Passages From The Life...

An Italian Woman in Welland, Ontario

By Carmela Patrias

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INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW

Agatha Raso (née Colarco) was born in 1911, in Bruzzano, Calabria, in southern Italy. She came to Welland[1] with her mother in 1921, to join her father, who had come to Canada around 1912.

Prior to World War I, southern European men, even married ones, frequently migrated to the Americas without their families. They did so because most of them were sojourners, who crossed the Atlantic with the intention of staying in America only long enough to accumulate savings with which they hoped to improve their lives in their native lands. Because most of them could not secure high wages, however, their sojourn often proved far longer than they originally anticipated, and the attendant separation from their loved ones became unbearably painful. Accordingly, many of them decided to bring their wives and children to America, even if they did not intend to settle here permanently. Frequently, they hoped that their wives would be able to contribute to the family's income and thereby hasten the return to their native lands.

Mr. Colarco was one of thousands of European and French Canadian workers who were attracted to Welland during the first decade of this century by the massive industrial expansion that followed the introduction of cheap hydro-electric power to Welland in 1898 and 1901. The Plymouth Cordage Company, Page Hersey Iron, Tube and Lead, the Electrometallurgical Company and the Woods Manufacturing Company (to mention only the largest industries in Welland) relied heavily on immigrant workers. The unskilled and semi-skilled work at the Page Hersey and the Electrometallurgical companies was performed almost exclusively by immigrant men, while the Woods Manufacturing cotton mill and, to a lesser extent, the Plymouth Cordage Company, also employed immigrant women.

Because the families of immigrants required the contribution of all members to make ends meet, their sons and daughters generally sought work as soon as they finished elementary schools, at age fourteen. Following marriage, and especially following the birth of children, most women stopped working outside the home. Like Agatha's mother, however, a good many of them supplemented the family's income by keeping boarders. In households with boarders, children who were too young to work outside the home could make an important contribution to the family economy by helping with household chores.

As Agatha's recollections illustrate, operating a boarding house was a full-time occupation; it involved cooking and cleaning for the boarders and doing their laundry. Indeed, all the boardinghouse-keepers that I interviewed insisted that their work was far more demanding than working in industry. They chose this occupation because it alone provided them with a cash income, while permitting them to stay at home with their children.

Agatha's mother clearly could not have managed without assistance from her oldest daughter, and Agatha bears no resentment against her parents. Indeed, as her fond recollections of her father suggest, she sensed that he was troubled by her predicament, but could do nothing to change it. Nevertheless, owing to her family's strained circumstances, Agatha, an intelligent and curious child, was denied not only an education but even the opportunity to play, which we see today as an essential component of childhood. Thanks to her contribution to the family economy, her younger siblings were able to get an education and to enjoy childhood.

Agatha's account of the absolute authority of parents over their children's lives — and the strict limits they imposed upon her own and her future husband's behaviour during courtship — is indicative of the persistence of old world values and morals within ethnic communities in Welland between the two world wars. Although Mrs. Raso would certainly not describe herself as a feminist, it is clear from her description of her relationship to her daughters that she viewed attitudes toward women within southern Italian immigrant families as confining. She did everything within her power to ensure that the lives of her daughters would not be subject to similar constraints. She worked for more than twenty years outside her home in order to permit her daughters to have an education. When they started dating, she deliberately refrained from influencing their choice of partners, and she saved her hard-earned

money, to be able to help them financially once they got married.

CHILDHOOD

How long did you go to school?

Oh well, I started to go to school a little bit. Prentice Catar took me to school, but I didn't understand very much, so I stayed home. And as I stayed home, I stayed because my mother kept on having her family, you know, my sister Mary, and Joe, and all the rest of it.

How many children did she have altogether?

Six. We were six altogether. So I had to stay home, and help my mother with the boarders. Believe me, I only had two years of education, and then you know, there was a man, he was a lawyer, and my mother talked with him, my mother says: "I like to get Agatha to learn to talk... to read and write Italian." And he gave me a little while of lessons. But I've learned it because I loved school so much, you know. I wanted to go to school, but I couldn't go. And I learned to read and write Italian.

Why do you think your mother wanted you to learn to read and write Italian? Was she wanting to go back?

No, no, no. She wouldn't want to go back. I could write to my grandparents in Italy. So I could read and write to them to get news about them, see.

