on her and he said, 'I know you have the *mucca* (cow), and if you don't give it to me, I'm going to kill you and your whole family.'" ⁸³ Antonia's daughter in law, Maria Rotondi praises Antonia for her strength in handling the situation and for being so brave, Maria explains that Antonia had hid the cow far in the woods in fear the Germans would come and try and take their only means of survival. The situation unraveled, which Angela Cave describes in her article about Antonia's experience as follows:

⁸¹ Dan D'Amelio, "Italian Women in the Resistance, World War II," *Italian Americana* 19, no. 2 (2001), 127.

⁸² D'Amelio, 127.

⁸³ Angela Cave, "A life spanning a century and two countries" in *The Evangelist*, July 22, 2010; 12.

Realizing she'd rather die than give up one of their only sources of food, Mrs. Rotondi told the soldiers, in her native Italian tongue, that she had no cow. One of her sons braced himself for her demise, plugging his ears. But the blue-eyed blond boy's fear softened the soldiers, and they eventually pardoned Mrs. Rotondi. In future encounters she would ask her daughters to give each soldier a glass of water.⁸⁴

Lucky to have the Germans spare her life, Antonia could continue to support her family with the hidden cow. While her resistance was to keep her family alive it was resistance nonetheless.

Antonia's daughter-in-law, Maria Rotondi praises Antonia for her strength in handling the situation and for being so brave.

Santina DiCocco also recalls hiding food from German soldiers:

Then we was taking care of all the property, we [her family and other women *paesan*] work on the farm, we all was working on the farms, we lived on the food with the farm, that's what we have. So and then the war comes and then they take all on us. We put the food we have in one room, we hid it.⁸⁵

Like Santina and Antonia, many Italian women, had to accommodate the demands of the German army. Complying with their requests or making small comforts for them were part of daily war life. Giving the occupying soldiers water, not protesting their pillaging, or just allowing them to use their home for shelter were daily compliances necessary for survival.

As briefly mentioned, Paolo Pezzino's article uncovers the numerous massacres against Italian civilians. Lucky to have missed being the subjects of brutal German orders, the women of Sora and Caserta only witnessed German brutality in small ways compared to other regions of Italy. The massacre that occurred at Sant'Anna di Stazzema is one of the more atrocious incidents that occurred during the German occupation.⁸⁶ This incident provides proof that Italians in other regions of Italy experienced far worse consequences from German actions. One

⁸⁴ Cave, 12.

⁸⁵ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of writer.

⁸⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Italy," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/oct2004/germ-o07.shtml>

week after German's ordered the population of the town to evacuate, many civilians remained, thus resulting in a full out massacre of the towns remaining population. Capturing the sleepy civilians in the middle of the night, the Germans corralled their captives into the town center:

Short is the action of the machine-gun, someone could be still alive; so, the Nazis heaped up the pews of the Church on top of the corpse and burnt everything. Meanwhile the Nazis blocked the poor houses scattered all over the valley. All the inhabitants were gathered in their houses and, there, they were before killed and then burnt, together with the house and the cattle.⁸⁷

Relentless violence was used against the innocent civilians, and the brutalities were not limited to this specific massacre. Elisabeth Zimmerman explains, "This massacre was just one of countless other war crimes, which became more brutal and gruesome as German troops faced increased danger from the Allied advance and partisan resistance."⁸⁸ On top of the blatant killing of Italian civilians, other civilians were harmed or killed in less direct manors. Even though Elia, Vita and other women from their region did not experience violence to this extent, living in a war zone made them aware of the potential dangers of violence and destruction. Landmines and airstrikes were a constant threat to Elia, Vita and others' every day lives.

Adding to the dangers the physical presence of Germans in civilian homes posed for Italian families, indirect violence was also common. It was common for minefields to be planted in areas where civilians commonly strolled. Geissler and Guillemin explain, "To obstruct the Allied invasion, the German High Command laid tens of thousands of land mines, destroyed bridges, aqueducts, power stations, and harbors along Italy's southwestern coast."⁸⁹ Although Geissler and Guillemin look only at these threats in regard to the Pontine Marshes, mine fields

⁸⁷ Parco Nazionale della Pace di Sant'Anna di Stazzema, "The Slaughter: 1944, August 12th," <http://www.santannadistazzema.org/sezioni/THE%20MEMORY/pagine.asp?idn=1130>.

⁸⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Italy," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/oct2004/germ-o07.shtml>

⁸⁹ Erhard Geissler and Jeanne Guillemin, "German Flooding of the Pontine Marshes in World War II Biological Warfare or Total War Tactic?," *Politics and the Life Science* 29, no.1 (2010): 3, ebscohost.com.

and other obstacles were positioned elsewhere to stop Axis and Allied movements. Individuals like Santina, Vita and Elia recall experiences with minefields close to their homes. Elia explains the position of mines placed similar to how Geissler and Guillmen describe, “The American people started to cross the bridge and under the bridge was the mine. And some kids [Italian] were killed [from it].”⁹⁰ Santina DiCocco was actually injured by the mines placed by German soldiers. She explains how the land mine exploded, how they walked to the hospital without shoes on, and how she was lucky the shrapnel only hit and penetrated her arm or she could have been dead.

I was ten years old, I was making the fire to warm up the water and cook the macaroni and things like that. And then, what [my father] did, he close all this again, then he touch something, probably the thing that make a bomb. And they start to explode. He said oh look at that! And I went right on the front of the house and it went right like that, “boom”, so then he was [injured] really bad too. And then they come the people and take care of us in the hospital; it was my cousin, my mother and me. My mother didn’t have any shoes on. So I got this the big thing [a wound]. For that much I don’t got killed, and I got it over here [her right shoulder], and there’s no meat no more, just a hole [no skin or muscle, just scar tissue].⁹¹

To add more difficulty to these situations, resources were limited in terms of critical care.

Santina was lucky to have been brought to the hospital, but care after she and her mother were released could not be counted upon. She was fortunate enough to run into another Italian family who could give her and her mother a small piece of bread and some milk while they walked back to their home miles away.

While Santina experienced pain and discomfort in her experiences as a ten year old in the war, other women could laugh about some of the days they spent playing in mine fields. Italia

⁹⁰ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁹¹ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

Capoccia states, “Well for us, we were young. See it looked like we had fun. Because we were young we no understand the war. But they throw the bomb where we live.”⁹² Despite the dangers, as adolescents, Italia and Vita continued with their everyday responsibilities and chores. Vita remembers heading down to the creek to do her laundry and having to avoid the mines that were scattered in the fields. She had been warned about their presence, but she and her friend felt it a game to be successful in washing their clothes.⁹³

To top off dodging mines while playing in fields, while trying to farm, or while feeding the chickens, it was also normal to feel the earth shake from bombs dropped from Allied aircraft. Maria Rotondi, even as a child can recall bombs dropping around her.

I was born in ‘42, the war was just started. That’s how I remember when it was getting done, ya know because I was only three years old. The thing that I remember, she grabbed me and went in the ditch. And I remember all these bombs and stuff. That’s the only thing I remember – the noise. Thank god I wasn’t that old to remember more.⁹⁴

In attempt to force Germans out of Italian cities and towns, Allied forces dropped bombs haphazardly. Whereas Olga Ferri was so happy to see American troops at the close of the war, Americans were also to blame for some of the devastation. She states, “Americans came and there were a few bombs dropped, they knocked part of the church down, but not many people were killed.”⁹⁵ To these women, the atrocities witnessed were brushed off and regarded as normal occurrences. At the close of the war Italians were finally able to rejoice for their freedom from the Germans and hope for living conditions to turn around, but war left Italy devastated.

⁹² Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁹³ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁹⁴ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Clifton Park, NY, January 10, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

⁹⁵ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

One secondary source claims, “Italians expressed their anger and scorn for a regime predicated on **war** which was incapable of protecting them from bombing raids, and from the aftermath, shattered homes and infrastructure, lost jobs, traumatized minds.”⁹⁶ Gustavo Corni also notes how the Italian government left war trodden Italy to fend for itself, “It appears that the Italian authorities did very little to help them integrate in a climate of great economic vulnerability of a country that had only recently emerged from the war.”⁹⁷ Without troops marching through towns and pillaging their homes Italians were better off, but the poor economic state of Italy still haunted Italian families, especially the *contadini* who remained working on what land they owned.

At the war’s end in 1945, no more death would be seen in Italy or elsewhere due to Nazi Germany and other factors of the war. Olga expresses the conditions of her hometown at war’s end, “Right after the war it was like we didn’t have nothing. It took us a while to get back on our feet, it was a bad experience I guess, but when you’re young you don’t think of too many bad things.”⁹⁸ Italians were left in a difficult place after numerous years of war, so they were happy to receive help from Americans. As Olga mentioned, small things like matches were helpful considering the conditions they were left to live in.

Dario Gaggio notes the struggles peasants encountered after the end of the war as agricultural society was fading out and peasants were unsure of what to do: “Peasant families grew almost all they needed, reducing the risks associated with agriculture by cultivating a variety of crops in intricate patterns of rows and patches. By the early 1950s, this system of

⁹⁶ Philip Morgan, "ITALY'S FASCIST WAR," *History Today* 57, no. 3 (March 2007): 40-46. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁹⁷ Gustavo Corni, “Italy after 1945: War and Peace, Defeat and Liberation,” in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds, Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Riotte, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 270.

⁹⁸ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

mixed cultivations (*agricoltura promiscua*) was under severe strain.”⁹⁹ Further economic strain after a devastating war was enough to encourage immigration into the United States. Her father having immigrated prior to the war, Elia and her husband longed to leave Italy after the war ended because they could no longer live well off of the land. She explains,

Well I want to come in America, because over there [Italy], everyone was poor. We gotta work hard to survive. We gotta make the food and sell it in the market to buy clothes. Because we don't have no clothes, we don't have no shoes, we don't have nothing. We have a really really bad time. That's why my family was over here in America, and after that, I said I don't wanna stay over here no more.¹⁰⁰

This response after the war was not uncommon. Many of the men of families had immigrated prior to their wives, children and sisters. America signified an escape from poverty, an escape from the horrors many witnessed from war, and opportunity that they no longer could find in Italy. Many Italians took the years following 1945 to fill out their immigration papers. The women and families that left the life of *contadini* and agriculture behind them after World War II had been pushed to America because the wake of the war left little promise of success for Italian peasants.

⁹⁹ Gaggio, 326.