So your mother's whole family was still back there?

Yes, we left, she never saw them again. Because we never had no money to travel back and forth.

She was writing to them? What did she tell them?

She used to write home, tell them this and tell them that. "Don't tell them I am unhappy, because I don't want my father to think that after all we had over there, I am unhappy here. Tell him I am alright." Little things like that, you know...

But she wasn't alright?

No, my mother couldn't read or write.

But what was it that she found so difficult in Canada?

Well, the climate, and the boarders, and she couldn't speak. There were some friends of ours, you know, that could speak to her, but you know what I mean, she couldn't speak, it was so hard for her. She was so close to her own people over there, and over here nobody visited her, and nothing. She was heartbroken, and she kept on having one child after another, and it was hard, you know. It was hard for me, too, 'cause I was so little you know.

And what did you have to do for the boarders?

I had to wash clothes for them, and I had to cook for them. I had to do everything for them.

And did they treat you nicely?

Yeah, they used to pay our board. I wasn't allowed to speak to them... No, no, my mother wouldn't allow me to speak to them. She said, "you are only a little girl, I don't want you to bother with them. You just do the work, and whatever they got to say, they have to tell me."

Did she ever sell them wine in the house?

No, no, no! My father used to like wine, he used to buy his wine, he used to drink it out of the house, he never brought wine home. No, no!

And your mother didn't have it for the boarders?

No, no. My mother wouldn't believe in that. She was very proud [too proud?] to sell a glass of wine, and go and talk with them. No siree.

How big was your house on Park Street?

Oh, we had six rooms — three for the boarders and two for us.

So there would be two boarders in each room?

Yeah.

You say that no one came to visit your mother. There weren't other people from her area here?

Yeah, there were two, three ladies from our area and everything, but my mother was so heartbroken, she never went to visit them or anything, she stayed in the house with her troubles.

She used to go to church?

Oh yes. My mother used to go to church every morning.

Did you go too?

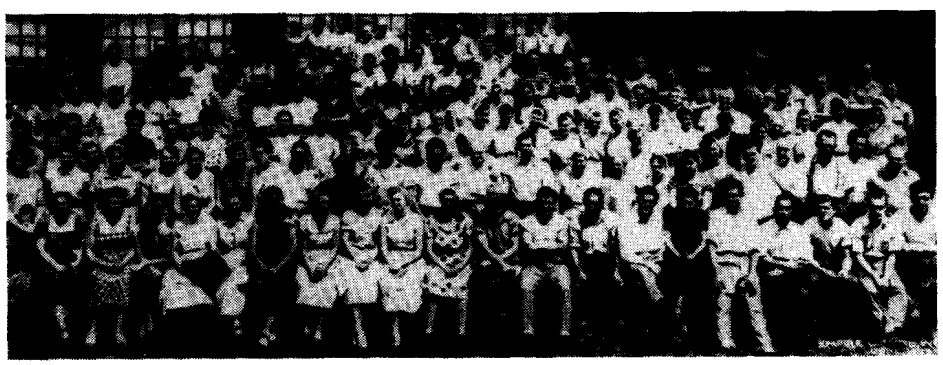
No, I was home to watch the children.

So did you go every Sunday?

Sometime, I go on Sunday, sometime not. A lady used to take me to church on Sunday, she used to come at the house. Her husband was Italian, and she was English. And she used to come and pick me up sometime for church, but I found everything so strange in church, you know. Everything was so different. I never attended Sunday school, like all the other children, and I *wanted* to go to Sunday school, because I couldn't understand English very good, because nobody would teach me English, see. We talked Italian in the house, we never talked English. My father wouldn't allow me to talk English. He said "you're talking Italian, not talking in English."

And on Park Street, who lived next to you? Were they Italian?

Yes, they were Italian, they were Sicilians. And upstairs where we lived, there were northerners, but they were Italian. But then, the Sicilians weren't too bad,



Empire Cotton Mills Workers, Welland, Ontario (1955)

but the others, they didn't want to be bothered with us, you know. My mother couldn't talk to them in northern... in high society, and they couldn't... but I could understand them, 'cause this man had taught me how to read and write in high class, see.

And what sorts of things did you read?

I never read nothing, I worked constantly, steady. I worked days with a big tub — we never had no washing machines — so I used to have those great big tubs in the middle of the floor, and I used to put my hot water in there and I used to scrub them [clothes] on the board. Men come... little girl... Imagine that! Washing on the board like that, you know. And my little sister would come and hold me by my dress, she followed there, and I had to pick her up [laughs].

Sounds like it was very hard.

Oh... you wanna know the part of my life. It was hard, I am telling you.

Did you have any friends your age?

No. No, I had no time for friends, I had to work...

And who did the shopping?

I did the shopping.

Where did you shop?

Oh, there was a Jewish store, Garsman, I used to shop over there. I used to explain to him what I wanted, meat or potatoes, or whatever I wanted. I used to point with my fingers... I used to say "how do you call'em?," and he used to say, "potatoes."

Oh, so you learned some English?

So I started to learn going out with the other people, see.

But how did you know what you needed to buy?

Oh, my mother used to tell me.

She used to plan the meals?

Oh yeah, she used to tell me buy this, buy tomatoes or whatever at the market.

And she cooked, how many meals for the boarders?

Oh, only once a day she used to cook. We didn't have very much to cook... They weren't big shots. We made a little sauce with tomatoes, and I used to cook them macaroni, on a wooden stove. Imagine, no gas. And I had to chop the wood to make a fire [laughs].

So you cooked once a day, but they ate there?

Once a day. They used to take their lunch to work.

Did you make their lunch?

No, they used to make their own lunch.

In the kitchen?

Yeah, in the kitchen, sure. We had no dining room.

And who used to do the cleaning?

I used to do it. I used to get to my hands and knees, and my father, God bless where he is, we used to put a great big pail of water on top of the stove, and I used to heat it, and put ... in it, you know... and I used to get on my hands and knees and with a brush, I used to scrub all the floors until my poor father got tired. "Oh," he says to me, "Aggie, you are a little girl, let me help you." So he used to help me.

But the other children were too young to help?

Yeah, my sister Mary, she was just two-three years old, how could she help me? And my brother Joe was only a year apart from her. They were all little.

They got to go to school?

Yeah. When they got five years old, that was the law, so they all went to school. I used to bring them to school.

What did you feel, when you took them to school?

Oh, I wanted school so bad, oh... I wanted to read and write. You know what I used to do? I used to sit... A friend of ours used to come to our house, I used to get the book, reader, you know those four-cent readers, and I used to get the book, and I used to go to him. "What does this say?" In Italian, you know. Oh, "that's horse." And what's that "horse?" He says, "cavallo," he says in Italian. And I used to learn all these things like that. But I learned you know. I could write, I couldn't write a good letter, but I used to write little letters, you know, like that. In Italian I was excellent because it was easy for me, I had more lessons.

Did your father read and write in Italian?

No, neither my father, nor my mother, they couldn't read and they couldn't write. I used to do everybody's...

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

What else did you have do for them?

Well, nothing. I used to do nothing until I was thirteen years old, and I was old enough for my age, so there was a lot of boys, they used to... a lot of people that they wanted to marry me. Imagine that [laughter]. And my mother says, "she is only a little girl."

The boys would come to your house?

The people, the mothers and the fathers. It was like the people used to talk in the house like that you know. And my mother used to say, "no, she is only a little girl yet, she is only thirteen years old."

Were these people friends of your parents? Were they from the same region?

Yeah, they were kind of friends, yeah.

From the same part of Italy?

Oh no, from Abruzzi and from the others, or they were from Calabria, and they were from Abruzzi, a different province altogether.

What did you think about that. Did you hear them talking?

I wasn't told, no, no, no, no. I wasn't told. Until Tony came to our house and I was thirteen. Tony's father and my father were good friends together. So he saw me, you know years ago they used to... they used to put waterwork outside, you know, with a pick and shovel. So our waterwork broke, and this... from the city, you know, came to fix it, and one man that knew my father talked to me. He said "are you Jimmy's girl?" And I says, "yes." And this elderly man he look around and he says, "is this Jimmy's daughter?" "Sure, that's Jimmy's daughter." "My God, she is a quiet girl, thirteen years old." So that night he comes over at the house and he asks my parents, 'cause he had one boy

and he wanted me to marry him [laughter]. My father says, "Peter, what am I going to marry, she is only a child, besides she is needed in the house, she can't go to get married." "Well," he says, "I have a son, he's eighteen," and he says, "he is not ready to get married yet," he says, "we gotta make friendship over here," he says, "we gotta get things fixed up and everything." And my father says, "no it's impossible." He says, "whether you like it or not, I'm going to bring Tony down to the house, to see your daughter." And that's exactly what he did, on Sunday. He brought his wife and brought him. And my mother did not say nothing to me, and I knew that they wanted me to marry. And when my mother told me... and when he saw me, he liked me, so he turned around and it was fixed up. Imagine that!