¹⁰⁰ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY. December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

CHAPTER 3: CHAIN MIGRATION

Since the mid 19th century, Italian migration was a common occurrence. Italian economy, agriculture, and political power had not provided a sufficient reason for hundreds of thousands of Italians to stay rooted in their birth country. Throughout the early years of emigration, men often left for America in hopes of establishing themselves in jobs to make enough money to support their families back in Italy. Up until the First World War, Male Italian immigrants were the most common. Humbert Nelli notes, “During this period the immigration was characterized by a heavy preponderance of unskilled working-age males. Thus of the 2,250,000 Italians who arrived between 1899 and 1910 males comprised more than three-quarters of the total.”¹⁰¹ With the outbreak of World War I, immigration slowed. Many men had returned to Italy prior to its start, and were further prevented from going back to America because of the war and the rise of Mussolini.¹⁰² The Immigration Act of 1924 lowered the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States, and was also a factor that kept many Italians back in Italy.¹⁰³ Fascism and Mussolini’s rule also prevented Italians from leaving Italy, resulting in their presence in Italy during World War II. Many Italian families that remained in Italy during the war had a relative or two who had escaped poverty-stricken Italy and sent small sums of money to support those still living in Italy. Samuel Bailly explains, “Almost all of the Italians who went to Buenos Aires and New York did so primarily to earn more money than they had in Italy – either to send back home or to improve their living conditions in the New World,

¹⁰¹ Humbert Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnic: The Italian Americans*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 42.

¹⁰² Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 160.

¹⁰³ Francesco Cordasco, “Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,” *Theory into Practice* 20, no.1 (1981): 59, ebscohost.

or perhaps a combination of both.”¹⁰⁴ Explaining the gendered make up of early immigration during the period of World War I, Nelli observes, “Of the 2,250,000 Italians who arrived between 1899 and 1910 males comprised more than three-quarters of the total.”¹⁰⁵ These relatives, generally male, along with certain stages of a woman’s life cycle would soon be important factors in many decisions to leave Italy following the end of World War II.

In Salvatore LaGumina’s compilation of Italian American male oral histories, it is easy to see the immigration trend within families. Specifically told through male experiences, many describe their elder male relatives’ unaccompanied departure from Italy. Henry Tolino explains, “My father came to the United States in 1910 while my mother, brother and two sisters remained in Italy.”¹⁰⁶ This situation was not uncommon for Italian families. Men immigrated prior to women and children in order to find jobs in America and become familiar with American life so that their families could follow in the future, or to make enough money to return to Italy and have a better life there. Saverio Rizzo recalls, “Most of the men who had emigrated from my town had intended to return, expecting to remain in America for perhaps five or six years simply to earn money.”¹⁰⁷

This situation was similar for many of the women who came to the United States after World War II. A number of women have noted their family dynamic and patterns of immigration, which were similar to those of the men in LaGumina’s collection of oral histories.. Antonietta Fazzone retells her father and grandfather’s experiences in the early 1900s,

My father, he was born in Italy. In those days what they used to do is, the men they used to come over here and work and make some money and go back in Italy

¹⁰⁴ Samuel L. Baily, “Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York,” *American Historical Review* 88, no. 2 (1983): 283.

¹⁰⁵ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethics*, 42.

¹⁰⁶ Salvatore LaGumina, *The Immigrants Speak” Italian Americans Tell their Story*, (New York: Center for Migration Studies: 1979), 53.

¹⁰⁷ LaGumina, *The Immigrants Speak*, 5.

and buy a piece of land or whatever... Same thing my grandfather used to do. Come over here ya know and make some money, go back over there and he started building a house, then I guess he ran out of money. And then he came back over here [to Schenectady] again.¹⁰⁸

For many other Italian women who ended up in Schenectady and other parts of the United States, this type of family migration was common. When travelling back and forth to Italy was no longer economically advantageous, wives and children were sent for.¹⁰⁹ This explains why a number of Italian women immigrated when they did and who accompanied them or did not accompany them in their journeys.

In the early 20th century mass migration from Italy was the trend. With nearly 16 million Italians emigrated by 1915, those left in Italy seemed to be the exception to Italy's mass migration trends.¹¹⁰ Mainly for reasons preventing Italians from escaping Fascism and poverty, many Italians stayed rooted to their hometowns and lived the life of the *contadino* (one who did not lack the absolute necessities of life).¹¹¹ These *contadini* characterized the majority of the Italian women who later settled in Schenectady. Working the farm and tending to livestock was the way these Italian families functioned for generations. Mass migration and immigration to America only provided them with an opportunity to earn more money. Money earned could then be used to buy more land in Italy for agricultural use, land in America to start a home, or to provide their children with basic necessities. Antonietta continues, "But anyways they all decided to go back, so they bought a piece of land and they start to build this house, then they ran out of money, so my grandfather, came back again one more time then they all settled back up in

¹⁰⁸ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁰⁹ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethics*, 46.

¹¹⁰ Giuseppe Lucrezio Monticelli, "Italian Emigration: Basic Characteristics and Trends with Special Reference to the Post-War years," in *The Italian Experience in the United States*, eds, Silvano Tomasi and Madeline Engel, (New York: Center for Migration Studies, Inc, 1970), 4.

¹¹¹ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 37.

Italy. So then my mother got married, and they never really came back over here, my grandparents.¹¹²” For reasons like these, many Italians knew what life was like in America, and had pre-established networks of family and friends overseas.

Women like in the case of Antonietta Fazzone’s family partook in active family migration with individuals moving back and forth numerous times. Although her situation is unique in the number of times her family travelled back in forth, individual movement by a particular family member, generally male, for economic reasons was not uncommon. This process known as Chain Migration, was very common, and the reason behind why families came in separate intervals. Antonietta can recall the order in which her family members arrived in Schenectady. First, she outlines her grandmother’s efforts to maintain their family in the midst of migration during the 1920s,

So anyways, my grandmother I guess she was young, she had one child. And she got sick and tired and says what kind of marriage is this ya know. You’re in the United States and I’m over here... So they decided to that she was going to come over here in Schenectady... She got pregnant and my mother was born in Schenectady, so this is a long ago story... But anyways they all decided to go back [to Italy], so they bought a piece of land. So then my mother got married...

She continues with the next generation’s migration patten in the post-war period:

So anyways, after the war, there were six of us in our family, I was the youngest one. So my oldest brother, in 1950 immigrated to Argentina, believe it or not. Then in 1954 my brother Paul, he was fifteen years old, he could come over here, but my parents had no real interest in coming over here, but they wanted something better for their children, so my mother wrote to one of her cousins and asked to take Paul in. My uncle didn’t have any kids, so he said yes [Paul could go live with him]... After that another brother married this girl that she was already here [in Schenectady] and she came back in Italy, and so then he [they both] came [back to Schenectady] in 1957, and that’s how we all started, it was

¹¹² Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

like a chain ya know. So then after that I decided to come. I was 16 years old in 1959.¹¹³

This kind of family organization and relocation was common among Italian *contadini* families. Throughout the 20th century, these women's families created and established links in America. Traditionally male immigrants came and returned to Italy for the sake of their women and children. Looking at an overview of the women's backgrounds allows for this clear pattern to be seen. The majority of the women immigrated after another family member had spent a portion of their life living in America on their own. This is an important trend to note because it sets up specific chains of immigration and can explain why Italians made the choice to immigrate, when, and where.

Family members who immigrated prior to the rest of the family added an interesting dynamic for Italians because it presented the opportunity for children born in Italy to already have American citizenship. Italia Capoccia and her siblings experienced this kind of transition. After Italia was born in 1927, her father immigrated to Schenectady to work in a factory, became a United States citizen and then returned to Italy because he was injured and could no longer work. At that point he continued to have children in Italy, and since he was a United States citizen, his children up until the age of 21 could be citizens as well. Italia observed, "Angelina was born in 1931, after he was a citizen of the United States"¹¹⁴ thus making Angelina and his subsequent children American citizens. Italia's sister Luigina states similarly, "Angelina was born a citizen. Angelina and Domenic. They were born over there [in Italy], but my father was over here [in Schenectady] first. Before they go, Angelina was twenty-one years. Before she was

¹¹³ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹¹⁴ Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

twenty-one she didn't come back here [to the United States], and she lost her citizenship and can't come no more."¹¹⁵ Later on in life, this characteristic would be beneficial when deciding to immigrate, and also was a factor because after surpassing twenty-one years old, American citizenship was revoked which prevented older people from coming. Olga Ferri provides us with a similar story. Olga's grandparents had immigrated to Schenectady; her father was born in the States and so he already had American citizenship. At some point, he returned to Italy, married, and fathered two children, but by 1939 he was back in the United States. With the outbreak of World War II, he was drafted in the American military and was forced to fight for American, leaving Olga, her sister and her mother back in Italy. She recalls: "It was my mother, my sister and I. My father was here. We were even alone. My father wasn't there during the war; he got drafted in the army and was stationed in Alabama, so it was just the three of us, my mother, myself and my sister."¹¹⁶ World War II kept Olga, her mother and sister separated from her father, not even the slightest communications were made until after the end of the war. War's end allowed letter writing to commence and after a number of years Olga's father made plans to return to Italy to pick up Olga and her mother and bring them back to the United States. These trends of immigration and return back to Italy were not uncommon, and are the reason behind the network Italians created both in the United States and in Italy.

In the period after World War I and prior to the outbreak of World War II Italian immigration slowed immensely. Nelli asserts, "Italian immigration declined precipitously from 283,738 in 1914 to 49,688 in 1915 (the first full year of war) and all the way down to 5,250 in

¹¹⁵ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY. November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹¹⁶ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

1918.”¹¹⁷ During this time period, many of the men who had immigrated before their families returned to Italy because they were unable to support themselves in the American life, to return to their families, or to select a wife.¹¹⁸ Many men enlisted in the Italian military and were subjected once again to Italy’s struggling economy. War preventing Italian immigration gave Italians no choice but to remain in deteriorating conditions.

In the wake of World War II, the decision to move to America was made easier, depending on one’s family immigration past. As detailed previously by some Italian women, many fathers, brothers and even husbands had been to the United States in the early 20th century leaving their families in Italy. With new immigration legislation, gaining a naturalized citizenship was beneficial to minors seeking to come to the United States. Antonietta recalls wanting the new legislation. “...after the war, ya know World War II, things were very bad in Italy. So this law came out that if you were a son or daughter of an American citizen you could come back, come over here, but you had to be under the age of twenty-one, you had to be a minor.”¹¹⁹ This new legislation, The Immigration and Nationality (McCarran-Walter) act of 1952, that Antonietta spoke of, was a continuation of The Immigration Act of 1924 that was passed to restrict the number of immigrants entering the United States. The revised Immigration and Nationality act of 1952, changed aspects of the quota system and the National Origins Quota, but still allowed immigration and citizenship to unmarried minor children, and wives of American citizens.¹²⁰ Under this new legislation and the previous immigration laws under the Immigration Act of 1924, some Italians benefitted, but others were unable to immigrate because

¹¹⁷ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethics*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia*, 91 and 95.