What did you think of him?

Well, I only looked at him, I never spoke to him, 'cause I wasn't allowed to speak to people. I had to stay in the house and listen to my parents, and they say "never mind listening to people." So he didn't say anything, so I turned around, and after he left, you know, after they left the house, my mother says, called me in the corner: "you know that boy wants to marry you, Agatha." And I said, "But ma, I don't wanna get married, I'm a young little girl, I'm doing the work...." "Well," she says, "they don't want you to marry him now, but you could marry just when you're... another five years. He'll wait for you another five years." "Ma, I don't wanna get married...." My mother says, "he can come to the house, if you like him you'll get married; if you don't like him, you'll get married after. But he's a good boy and everything. He's got a good job in the Cordage" [Tony worked in the Cordage when he was about eighteen-nineteen years old]. And he started to come to the house. But my father and mother order me not to speak to him.

Was this the way that all girls were supposed to behave?

In the old darned Italy. That's what they used to do. They never used to speak to people. So he used to come at the house, and I couldn't speak.

So what did he do? He came and talked to your parents?

To my parents.

And what did you do?

I used to go wash the children, and dress them up, and wash their clothes, go in the bedroom and wash the clothes. Imagine we had no hot water, I had to wash clothes in cold water.

You didn't even sit in the same room with him?

No, no, no. I wasn't allowed. I sat in another room. So after he came for three years, he started to push. He wanted to get married. And I was only fifteen. They did one thing after another. I got mad. So one night we were all eating at the table, and he says, "When are we going to get married? Mr. Colarco, I'd like to get married." And my father says, "No, you gotta wait for her." And I got up from the table, I'll never forget, I got up, and I says, "Oh yes, we're gonna get married" [laughter]. My father was surprised... I says, "You wanted me to marry this boy, now he's three years here, I'm gonna marry him." So I married him.

So you never talked to him yet?
No, the first time I talked to him was the day we got married. And he came at the house, I never spoke to him once.

But you must have liked him?

Well, he used to come at the house, you know, and he used to bring me gifts and everything.

What did he bring you?

Oh, he used to buy me clothes. He used to bring chocolates for the children, you know.

So I bet your brothers and sisters liked him too.

Oh, the kids loved him. We used to have a great big window, you know, and you should see Joe and Sandy and Mary and all... But these three they used to stay by the window and watch him. So Toma (they used to call him Toma) would bring the chocolates [laughter].

And did you have any idea what married life would be like?

No, nobody told me nothing.

Your mother didn't talk to you?

No, no, nothing. My mother wouldn't believe in talking. She says that's scandal. Can you imagine? "A scandal to talk about these things," she says, "in front of decent people."

So, you were fifteen when you married.

Yeah, I was fifteen years old [pictures shown — Mrs. R. very beautiful as a young girl].

Where did you live when you were first married?

His people wanted us to live over there with them. But my mother said no. "I'm not gonna put her to work with two old people," she says. "You have to have a house of your own, and you can just go ahead." So he went, he bought me the clothes, he bought me everything, 'cause my mother had no money. In those days there was no insurance, that somebody take sick and you have to get insurance pay. We had to pay out of our own pocket if somebody was sick. So my father had work and money, that used to go to the doctors. My mother had operations.

The children were sick, or your mother?

Oh yeah, my mother was sick and the children were sick sometime. When we had to get the doctor we had to pay. So my mother told Tony "don't think that I got money to give her, because it's just the girl. If you like the girl, fine, if you don't like the girl, just leave her be. That's all there is to it." And he says, "No, I don't care. I like the girl, and I'm gonna buy her what she needs." Sometime, you know, I don't think Tony is anything to me but my brother, you know. Because I was raised with him in the house all the time.

And, was he renting an apartment for you?