¹¹⁹ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²⁰ Marion T. Bennett, “The Immigration and Nationality (McCarran-Walter) Act of 1952, as Amended to 1965,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 367 (Sep., 1966): 131, jstor.org.

of timing and places in their life cycles. After the war, Vita was under twenty-one and was ready to immigrate because her brother had left Italy prior to the war and had established himself in Schenectady. Her father also had immigrated when he was very young and had returned to Italy only to get married, have children, and then return to Schenectady alone. These two moves gave her motivation and an opportunity to end up in the States after World War II and can explain their family's migration. However, when Vita boarded the boat to New York in 1948, she and her six-month-old baby, Anna, travelled without her husband Michele, who had to stay in Italy until 1953. She recalls, "Mike was in Italy, he couldn't come. He had to wait for me to get citizen papers and then call him. That time it wasn't like before, go, come, go. It was real strict. He had papers from his father like Mario, my brother [did from my father], [but] because he was past twenty-one years old. Mike had to wait. Five years he was in Italy [after me]." ¹²¹ Luckily, chain migration allowed her to be comfortable and safe when arriving in her new home of Schenectady. Her brother, her brother-in-law and other family members were previously established, so she was able to find a place within the community with their help.

Vita, Elia, and Olga were among the first women of those in this study to arrive in New York following the war. Their family's previous migration history, all similar, allowed them to leave Italy and settle in New York shortly after the end of World War II. Vita came in 1948 because her family members presented her with the opportunity and her stage in life allowed her to. She says, "My father came over here [years before World War II], [and] he called us after the World War Seconda, and we came after the war." ¹²² Stuck in poor farming conditions, Elia's family migration was established not long after World War II. Agriculture and Italy were not

¹²¹ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²² Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

producing much, and neither were Elia and the Lecce family. Elia's father had immigrated to Schenectady in 1912, returned back to Italy for his children's youth, then came back to Schenectady. Elia's father was the first to immigrate from her family and thus was the reason for her immigration to Schenectady later in life. In 1947, Elia's siblings arrived in Schenectady, but Elia stayed behind, "That's all, it was just me and my husband here [in Italy]." ¹²³ Elia finally arrived in Schenectady seven years later, her departure most likely delayed by reproduction, immigration paperwork, and lack of money. So in 1954, Elia, her husband and her children moved in with her parents who had arrived prior to her. Similarly, Olga's father was already stateside, "My father wasn't there [in Italy] during the war. Because he came here [to Schenectady] in 1939, then the war broke out and he couldn't come back." ¹²⁴ Olga was age sixteen at the time of her immigration. She was unmarried and was still a minor, so her father's American citizenship granted her and her mother citizenship as well, motivating their immigration. She describes how she felt when her father asked the rest of her family to come to the United States but other factors prevented everyone from coming,

He asked my mother if we wanted to stay there [in Italy], then he would come back. Or if we wanted to come here [to Schenectady]. And my mother said she wanted to come here. She asked us too, and I said 'Oh yeah! We wanna go!'... Of course you wanna go find out, what its [America] is like. But by then, my sister was over twenty by the time the war was over and she got married so she couldn't come with us. So only my mother and I came. ¹²⁵

These women had connections to America right after the war, and were fortunate enough to take advantage of what America had to offer. Devastated by war, the slightest opportunity and hint to

¹²³ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY. December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²⁴ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²⁵ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

leave Italy was generally taken if circumstances allowed them to leave. However, some Italians, like Olga's older sister, could not jump immediately at offers to come to the United States.

Olga's family experience is similar to that of the women who immigrated in the following ten years (i.e. 10-20 years after the war's end). Many other Italian women immigrated in the 60s because marriage, age or other factors prevented them from leaving in the immediate post-war years. Like Olga's sister who had to remain in Italy while Olga and her mother joined her father in Schenectady, many Italian women remained in Italy through rough economic times because they were tied there from marriage. Italia, Ersilia and Santina all remained in Italy for a number of years following the war because their personal lives kept them from immigrating. These women immigrated at later points in their lives. Initially too young to leave immediately after the war, Luigina at the age of thirty, arrived in Schenectady in 1968. Following family patterns of chain migration, Luigina was one of the younger children in her family, and remained in Italy with her mother, so she witnessed her three brothers move to the States prior to her. Remaining in Italy, Luigina was married and went on to have a child. "Everybody left Fontechiari,"¹²⁶ Luigina explains. And when the time came after she had her family established, Luigina left too. "I was married in Italy and brought my husband and Rinaldo (her son). When we arrived in New York, they came to get us. It was Cestino, Augustino, Guido, my three brothers."¹²⁷ Everyone was there ready to make her transition easier. Luigina's sister Italia, also shared a similar experience; arriving in Ohio at 27 years old, she was married in Italy and had two children. Italia first immigrated to Ohio because her husband's family was rooted there, but after a year of difficulty, they relocated to Schenectady where Italia had more family, more

¹²⁶ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²⁷ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

relatives and a better network of support. Italia explains, “We move over here a Schenectady because I don’t have no relatives over there [in Ohio].”¹²⁸ Ersilia and Santina also got married in Italy and remained there while their families were established in the States. Arriving in the mid 60s, these women were content to leave agricultural Italy, rejoin their extended family and create a more successful home than they had in Italy.

These patterns in migration movements are very common among Italian families, and these women’s experience portray how chain migration really set these women up to leave Italy and bad times. World War II had direct influence over some of these women’s choices to immigrate, or it affected other family members to make the move, eventually resulting in immigration for all. Although some of these women did not come immediately following the end of the war, it is safe to say that their experiences during the war were still part of the driving force pushing them to America. All these women knew was how to work the land, and live the life of the *contadino*, and Italy was no longer providing them with adequate production to live very comfortably. Gustavo Corni describes the state Italy remained in at war’s end, “At the end of the Second World War, the general internal situation in Italy was extremely difficult, At an economic level, over and above the serious damaged suffered, particularly by the infrastructure network (ports and railways but also the steel industry), estimated at an overall cost of 3,200 billions Lire... there was a very serious inflation crisis...”¹²⁹ Further describing conditions of central and southern Italy, “There was also a deterioration in economic morals with the triumph, mainly in the southern regions, of an illegal economy ‘intoxicated’ by the extraordinary financial

¹²⁸ Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹²⁹ Gustavo Corni, “Italy after 1945: War and Peace, Defeat and Liberation,” in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Rlotte (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 263

capacity of the occupiers. Acquiring essentials for daily life was still extremely expensive for the average Italian citizen, and, above all for those on fixed salaries (and, therefore, mainly civil servants), the black market was very damaging.”¹³⁰ These economic reasons, along with pull factors of other family members are why we see these women entering the United States over a twenty-year period after World War II. Marriage kept some women enduring poor conditions for longer than others, and others were young and convinced to immigrate early because of extended family ties. Ultimately, through chain migration these women were able to make their way across the Atlantic, and begin new lives in a new country that would show their families success.

¹³⁰ Gustavo Corni, “Italy after 1945: War and Peace, Defeat and Liberation,” in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Rlotte (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 263.

CHAPTER 4: WORK

Generally, the life of the *contadino*, or the Italian peasant farmer, was the only means of surviving in Italy prior to their economic boom of the 1960s. Both men and women worked hard in the fields to maintain a living that by today's standards would be qualified as barely surviving. However, once men left Italy in search of better opportunities, women took over the roles of working the fields alone. Jennifer Guglielmo describes how work shaped the lives of daughters and mothers: "A life of intense labor began when girls were ten or eleven years old, the age when many assumed the responsibilities of their household while their mothers worked in the fields."¹³¹ Work in Italy meant hard, laborious, hands on work because the availability of land, lack of industrialization, and limited education only allowed for peasants to partake in agricultural labor. These are the reasons for which many men began leaving Italy. Hopes of success within an industrialized economy drove many men to American cities. When women of the family finally decided to make the move to reconnect their families, they too had to leave the field and find jobs in other kinds of work. Linda Reeder states, "Having invested in their own dreams of bettering their families' material conditions through transoceanic migration, the wives of migrants worked hard to make that dream come true."¹³² In this way, Italian women's lives differed from many native-born middle-class American women's lives in the 1950s and 1960s.

For the Italian women who entered the United States during the first wave of mass Italian immigration, options were limited. Back in Italy, the wife "supervised household chores and organized the clothes making and food preparation. In addition, she often tended animals and

¹³¹ Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 15.

¹³² Linda Reeder, "Sicilian Women and Mass Migration, 1880-1920," in *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*. 53.

tilled the garden, producing food for family consumption and for sale at the local market.”¹³³ In American cities there was no land to be worked, and families weren’t in good enough economic situations to only have the breadwinner father bring home the pay.¹³⁴ Families would be able to scrounge by with one income, but two incomes were necessary to achieve comfortable and successful lives for children. Working in agriculture back in Italy to add to the husband’s income, Italian women arriving in America were aware that they would have to continue this role in some way. Italian families depended on income from multiple wage earners, hence women had to find a sector of work where they would be valuable. Sewing was a skill utilized by women back in Italy, which made Italian women marketable to work in textile mills and garment factories. Quickly, Italian women made their way into garment factory work, getting paid minimally for a job based on a skill that considered them skilled artisans back in Italy. Jennifer Guglielmo explains, “Both younger single women and married women also sought to work outside the home in garment factories. They most often found jobs in the ‘unskilled’ trades as operators and finishers, ‘lining garments, sewing on buttons, trimming threads, and pulling bastings by hand,’ while employers, trying to fill orders on short notice, continually pushed them to increase the pace.”¹³⁵ Italians filled the demanding factory positions, and soon after, Italian women dominated the floors of garment industry factories. Guglielmo states, “Italian women entered the garment industry at the bottom of the ranks. By 1919, work in both artificial flowers and feathers – the lowest-paid work in manufacturing – had become known as ‘the Italian

¹³³ Miriam Cohen, *From Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993) 28.

¹³⁴ Miriam Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 44.

¹³⁵ Jennifer Guglielmo, “Italian Women’s Proletarian Feminism in the New York City Garment Trades, 1890s-1940s,” in *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 254.

women's trade.'"¹³⁶ As time progressed, Italian women remained in Garment factories and held predominant roles there. Italian women worked long hours, and endured tough conditions for minimal pay; slowly they crept into other sectors of industry, still willing to do whatever work came their way as long as it helped out their families. As Cohen states, "These industries, along with domestic service and textile manufacturing, were the arenas where women were most likely to find work,"¹³⁷ and Italian women remained in these industries for many years.

In Schenectady, initial attraction to the area was created due to the industrial boom that occurred in the 19th century. General Electric, American Locomotive Company (ALCO) and Schenectady Locomotive all provided ample job opportunities in factories for men. Men's movement to America to find jobs in industries commenced the chain migration process for many Italian families. When an increased number of women began arriving in areas like Schenectady to reconnect their families they too had to search for jobs within major industries. Aside from General Electric, ALCO and Schenectady Locomotive, women found jobs within clothing manufacturing companies that were more suitable to their skills. Robert Pascucci notes the breakdown of Schenectady's firms aside from General Electric and ALCO, showing where the majority of women went to work, "With the exception of the Mica Company and two garment factories, which employed between 150 and 350 each (largely women), the other firms were small, with ten to thirty workers apiece."¹³⁸ The initial Italian population of Schenectady had to work incredibly hard to establish decent lives for their families, and starting from the bottom in low wage factory work was where they began.

¹³⁶ Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 69.

¹³⁷ Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 45.

¹³⁸ Robert Pascucci, *Electric City Immigrants: Italians and Poles of Schenectady, N.Y., 1880-1930*, (New York: State University of New York at Albany, Dept. of History, 1984), 185.

From the various Italian women whose stories we have, we can see a clear trend in the fading out of industrial work as women begin developing families. The women who arrived in Schenectady unmarried, childless or with very young children found it easier to find jobs working in factories. Olga Ferri, Vita Serafini, Elia Lecce and Maria Rotondi were among the women to immigrate and find their first jobs in factories. Olga was in her late teens, unmarried, attending night school and working. Vita was twenty-one, married with a two year old child who was cared for by her mother, and Elia was married, nearly thirty years old, lived with her parents for her first year in Schenectady and had four children under the age of six. Finally, immigrating to Schenectady in 1962, Maria Rotondi was twenty years old and married, but had not begun having children yet. Whether childless, or with young children who could be watched by relatives, all four women had extended family and were at a time in their life cycle that allowed them to spend an entire working day in a factory setting. As women continued to progress through their lifecycles and creating bigger families, factory work became more difficult to handle as children got older, women had more children, and women had less help from aging parents. At this point in the lifecycle a movement from factory work to domestic services is seen. Regardless of where one worked, arriving in a foreign city was very nerve wracking for these women. Unable to speak English, unaware of American cultural norms, and the structure of formal working places, these Italian women threw themselves into these foreign environments only thinking of the benefiting their current and future families. While all of the women worked long, tough hours in whatever jobs they could find, the dynamic of Italian women in the workplace saw a pattern as the years went on.

It just so happened that in a number of factories where these Italian women worked, small Italian communities were formed, Italian women sticking together because many were

illiterate and could not speak English very well. Italian women worked long hard days in these factories and generally remained in one job until the birth of a child. From then on, moving between companies on a time frame established by the birth of children and the economic situation of industries was very common. Olga explains her movement from job to job, “I worked down the street here. Cheltingham Manufacturuer, they were making nightgowns. And from there I went to the glove factory. And then from the glove factory I went to Mica insulator on Broadway. And then I got laid off, and in the meantime I got married and I stayed home for quite a few years with the kids.”¹³⁹ Younger women tended to remain in factory work until marriage and childbirth removed them from that kind of work. Diane Vecchio observes of Italian women, “While almost all left factory employment upon marriage, Italians and Poles more typically left after the birth of a child.”¹⁴⁰ Olga was able to stop working once her children were born because they were already in a better economic situation; her husband most likely had established a decent financial situation, working in Schenectady for years prior to their marriage and children. Maria also having a better financial situation notes similar movement of factory jobs, “I went to work. I went on the factory...At Cheltingham Manufacturing in the press. The Corral, they did the clothes for Corral, then I worked at Belrad which is another factory. They used to do clothes for John Meyers here in New York, coats and suits. After that, after a couple of years I had my first boy in 64.”¹⁴¹ Vita on the other hand came alone and with a child to support, so was essentially forced to work to support her family. Vita depicts her original working situation when she first arrived, “I went to the gloves factory to make gloves. I worked

¹³⁹ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴⁰ Diane Vecchio, “Gender, Domestic Values, and Italian Working Women in Milwaukee: Immigrant Midwives and Businesswomen,” in *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 165.

¹⁴¹ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Clifton Park, NY, January 1 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

with other women who worked the machines, they made the gloves too. I worked 8 hours, made twenty dollars a week. Five dollars I'd give to my father to put in the bank every week. And when Mike come after 5 years, I had \$1500 saved. I save \$5 a week, I didn't buy no shoes, times were tough."¹⁴² As Vita portrays, it was common for these women to live with the bare minimum while they were establishing themselves in their new community. Used to living in poverty, these Italian immigrants felt no urge to partake in the commercialist society of the fifties. Although the women who came to Schenectady earlier like Olga and Vita did not endure situations like those who came at the turn of the 20th century, they still had to work if they wanted to see their families have success.

By the mid 1950s, Vita and Olga were the knowledgeable women who could share with newly immigrated women their experiences and help them establish their lives in an easier manner by giving support. Italians had developed a reputation of hard working people, so finding jobs became easier, especially when groups of Italians were already found working in certain jobs and in certain companies. As Vita and Olga's respective children grew up, certain aspects of the women's lives changed. Italian women returned back to work for as many hours as they could when their children were of school age. Instead of returning to factory work, Olga found employment in a department store working alongside other Italian women and Vita was offered good pay and good benefits at General Electric as part of the cleaning crew when a fellow Italian suggested the job opening to her.¹⁴³ Elia switched out of factory work into laundry at Ellis Hospital because it was walking distance from her new home and her children's school. Finally, while Maria was pregnant, she switched to helping her husband with his work, giving

¹⁴² Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴³ Olga Ferri, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Rotterdam, NY, November 2, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer. Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

herself more flexibility.¹⁴⁴ Change in employment meant more flexible hours for Olga in the department store, but Vita continued to work full time as she had her oldest daughter, Anna, ready to help out with her younger siblings at home.

Following the development of families, and taking on more responsibilities in the home, working at Ellis Hospital, General Electric and the American Laundry, all located in Schenectady, were places of employment where Italian women found it easiest to juggle home life and earning an income. They were also where these Italian women spent most of their days and shared most of their jokes and fun. Maria Rosa Guerini, an Italian nun working for St. Anthony's remarks on the make up of Italian mothers whose children she taught at St. Anthony's school on Van Vranken Ave, "Most of the women were working in the hospital you know, doing cleaning and housekeeping, but there were some professionals, too."¹⁴⁵ The majority of these women that Maria Rosa speaks of started off in a common job amongst Italian women at The American Laundry. Antonietta recalls her American Laundry as her first working job, "I couldn't go to work because I was only 16, so I went to school, and I went to work part time in the summer. I went to work at American Laundry ya know, it was a lot of fun. All these women and I met a lot of your grandmother's *paesan* (Italian neighbors) over there."¹⁴⁶ American Laundry was a work place where Vita, Luigina, and Santina all spent many hours sweating over the hot pressing of linens in summer heat and winter cold. American Laundry developed into a safe space for Italian women, a place of work, but also a place of community and a support system. Santina describes her experiences as follows,

¹⁴⁴ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio. Clifton Park, NY, January 10, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴⁵ Maria Rosa Guerini, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 11, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴⁶ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

We had a lot of fun time, because at the Laundry it was all Italian people. No one talked English. Probably 4 or 5 people was talking English. Hey when you come and you can't talk English, you just go and talk with the people who talk Italian, not English. So my boss he got mad and then he left and worked at GE. It was girls we was young girls, weren't even married. My mother was washing the sheets in the back, put them down, we was in the front we was fold and separate all the sides and ya know wrap them up because they had to go in the hospital, in any place, in the restaurant.¹⁴⁷

Long hours in hot conditions were difficult for these women, but thankfully they were connected through language and similar goals of successful futures. Ersilia acknowledges, "Everyone was Italian, if they weren't Italian it would have been bad!"¹⁴⁸

Similar to the demographics at American Laundry, Ellis Hospital and General Electric also had a large number of Italian women working in their laundry department and house keeping. These women did not relate to other women who were native born Schenectady, so remaining among Italians comforted them. Luigina describes the make-up of Ellis Hospital's laundry department, "I went to work at the laundry at Ellis Hospital. It was almost all Italian over there."¹⁴⁹ Elia Lecce began working at Ellis Hospital after her start in the factories as well. Spending short amounts of time working in the glove factory, then at American Laundry, Elia spent the majority of her working life in Ellis Hospital. Arriving with three children, working was the only way to support her family. She states, "I work all my life. You know because I gotta send the kids to school, I gotta pay for college, I gotta work."¹⁵⁰ Working was not an option for these women, it was an obligation taken seriously if they wanted their children to achieve much

¹⁴⁷ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January, 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴⁸ Ersilia DiCarlo, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 8, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁴⁹ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁵⁰ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

more than a third grade education, the education level the majority of the women were only capable of obtaining. Industries, housekeeping and laundering opportunities provided these women with steady but difficult lives of work.

Aside from the wage labor these women did in factories and in laundry, the work Italian women did in the home was nearly a full time job on its own. While all these women needed to go to work and be a second provider for their families to supplement their husbands' wages, their hard work did not remain in the workplace. While these women's incomes were secondary to their husbands, the work they did in the home was their primary realm of work, and they were proud of their efforts in the home. As Miriam Cohen describes, "Italian women were victims of the double day; they were still responsible for taking care of the home and raising the children."¹⁵¹ Luckily for these women, they had spent years in Italy living hardworking, laborious lives, and to continue that in America where there would be greater rewards was not a foreign concept for them. Some women who illuminate this "double day" include Ersilia DiCarlo, Maria Rotondi, Luigina DiLegge and Elia Lecce. After a long day at work cleaning patient's rooms at Ellis Hospital, Ersilia would leave work only to begin her chores at home. Tending to the garden, cleaning the house, taking care of her kids were in the list of things she needed to complete outside of her eight hour work day at the Hospital. These tasks would be disrupted by her husband and fulfilling his needs when he arrived home from work. Ersilia recalls, "He was your typical Italian guy, he never cleaned a thing. I was doing the yard and in the garden doing hard work and he came home and says make me something to eat?"¹⁵² Caring for the Italian husband was another chore added to Italian women's list of tasks at home,

¹⁵¹ Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 98.

¹⁵² Ersilia DiCarlo, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 8, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

ultimately lending very limited free time for these women to do as they please. Luigina explains the husband-wife work dichotomy of her home,

I always did the women's work. It was the same in Italy. I do my work, he does his work. I do my garden, I do everything else in the house. I make dinner all of the time. Before I go to work I get up in the morning because he don't want his lunch made the night before. He wanted it in the morning, he wanted it fresh. I couldn't make the lunch and put it in the fridge, he no want it! I make it fresh, I make the coffee, I get up first. Then he gets up, and goes to work. I make everything ready for the kids, then I go to work. When I get home I start to do it again. I cook, clean, I never by the bread, I make it all the time. I come home from work at 4 o'clock, I make the bread. My Family is all the same, we all do the same way.¹⁵³

Luigina notes at the end of the dialogue that the situation explained was not just for her. Her other female siblings, Italia one of them, played the same gendered roles and were subjected to the demands of the husband. Luigina makes light of how difficult her work really was by joking about how fresh her husband's sandwich had to be. She claims he would know if she had put it in the fridge if it was made the night before, and he would not allow anything but a fresh sandwich. She jokes about waking up before her husband and staying up later than him to deal with the children and other household chores because she was just filling the role an Italian woman was supposed to uphold during these times.