Yeah. We had a little apartment, you know. And he bought a nice bed, nice dining room table, he bought the kitchenette set. He bought everything. He had a little money, you see.

And was it waiting for you when you went there? Or did you select these things with him?

No, I didn't select these things. My mother went to select them. She was the boss. I stayed home with the kids when she went out with Tony, and they bought this furniture and these things.

When you got married, did you stay home?

Yeah. It was two or three houses from my mother, so what I used to do, when he used to go to work, I used to run over to my mother to help her with the chores, washing clothes. No use getting married, I was in the house working anyway.

MOTHERHOOD

How old were you when you had your first child?

Oh, let me see now... if I was eighteen. 'Cause I didn't wanna have children right away, see. So after I had Rose, after three years I had Joan, and I says, no more children for me... I was pregnant with my oldest girl... It was spring, and all the children played skipping rope. And I used to see them, and I used to love to skip rope. So you know what I did? I got hold of my brother Joe and my sister Mary, I said, "let's go into the house." I got a rope and I used to tell them, "I'm gonna skip." And I was pregnant. Can you imagine that? I didn't understand it. I wanted to play. I was so young, I wanted to play.

[Following the birth of her second child, AR went to work outside the home, first in a canning factory outside Welland, in a laundry and at the Empire Cotton Mills, in the winding department. She found the work at the Cotton Mills hard and she was incensed by the injustice of having to bribe the forelady with gifts and money in order to keep her job. However, she stayed at the textile mill for 20 years.]

You wanted your daughters to have an education?

Oh, *definitely*, yeah! They were all educated, the two girls.

How much education did they have?

Oh, they didn't go to college, but they went all through high school, and all that. And they could read and write Italian and English too.

You taught them?

I taught them. They used to understand. We used to get together you know. I was young, and they were almost the same age as me. And we used to get together. We used to sing. They used to sing. We had a lot of fun. Because we were more like sisters, not like mother and daughters.

Did you have any dreams for your daughters? What did you want them to be?

Oh yes. I wanted Rosey to be a pharmacist. But the little bugger didn't wanna go to school. She says, "I don't wanna go to school." I got a job at New Method Laundry, and I says, "I am taking that job, Rose, and I want you to go and be a pharmacist. You are small and delicate," I says, "you don't have to work hard." And she says, "O.K., Ma." So she went to school, and she got into the wrong company, they told her not to go to school... "If you're not going to school, you've got to work. You're not gonna bum around." And she used to say, "Mom, I wanna go to night school." I says, "No. If you want to go in the daytime, you're willing to go learn. If you don't want to go to school, you'll have to work. I'll get you a job. I'll make you work." So she say, "O.K., I'll work."

[Mrs. Raso turned to a neighbour who worked in the Cotton Mill for assistance.]

I says, "Martha, you gotta do me a little favour. I got a girl, she don't want to go to school. I wonder if you could put in a good word for her... I want to teach her a lesson, I want her to leave and go to school." But Joan was different. Joan is the little one. She was different She loved school. And you know she used to come out with scholarships and everything. So I wanted her to go to school... to go to college and all that.

What did you want her to be?

Oh, she could be what she liked, I wouldn't choose for my children, no. So she wanted to be a stenographer. She got a job, and with the money that she got, I used to buy her nice clothes, because I wanted her to look nice. I wanted both of them to look nice... The girls grew up and everything. Joan, the younger one, she didn't want to get married. So, I says, "Joan, doesn't matter what nationality it is, you bring him home. We accept him. Long as you like him and you are happy, he doesn't have to be Italian." So when Nicky came to the house, she would wait for me until 11 o'clock, upstairs, and she used to take a peek, to see if I'm in, and I says, "I'm here Joan. Was Nicky here tonight?" She says, "Yeah," she says, "what do you think about that boy?" I says, "It's nothing what I think. You gotta live with him, you gotta marry him." So I said, "Do you like him?" She says, "Yeah, I like him." I said, "If you like him, you'll go out with him, but if you don't like him, don't go, I don't want you to go, there's no sense in going."

[1] By Welland I mean the area which falls within boundaries of the municipality today. Until 1961 this area was divided between the city of Welland and Crowland township. Most of the industries which were attracted to this area prior to World War II were actually located in Crowland township, where land was cheaper and assessment rates lower. A large number of immigrants also lived in Crowland, next to the factories which employed them.