Similar household dynamics can be seen with other Italian women. Elia Lecce explains a similar situation, but she makes sure not to discredit the hard work her husband did to support her family economically. Elia states, "My husband worked two jobs, one job in the morning, and he did a part time job at night. I go and work in the hospital in the morning. Before I go to work, I prepare the food for the kids. When I come home at night, I gotta cook for my husband, I gotta

¹⁵³ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

cook for myself. Besides that I gotta do the house cleaning, I gotta iron the clothes, ya know.”¹⁵⁴ Elia felt as though doing all of the household chores, taking care of her children and her husband was her duty, so she never asked her husband to help out, but he also never offered help. Maria Rotondi’s home life story and husband-wife relationship is also interesting. The majority of Italian men took up masonry and carpentry jobs in Schenectady, so their work involved a lot of manual labor as well. Maria recalls doing her typical day of work at Cheltingham Manufacturers, doing her household chores on top of that, and then going to help her husband with his carpentry jobs to earn a few extra dollars. She states, “After work we used to come home, used to eat something then we used to go do extra jobs, inside jobs, the remodeling.”¹⁵⁵ But Maria also admits her husband did help out with the kids and cooking occasionally. This difference in household dynamic could be attributed to the fact that her husband immigrated at an earlier time than she did, spending the majority of his life being raised in America, and less time learning the male dominated roles of Italian culture back in Italy, but even so, the work he did outside of his job was very limited compared to the kinds of things Maria did outside of her paying job.

An entertaining dialogue between Italia Capoccia and her husband Ralph really exemplifies the typical breakdown of division labor and portrays how little husbands did to help their wives in the home. Italia explains what she typically did for her husband everyday, “All the time I made him his lunch. We’re married. I gotta put the food in front of him all of the time. I get up do the lunch, even when he goes hunting, I get up early in the morning, make the lunch, make the coffee, cause he gotta go hunt!” Ralph responded honestly, saying that their relationship was just like any other Italian husband and wife. He admits never to have helped

¹⁵⁴ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁵⁵ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Clifton Park, NY, January 10, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

Italia out for all 62 years they lived together. This lack of reciprocity was described by Luigina, when she also points out her sister was subjected to similar gendered expectations, she stated, “My Family is all the same, we all do the same way.”¹⁵⁶ Italia further explains his role with the children, “He don’t wanna even hear them cry. If he hears the kids cry he get mad at me. I tell the truth. You can’t say I’m lying.” Ralph’s response: “Everybody looks at these things differently!” This back and forth argument between Italia and Ralph concerning their roles in the home really portrays how little involved the male was in the home, and shows how little the husbands thought about the burden they placed on to their wives.

Whether it was long days sewing at Cheltingham Manufactueres or the glove factory, or hot days pressing clothes and linens at American Laundry, Italian women never stopped to take a second for themselves. “We knew work, work, and work. Never take care of yourself!”¹⁵⁷ explains Maria Rotondi. Maria hoped her children learned that taking care of oneself is necessary, as she wished she did earlier in her life, now living with a broken back.¹⁵⁸ Working two jobs, coming home to take care of the kids and starting a whole separate round of chores was the same routine Italian women engaged in daily. Within the interviews, the women never complained about their situations because they had experienced poverty, death, and war in Italy, and working in Schenectady and in America was an opportunity they couldn’t let slip away. Working at full time jobs, part time jobs, and odd jobs here and there so that they could contribute economically to the improvement of their children’s opportunities was these women’s

¹⁵⁶ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁵⁷ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Clifton Park, NY, January 10, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁵⁸ Maria Rotondi, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio. Clifton Park, NY, January 10, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

goals. No superfluous spending on unneeded items was allowed. Italian women lived with the necessities and worked hard to save money for the future of their families.

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY

Entering a new country not knowing the native language, without money, and with a dream was difficult for many Italians. The transition from Italian farm life to industrialization and life in an American city was shocking to many who had never stepped foot outside of their hometowns. Luckily for the women who immigrated after World War II, family and friends had already established themselves in America, so through chain migration Italian women and their families eventually ended up in places like Schenectady. Without the support of neighbors, friends and family, the transition would have been a rather discouraging experience.

No matter the point in their life cycle, Italian women who arrived in Schenectady immediately felt threatened by their American surroundings. Santina DiCocco recalls arriving and feeling as though she was looking at the small packed buildings, homes to tombs of deceased within a typical Italian cemetery. She states, “So then when we came over here. I see all those houses, and it just looked to me like a cemetery. I wanted to go home the next day.”¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Ersilia’s daughter recalls arriving into the city, afraid of its composition, “I was excited, but I remember one thing, as soon as we landed I was fine, but once we got to the house I was like ‘yikes!’ Here we were, living in a farm land in Italy, then all of the sudden you’re in a city!” Leaving the life of the *contadino* and the green impoverished landscapes behind in Italy hope and opportunity, but many Italians were not prepared for the drastic change in lifestyle. Starting anew in a foreign land was frightening to these women, so having a support group was essential to their survival. For those who were of working age and sought employment immediately upon their arrival, finding a job where other Italians were working was ideal. Women took positions where they could utilize skills they already had, working in laundry,

¹⁵⁹ Santina DiCocco, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, January 12, 2012. Transcript in possession of this writer.

house keeping and seamstress jobs. Ultimately, these women ended up working in the same businesses and when they came to America knowing no English, Italian-dominated workplaces helped them feel more at home in America.

While the women were bonding within their jobs, Italian men remained working in construction. Because the occupations of Italian men and women were generally within the same fields of labor, they tended to follow similar daily routines. While the men were out working all day, the women would continue to do their part time jobs, get home in time to take care of the children, and then do the cooking and the cleaning. Frequently, children left at home while their mothers were at work could depend on neighboring Italian mothers who may have had different working hours or were stuck at home because of a newborn child. Luigina recalls leaving her son home alone while she went to work one day, and how she was able to rely on her neighbor Zi Concetta:

I called home, Rinaldo answered me and cry like a dog. Howling! ‘I’m scared, I’m scared!’ Because he was alone. Maybe nine years old. So I called Zi Concetta and I say, ‘Joey, put something on the head and run across the street to Zi Concetta.’ And tell Zi Concetta, ‘Rinaldo is stuck in the house crying cause he is scared and he is coming to your house!’¹⁶⁰

This kind of neighborhood camaraderie was common and helped women provide their families with extra support if they could not be present all the time.

Finding a neighborhood to live in where each family could have support from their fellow Italian immigrants was very important. As Barry Moreno notes, “When large numbers of Italians settled in American towns and cities, they preferred to live among their own kind, creating close-knit neighborhoods that were rich in Italian culture.”¹⁶¹ In many of the families

¹⁶⁰ Luigina DiLegge, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 29, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁶¹ Barry Moreno, *Coming to America: Italian Americans*, (New York, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2003), 50.

first years of life in Schenectady, being closer to the center of the city was essential for work, education and convenience to markets. Many of the women first moved into houses neighboring Van Vranken Avenue. Carrie Street, Avenue B, Mason Street, Nott Street, Foster Avenue and Lenox Road were all popular places for Italians to buy their first homes.¹⁶² Similarly, Olga and Antonietta first had homes in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood, where Italians congregated close to the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. (See Figure 2.) Antonietta states, “Mount Pleasant was all Italian neighborhoods. There were all kinds of *paesan*¹⁶³ over there ya know. People that we know who came from our hometown in Italy.”¹⁶⁴ Many of her neighbors were directly from her hometown or other places close by in the province of Caserta and made it easier to settle there when they all spoke similar dialects of Italian. Homes in these areas were smaller, more economical and more convenient to the Schenectady’s center. Italian-dominated neighborhoods made Italian community support much easier for everyone and it fostered Italian run businesses. In a sense, areas of Schenectady grew “Little Italies” without intent.

In the early years of Italian immigration, Italian men and women opened up grocery stores and small meat shops specializing in Italian products, thus providing the Italian community with convenience and a means of asserting Italian economic success in Schenectady. Like “Little Italies” in other major cities, Schenectady developed a cozy community through numerous “bakeries, cheese shops, stores selling second-hand goods and taverns.”¹⁶⁵ Italian immigrants relied on their Italian-run businesses for everyday needs, and the local store became a social place because Italian women often went everyday for they did not have enough money to buy groceries for an entire week in one shopping trip. Vita recalls the Italian run businesses near

¹⁶² See Interviews of Elia Lecce, Vita Serafini and Manning’s Schenectady Directory, 1951.

¹⁶³ *Paesan*, a fellow countryman, or fellow Italian.

¹⁶⁴ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁶⁵ Barry Moreno, *Coming to America: Italian Americans*, (New York, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2003), 50.

her first home in Schenectady, “They don’t have the pharmacy no more, but before it was Ferro’s pharmacy, Italian guy, from La Posta and his grandson went to school with Linda [Vita’s daughter].”¹⁶⁶ It was typical for Italians to name others by their first names and then the name of their Italian hometown. This tradition reveals the close unity of the community; each Italian immigrant knew the origins and hometowns of one another, creating a unique dynamic for the Italian community. Another Italian grocer whom the community failed to forget was Vito Codino. Sister Maria Rosa describes his success, “Vito Codino, he is a big business and has only warehouses now. But he used to have a store where the Hardware store is. First he had a little store, then he had a bigger store and now he has only warehouses where they produce, at a big big factory up in Scotia.”¹⁶⁷ Many other women attest to his stores importance in their neighborhood. Families with surnames like Codino, Perecca, Cornell’s, Capiello and La Gioia were all prominent, having successfully established themselves in the area as owners of grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants, dairies and delicatessens, respectively. Italian heritage reverberated throughout Schenectady and made a lasting impression.

Having roots in agricultural Italy, many women felt as though they lost a part of their normal life when they moved into cities. Land was certainly not as abundant as it was in the Italian countryside, yet a number of homes contained small plots of land that Italians did not fail to take advantage of. Gardening was a vital source of family produce, and allowed many families to save money when it came to groceries. As Jerre Mangione explains, “Wherever there were backyards, the immigrants gardened, producing for their own use the same vegetables they

¹⁶⁶ Vita Serafini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Rexford, NY, October 12, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁶⁷ Maria Rosa Guerini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 11, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

had grown in Italy.”¹⁶⁸ Where not all homes were lucky to have garden space, the tight knit Italian community was always generous in sharing produce and land. Italia Capoccia first lived in a smaller home on Foster Avenue where she was not able to have a garden at all, but then once she moved to Raymond Street she was able to garden because her neighbor let her use her land; “I made a garden. The lady in the back lived on Avenue B, and she told me if I want to make the garden, she had a garden in the back she didn’t use anymore.”¹⁶⁹ Sharing gardens and space between neighbors was common and further encouraged neighborhood unity and support. Gardening, as well as other activities with neighbors, was an important source of entertainment for these women.

For everyday entertainment, women primarily spoke or visited with their next-door neighbors rather than engaged in other activities that would cost money or require them to interact with non-Italian speakers. Many working Italian mothers had little time to engage in fun, costly activities like other middle class native born Americans did in Schenectady, yet they found taking walks, visiting one another, or spending time outside enough for their daily social life. Elia Lecce’s first home was behind Vita’s mother’s house; Elia recalls, “We talked outside in the gardens. Here we had a good time. She no talk English, and we spend a lot of time. She was nice and friendly.”¹⁷⁰ Interactions as small as the ones Elia and Vita’s mother had were the backbone to Italian culture and networking. When a neighborhood was as close as those formed by Italians everyone was comfortable, and fun was easily attained just by the simple sound of an accordion. Antonietta acknowledges this concept of Italian community, “You could leave the

¹⁶⁸ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 175.

¹⁶⁹ Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁷⁰ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

doors open, it was a very nice neighborhood. You knew each other and we lived next door to these people who came from Italy too. Dellarata, he used to play the accordion every night!”¹⁷¹ Dropping by a neighbor’s home was encouraged and the norm. Even if their presence was unannounced, face-to-face interaction and communication was valued. Italia plainly states, “we went to meet up with people,” and that was enough for her social life to escape from a hard day’s work.

In addition to impromptu or informal visiting, organizations like the Sons of Italy, also set up events that brought the community together, generally involving food and dance. Antonietta recalls, “We really used to just get together, play cards, socialize with families. Sometimes we would go to the movie. They used to have Italian movies down at Proctors. Then they had the sons of Italy down on Liberty Street for dinners and dancing and stuff like that.”¹⁷² Schenectady newspapers would note when and where festivals or events held by the Sons of Italy took place, but these events were mainly known about through participation and spread through word of mouth.¹⁷³

The Italian community pursued other means of entertainment but much less frequently. Mangione describes the activities engaged in for special occasions that were typical of Italian communities, “They held family celebrations, usually on Sundays, to honor engagements, birthdays, baptisms, christenings, graduations, and visiting relatives. After a sumptuous meal, the women talked among themselves while the men played card games.”¹⁷⁴ Religious and culinary traditions ruled the neighborhoods and were the backbone for an Italian celebration. Bigger

¹⁷¹ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November, 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁷² Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November, 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁷³ See Schenectady Gazette, Friday, June 8, 1951, “Parade Slated for Feast of St. Anthony.”

¹⁷⁴ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 307.

parties and other entertainment became more common as these women grew older, their children grew up and work became less intensive. Italians never failed to celebrate an occasion that deserved a party. “When we were young, our family wanted to have the birthday party, so we make the party. See before, we all came from Italy, and we visited each other. Now no more! They who grew up here, [today] they got a different idea than we have,” explains Italia, criticizing the antisocial ways of the new generations. Santina DiCocco recalls being busy with attending weddings of her many relatives, “There was a lot of wedding. We was at a lot of wedding, sometimes they had two, three, four wedding, we had to do it. Then we worked at GE and every year there was a big party. All those things, we went a lot of place, I tell you we was around a lot.”¹⁷⁵ Despite the hard work and demanding family obligations, these women made sure that they enjoyed themselves when the opportunity arose.

While children were still growing up, church and school played a large role in Italian women’s lives. Since their homes were situated near St. Anthony’s School and St. Anthony’s Church was just down the street, many Italian women attended events held by both institutions. Living in close proximity to the school assured that the children of Italian immigrants would interact, especially within the same school. Walking distances also made it easy for children to play with each other especially outside in the streets. Mother’s also actively took part in activities related to their children’s education and the church. “We have festas, dinners, pasta dinners, then we have bake sales, we have a lot of things at St. Anthony’s,” Sister Maria Rosa explains.¹⁷⁶ Bake sales were a common way to help raise money for the church and its school, and many women became involved in these to support the community and also to catch up with

¹⁷⁵ See Schenectady Gazette, June 15, 1948, August 15, 1948 for marriage notices of marriages held at St. Anthony’s Parish.

¹⁷⁶ Maria Rosa Guerini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 11, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

their fellow *paesan*. Sister Maria Rosa recalls learning how to cook from the Italian women who came and helped out with the bake sales and the feasts: “I learned [how to cook] from all of those ladies! The grandmothers of the kids or the mothers that helped, because I never cooked when I was in Italy because I was a young teacher.”¹⁷⁷ Feasts and bakes sales were times when Italian women were able to use their culinary skills to help out with a greater community effort. Antonietta describes her involvement in the church and school community with great fondness:

The boys started school, we sent them to St. Anthony’s school so we went there and helped with the feast down there every year. They always have a lot of food and what else you know. And for the school they used to have all these bake sales to raise money. We used to make the *taralli*, oh my god, I don’t know how many we made. It was a lot of fun!¹⁷⁸

Sunday encounters at church were also a means of socialization for many women. Every week, groups of the same women would attend the same mass, so that they would ensure seeing each other. Elia Lecce remembers going to church and seeing Vita every Sunday and also helping out at the festivals, “I go to church every Sunday, I’d see Vita over there. I went to St. Anthony’s all the time at the *festa*. I go help the church all the time to make food, *cavatelli*, *blochese*, everything! I go help Sister Maria Rosa.”¹⁷⁹ Italia also describes her Sunday routine revolving around church, “Every Sunday I go to church. Unless I feel sick I don’t go. A lot of people like to go, that’s the time to go out.”¹⁸⁰ Because Italian culture centered around food, family and religion, events like these were well attended and helped maintain the composition of the Italian community. Newspaper articles from the Schenectady Daily Gazette note the success

¹⁷⁷ Maria Rosa Guerini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 11, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁷⁸ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November, 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁷⁹ Elia Lecce, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 1, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁸⁰ Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

of the feasts with massive amounts of food and entertainment that still continue revive the Italian community today.¹⁸¹

During the first years of immigrant life for those who came during the post-World War II period, Goose Hill and Mount Pleasant were prime neighborhoods for Italians, economic independency slowly allowed Italians to move into slightly more “suburban” areas. After establishing homes, families, jobs and economic stability many of Schenectady’s inner city Italians moved toward more open neighborhoods. Even so, they retained a sense of cultural cohesion as the Italians tended to live near one another in the new neighborhoods. Many husbands who worked in construction jobs sought new land that was bigger where they could build their own homes. Soon enough, the area a few blocks northwest of Goose Hill switched to the Italian dominated neighborhood, where the fun-loving community was reestablished. A majority of the women moved to the bigger and nicer plots of land by 1970, the time spent in small homes in Goose Hill depended on their year of immigration. Cullen Avenue, Tracey Avenue, Randolph Road and the rest of the streets that lay north of Lenox Road and south of Rosa Road became prime targets for Italian home building. (See Figure 3.) Sister Maria Rosa explains, “I used to call it Sora lane, even a friend of mine says, ‘that’s Sora lane up there, they are all from Sora!’”¹⁸² With these new plots of land and houses, the Italian community remained intact, visiting one another’s homes. Socializing in gardens and in the streets was still common, yet this new neighborhood allowed for more space to do so. Antonietta remembers when she bought her plot of land on Cullen Avenue. The landowner was looking to sell his land, but only

¹⁸¹ See Schenectady Daily Gazette, June 8, 1951, June 21, 1998, August 20, 1998.

¹⁸² Maria Rosa Guerini, Interview by Lia D’Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November 11, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

to Italians because he felt they were trustworthy. Antonietta recounts the events that led to the land purchase in detail more than forty years after they occurred:

So one Sunday we were gonna go visit over there, and we turned on this road over here and there was a little sign saying there was a piece of land over here. So there was a little sign by the road that said For Sale with an arrow pointed back over here (towards Tracey Avenue), so my husband says, while ya know, maybe we should inquire about this lot over here. So we turned around and we went on Tracey Avenue over there, and there was ya know a little old man over there smoking a cigar. And my husband says while ya know are you the owner of the land over there? And he says 'ya, are you Italian?' To my husband and he says 'ya I am.' And he says, 'are you gonna build a house over here?' And my husband says, 'ya that's why I wanna buy it.' And he says, 'okay now we can talk, because you're Italian.'¹⁸³

Those looking to sell their land, like this man, targeted Italian families because of the good reputation they had formed. Italians also aimed to buy land in similar areas because they were all looking for land similar in size, use and price. The friendly Italian dynamic that once lived in Goose Hill eventually moved to more permanent and comfortable housing less than five minutes away. Here, neighborhoods were a little more diverse than that in the Goose Hill area. Yet as Mangione describes, Italians could not remain far apart from each other, "Moving into a mixed neighborhood usually made little difference to immigrant parents since relatives would inevitably join them, usually within no more than five or six blocks."¹⁸⁴ Italia's husband Ralph remembers a number of friends and relatives lived near their home on Tracey Avenue: "A lotta people all the time... Your grandfather [Vita's husband, Michele] live over here aththe corner. And I remember Domenic Serafini lived on the next road!"¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Antonietta Fazzone, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, November, 27, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

¹⁸⁴ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), 164.

¹⁸⁵ Italia Capoccia, Interview by Lia D'Ambrosio, Schenectady, NY, December 30, 2011. Transcript in possession of this writer.

Regardless of where they ended up, Italian immigrants made sure to remain in touch with their relatives and the other Italians who they shared difficult experiences in the early years of immigrant life. Family and religion kept Italians rooted together and traditions brought from Italy also helped glue the community together. Years after their first arrival, many of the women still note how they go to church every Sunday at St. Anthony's to see one another because that is their only opportunity to do so in their old age. Even if it means driving 15 minutes, as opposed to walking the block and a half it used to take them, remaining in close contact is essential to them, and they will continue to follow their community traditions for as long as they can.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The ten women who were interviewed proved that their immigration experiences were not easy, even coming as a part of a more recent period of immigration. In some aspects, the experiences they had were easier than those that were endured in early periods of mass migration. Chain migration made it possible for easier integration into American society because businesses, family connections, and cultural cues were already established. Furthermore, other Italians were willing to share their experiences with new immigrants to make their transition easier. Despite basic advantages like those from chain migration, the women who came after World War II encountered many of the same difficulties that earlier Italian immigrants had faced in terms of living conditions growing up in Italy, transitioning from agriculture to factory work, adapting to American culture and learning English. These women's stories show the importance that they placed on bettering the lives of their families and reveal that Italian women would work any number of hours, save every penny and live very modestly in order to provide their children with better opportunities. The Italian ethic of working hard and the desire to make a better future for their families are manifested in the ten women's accounts.

Each woman was willing to share her experiences and not romanticize or exaggerate any of their stories. The questions that were asked of them were answered simply and straightforward, and the women did not look for praise or expect to be pitied. Most of the women asked why anyone would ever be interested in hearing boring stories of their lives. They told their stories unaware that the experiences that they went through were unique and worthy of being heard, let alone shared with others. Sometimes it was even difficult to produce conversation or get details from parts of their life. Responses to some questions were stated briefly and without explanation because some women felt as though the details of their lives

would not be of interest. Many of the women laughed as they thought back to difficult times in Italy or the difficulties suffered as they went to work for the first time not understanding a word of English, laughing about past difficulties allowed them to look back and talk about their experiences.

This collective feeling of unimportance and lack of desire to share their stories poses an interesting dynamic. As a third generation Italian American, it is clear that the experiences of my grandmother, grandfather and other relatives are truly unique and deserve being told. My grandparents, on the other hand, do not understand why I and so many of my cousins, aunts and uncles seek to find out a new story or a little bit more from their past. They do not wish to document the journeys that they have made, but so many of their children and grandchildren seek to glorify their past. As can be seen at Sunday dinners with my extended family and at family holiday parties, various members of my family are always seen attempting to pull a story out of grandparents, great aunts and great uncles to learn a little more about the past. As a number of Italian American women authors have noted, a generational retrospect exists. There is desire to share the significance and the importance of our immigrant grandparent's lives and much of that sharing happens through fiction. Authors like Helen Barolini and Gianna Patriarca have written poetry and other pieces of fiction that represent the journeys of their Italian female ancestors and anthologies of other fictional writings have been collected to shed light on Italian Immigrant's lives.¹⁸⁶ Through fictional writing, descendants of Italian immigrants are able to contextualize grandparent or parent's immigration experience and add value to the stories they felt were not important enough to pass on. In my own case, I chose to interview and retell the experiences

¹⁸⁶ See Gianna Patriarca, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies*, (New York: Guernica, 1994), Anthony J Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, and Fed L. Gardaphe, eds, *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, (United States: Purdue University Press, 2000), Helen Barolini, *A Circular Journey*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) and Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta, eds, *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2002).

collected from these women in an academic study so as to not lose their voices and to stress the importance of knowing their stories.

Just as women interviewed for this study did not recognize why someone else would value their life stories, they were not inclined to reflect on the gendered nature of their experiences. However, the social institutions in which their lives were situation – family, work, and community – were indeed gendered. When discussing the roles that they took on within the home, many stated that they did all the cooking, cleaning, child rearing and accommodating for husbands, and few women acknowledged that their husbands rarely helped. Some even gave excuses for their husband's lack of participation in the home, saying that the men worked all day, so having dinner ready and taking care of the kids was the least that they could do. Some women did however acknowledge that the make up of gender roles in the home was just the way it was for Italians, whether in Italy or in the United States.

Another commonality that was seen in the interviews was the many discussions of their children and grand children. While the women did not get excited about many of the points discussed about their own loves, talking about their children's accomplishments always brightened up the conversations. The women's attitudes during this topic of conversation really exhibited why they did not mind juggling two jobs, working overtime, preparing dinner every night, and cleaning the home. These women immigrated for the betterment of their lives and for the future of their families and this can be clearly seen when they speak so highly of their children and grandchildren's accomplishments. These women took pride and they wore giddy smiles when they began listing the universities attended by their children and explaining the jobs they currently held. Knowing that their children have made more than decent lives allows the women to look back upon difficult times and be happy that they never quit. These women were

truly extraordinary in their efforts to create better opportunities. Most of the women only had three years of formal education, and yet they were still able to create adequate opportunities, so that their children could become executives in prestigious firms and engineers. These ten women prove that hard work, dedication, and a good attitude towards life could get one very far. As proven by many of their statements, the women of this study were modest, hardworking women with goals for the future. Opportunities were not just handed to them, and the success of their children did not just occur overnight. Schenectady's Italian immigrant women population demonstrates a number of cultural values, and trends in work, home life and entertainment. Tied together through heritage, culture and overcoming difficult obstacles, the Italian people of Schenectady not only shaped their own lives, they helped shape a community; these feats are worth recognition. It is my hope that this thesis has made real the difficulties and experiences that Italian immigrant women had after World War II and that this thesis can be the start for other studies on modern day immigrant experiences.

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

My name is Lia D'Ambrosio and I am a student at Union College. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. A description of the study is written below.

I am interested in learning more about experiences as an Italian American immigrant woman in Schenectady between 1945 and 1960. You will be asked to answer a number of questions that pertain to experiences in work life, social life, family life, and in education. This will take approximately 1 hour. The information that you reveal will be used as primary source accounts in the senior thesis I will be writing and will be integrated into research compiled on Italian American women of Schenectady. There should be no risks involved in your participation of this study. If any of the information or experiences you are recalling make you feel uncomfortable, or bring back unwanted feelings you may stop the interview. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

All information will be kept either confidential, in the case where subjects' identities need to be retained or can be associated with their responses, or anonymous and confidential, in the case where data collection does not allow responses to be connected with a particular subject.

All of my questions have been answered and I wish to participate in this research study.

Signature of participant

Date

Print name of participant

Name of investigator

Date

Confidentiality of Interview:

I wish for my interview be held confidential

____ Yes

____ No

Signature of participant

APPENDIX B: SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF INTERVIEWEES

Vita Serafini

Born 1927, Fontechiari, Frosinone. Father immigrated to Schenectady before her birth and returned to Italy to get married, then returned to Italy only once after Vita was born. In 1948, Vita first immigrated with her mother and brother under her father's sponsorship. Returned to Italy in late 1948 to marry her husband Michele months. She returned to America in 1949 traveling alone with her infant daughter Anna, and leaving her husband behind because of immigration laws. Vita had five children. She worked first at a Glove Factory, then Cheltingham Manufactures and then in GE housekeeping. Vita first lived on Nott Street with her mother, moved to Carrie Street when Michele arrived, then moved to Cullen Avenue. Underwent three years of education in Italy.

Olga Ferri

Born in 1933 in Squila, Casserta. Her grandparents immigrated in the early 1900s, giving birth to her father in America. Returning to Italy, Olga was born, then her father returned to America to fight in World War II. After the war, her father returned to Italy to bring Olga and her mother to Schenectady. Olga immigrated to Schenectady in 1949 with her mother. Met her husband at 16 while living in Mount Pleasant and then married five years later. Worked in the Glove factory, Cheltingham Manufacturer, MICA Insulators and The Big N. Did not go to work during the first seven years of her first two children's lives. Underwent five years of education in Italy, then attended the Hamilton School in Schenectady.

Italia Capoccia

Born in 1927, Fontechiari, Frosinone. Husband Ralph, born in 1923. Married in Italy in 1949. In 1954 she immigrated to Ohio to stay with Ralph's family, but then relocated to Schenectady a year later to be with more of her relatives. Two children were born in Italy, her third born at Ellis Hospital. Worked at Ellis Hospital for 25 years. First lived on Foster Avenue, then Raymond Street, then in 1969 moved to Tracey Avenue. Underwent three years of education in Italy.

Maria Rosa Guerini

Born in 1934. Lived in Udine, Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Age 19 was studying in Rome as a nun, completing her degree, and was requested for a mission to the United States. Immigrated to Providence, RI, in 1960. Relocated to Schenectady for a new mission in 1967. Worked at St. Anthony's and at St. Anthony's school teaching many children of Italian immigrants.

Elia Lecce

In 1926 Elia was born in Vernacchia, Frosinone. Father immigrated in 1912 followed by her sister and brother in 1947. She got married in 1947 and had three children prior to leaving Italy and immigrated in 1954, her last child was born in Ellis Hospital. She first lived on Carrie Street with her parents, then moved to Parkwood Avenue. Elia worked in the Glove Factory, at American Laundry and at Ellis Hospital. Underwent three years of education in Italy.

Antonietta Fazzone

Born in 1943 in Caiazzo, Casserta. Youngest of six children. Immigrated alone to Schenectady in 1959. Attended Mount Pleasant High School. Antonietta came before her parents and was taken

in by her Uncle and her older brother who had immigrated before her. Went to school when she arrived at Age 16, and worked at American Laundry during the summers while she was still a student. Married in 1963, Antonette's husband immigrated with his family in 1954. First lived in Mount Pleasant with her family, in 1963 lived with her husband in Mount Pleasant, then moved to Cullen Avenue in 1970. She had three children, the first born in 1964.

Livigina Di Legge

Born in Fontechiari, Frosinone in 1936. Immigrated in 1968. April 11th. Born in Fontechiari, Frosinone. Sister of Italia Capoccia. Came when she was 30 years old, three other brothers here before her. Father was in America before, then returned to Italy for better work. Her first residence was on Raymond Street, second on Seneca avenue and her third on Tracey Avenue. Underwent five years of education in Italy.

Ersilia DiCarlo

Born in 1925, Fontechiari, Frosinone. Was married in Italy in 1948. Had three children, her first two born in Italy, Marian born in 1948, Olga born in 1955, brother born in 1964. Immigrated in December 1963 to Jamaica Plain, and in 1966 moved to Schenectady because homes were cheaper. Worked at American Laundry and then Ellis Hospital as a cleaner for 24 years. Has lived on Lenox Road since she moved to Schenectady.

Maria Rotondi

Born in 1942 in Sora, Frosinone. Married at age 18 to an Italian man who returned to Sora after 12 years of life in Schenectady. Together they traveled back to Schenectady to live, Maria's year of immigration, 1962. She had three children and worked at Cheltingham Manufacturers on and off throughout their childhood. No one else from her family immigrated, leaving her to become part of her husband's family, her mother-in-law (age 104) still living, also lived through WWII.

Santina DiCocco

Born in 1935 in Fontechiari, Frosinone, Santina lived through the German occupation of her home, and survived injury from a nearby minefield. Was married in Italy in 1952. Her parents immigrated in 1956 leaving her behind because she was married. Ten years later Santina immigrated to Schenectady in 1966 with her husband and three children. Santina worked at American Laundry then transferred into a factory job at GE where she worked for 24 years. She had three children. Lived with her sister for nine months on Lenox Road, then lived sixteen years at Avenue B and Mason Street with her family. Underwent three years of education in Italy.

APPENDIX C: MAPS OF SCHENECTADY AND ITALY

FIGURE 1 – MAP OF ITALY, LOCATION OF TEN INTERVIEWEES HOMETOWNS

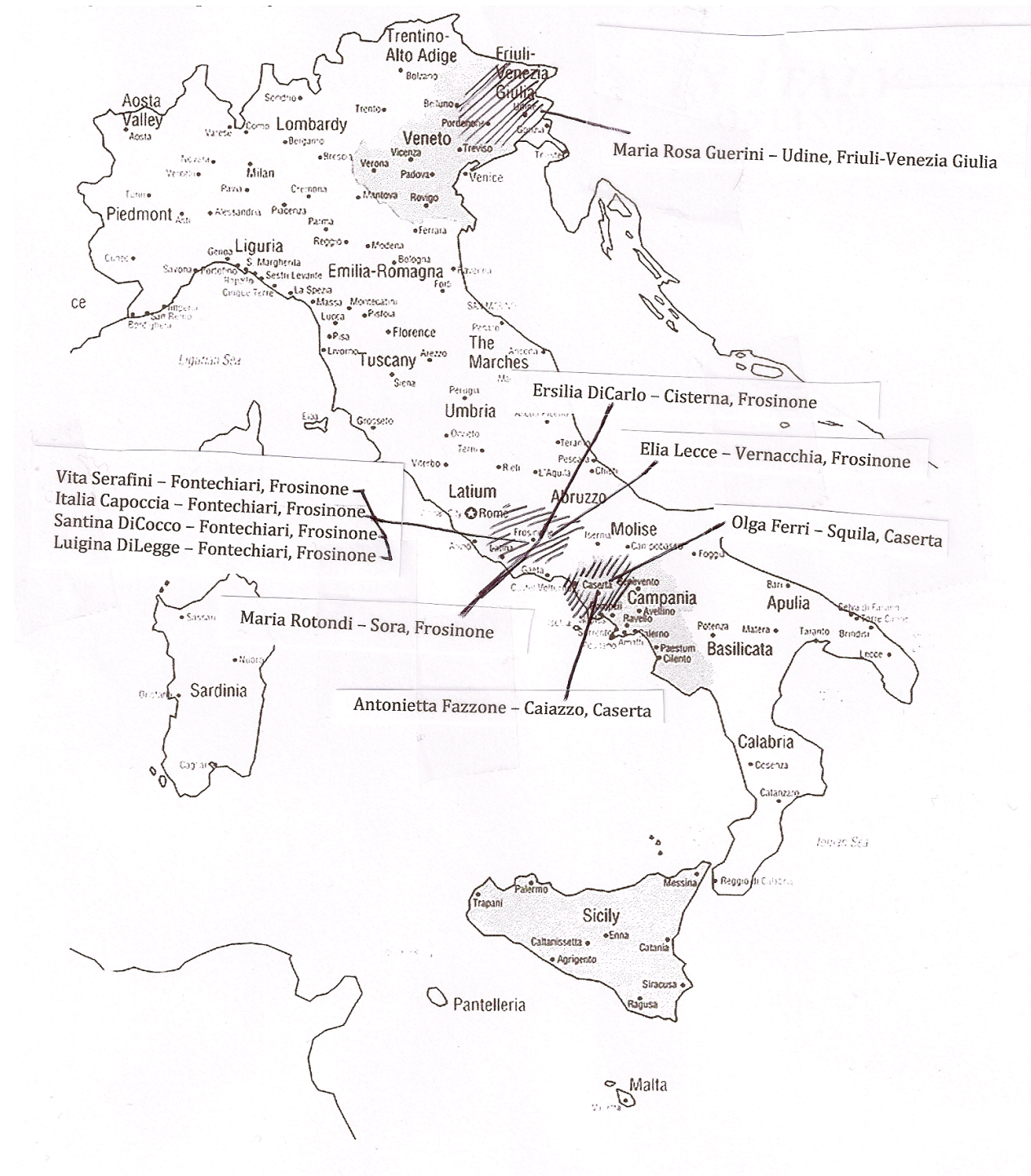


FIGURE 2 – ITALIAN NEIGHBORHOODS BEFORE 1968

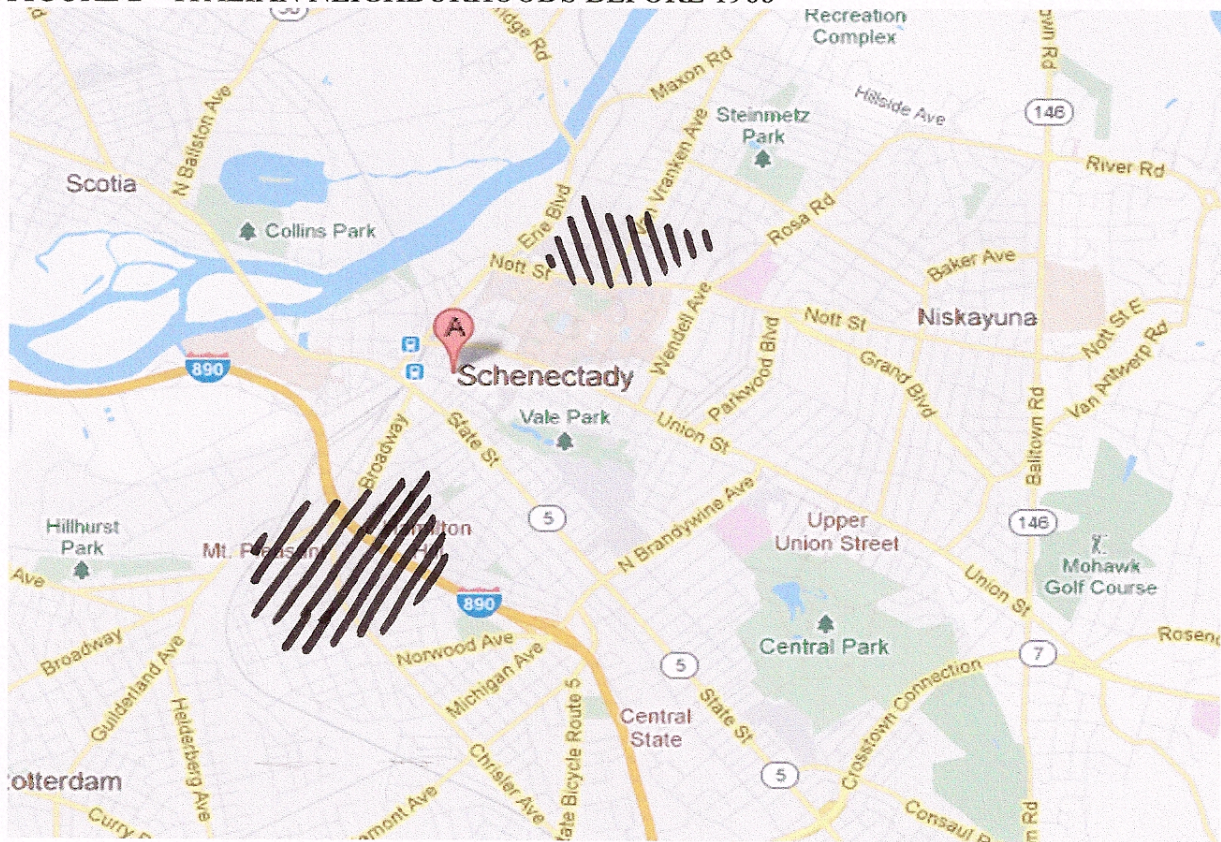
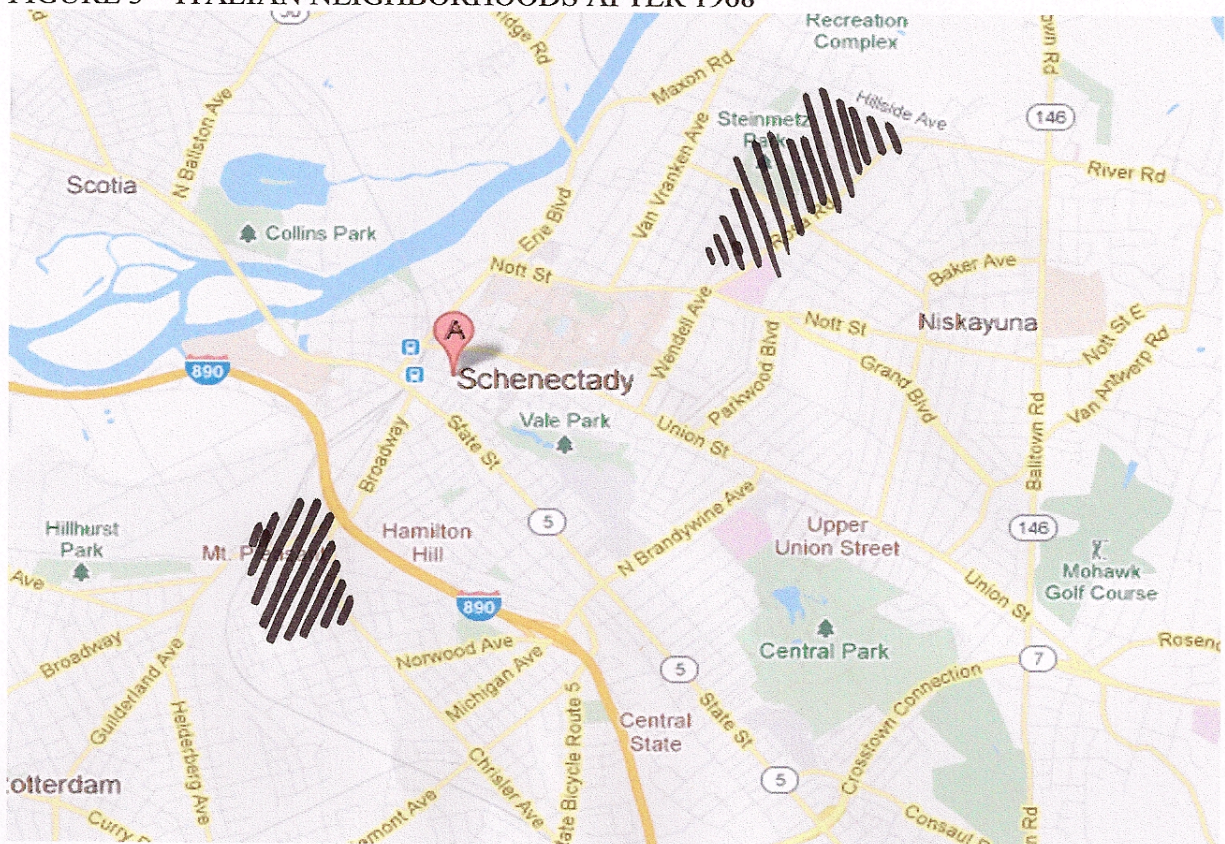


FIGURE 3 – ITALIAN NEIGHBORHOODS AFTER 1968



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