

“An Oral History of Italian American Identity & Perception during the First Half of the 20th Century”

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Criss Library-2:15 PM

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, my name is Joshua Alan Hoxmeier and I am a master’s student here at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I apologize in advance for any mispronunciations of names on my part. Also quotations are stated exactly as they appeared in the transcripts so as to make sure the actual voices of the respondents stand out as much as possible so any mistakes in these quotations are theirs.

This paper will detail the experiences, perceptions, and memories of working and middle class Italian American men during the first half of the twentieth century and examine the differences between how the two World Wars and their aftermaths shaped the ethnic identity of these men. By looking at Italian American World War II veterans, I conclude that the notion that Italian American inclusion was achieved through the First World War and the nationalism of the 1920s, especially the restriction of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, is not fully representative of both the realities and perceptions of a sizable number of Italian American men. The view that by the time FDR came into office, ethnic identity among European ethnics, of which Italian Americans are an illustrative example, no longer seemed to matter is challenged by the argument that it was not until the Second World War and its aftermath that Italian Americans became socially, culturally, and economically included into the American identity.¹ The reason for this was the differences in the natures of the two World Wars and how they effected Italian

¹ Gerstle, 137, 177.

American ethnicity. The Second World War contained a number of unique factors that greatly assisted the integration and assimilation of Italian Americans resulting in their permanent inclusion. I seek to add to the work of Christopher Sterba's *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War*, and other scholars who have discussed the effects of World War I on the ethnic identity of Southern and Eastern European Americans, by showing that the inclusion of Italian Americans that did not endure following the First World War did in fact survive the aftermath of World War II.²

For this paper, I examined sixty-two oral interviews with Italian American World War II veterans.³ These interviews are housed in two locations: the Immigration History Research Center Archives (or IHRCA), at the University of Minnesota, and the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, PA. They come from three different collections: being the *Italians in Chicago Oral History Project* and the *Telegraph Hill Dwellers Oral Histories* from the IHRCA, and the *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection* from the Heinz History Center. These interviews detail the lives and military service of these men and reveal a great deal about their personal identity as Italian Americans.

Christopher Sterba in *Good Americans* and Gary Gerstle in *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* both argue that the cultural and economic inclusion of southern and eastern European ethnics, including Italian Americans, began in the 1920s, through such things as better jobs, better housing, more interactions outside the ethnic neighborhood, etc.⁴ Additionally, Gerstle states that the identity of many of these European ethnics was beginning to shift to an American one during this time. As he stated concerning the ethnic loyalty of these

² Christopher Sterba's *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ The *Telegraph Hill Dwellers Oral Histories Collection*, Italian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, *The Italians in Chicago Oral History Project Records*, Italian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.

⁴ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 204-205, Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 126.

Europeans, “Only in the 1920s did many begin to imagine themselves as citizens of the American republic.”⁵ Sterba makes a similar but more nuanced claim as he does qualify his argument that the inclusion and assimilation of Italian Americans he saw in New Haven during the 1920s may not have been representative of the experiences of Italian Americans in other parts of the country and the oral interviews used here confirm this qualification.⁶ Based on my findings, I do not see this inclusion of Italian Americans during the 1920s described in the secondary literature. What I found was continued economic, social, and cultural exclusion and separation that did not truly begin to disappear until the Second World War.

In contrast to the arguments of pre World War II inclusion and assimilation, the picture that the oral testimonies paint is not one of cultural and economic inclusion, but rather one of continued exclusion and separation during their childhoods and early lives in the 1920s and early 1930s. Out of the sixty-two interviews, forty-six of them mentioned some form of enduring exclusion in the years following the First World War. One of the more obvious examples that illustrates this enduring exclusion is the prevalence with which these Italian American men discuss their experience with discrimination before World War II and its absence when they discuss the post war years. Out of the sixty-two respondents, thirty said they experienced some form of discrimination before World War II. This number is incredibly high when compared to how many mentioned discrimination and prejudice during and after the war. Only four mentioned such experiences during the war and zero afterwards. This trajectory discrimination before, during, and after World War II challenges the notion that Italian Americans became economically, socially, and culturally included and assimilated before the Second World War.

⁵ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 126.

⁶ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 205.

There were three distinct areas of discrimination that these men either experienced or perceived during their lives: early childhood outside of school, at school, and finally at the workplace. During childhood many men experienced intense discrimination at the hands of the older stock Americans. Louis LaCivita recalled that he was not allowed to join the boy scouts in his hometown of Wilmerding, PA, because of his Italian descent.⁷ Jack Scuillo describes how when he was growing up the other children “liked to tease you like ‘guinea’ (“gin-ee”) here and ‘dago’ there.”⁸ These are just a few examples that show how even during their later lives in the 1980s to the early 2000s when these interviews were conducted, the earliest experiences with discrimination stayed with many of these men well into their later lives. Subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice like these had the power to influence one’s internal self-perceptions and could color one’s memory for the rest of their lives. It is telling that these two men who also mention all of the success they had during their lives would place so importance on these examples from their early childhoods which told them from a very early age that as Italians they were not fully accepted into American society.

This perception remained strong even when these men discuss their lives at school. For numerous men, this is often the time period when they begin to take note that as Italians they were somehow different from the other children. School was oftentimes the first place many of them came into deep and sustained contact with non-Italians and the English language and these had great influence on their self perceptions about their ethnic identity. Emilio DeFilippo mentioned how his early years of school were filled with contradictions as he and his family felt that education was extremely valuable for their economic mobility but the discrimination he

⁷ LaCivita, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 6.

⁸ Scuillo, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 3.

experienced at school convinced him early on that as an Italian, “because of the way we were treated that we would never get out of that run that we were in as being ‘dumb dagos.’”⁹ This example is representative of many others which illustrate how the discrimination they experienced at the hands of the non-Italian children, and even at times from their teachers, colored their opinions on education and could partially explain why the men in this generation of Italian Americans lagged so far behind the women in terms of education. While these Italian American boys were picked on verbally and physically by the other students and oftentimes seen as troublemakers and assumed to be bad students because of their ethnicity by their teachers, many of these boys came to see school as a place that would not bring them much fulfillment or enjoyment.

A final area of discrimination noted by many of these men that challenges the notion that Italian Americans were experiencing economic mobility before the Second World War through the acquisition of better, higher paying occupations is that even when many of these men finished school and entered the workplace in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they still both experienced discrimination and perceived that their Italian ethnicity worked against them. Before the war, Albert DeFazio Sr. stated that many of the people he knew changed their names in order to get a job because, “You couldn’t get a job if your name ended in a, e, i, o, u; all the Italian names ended in vowels.” He mentions that he was lucky to get a job without having to change his name because he worked for a manager who took a liking to the hard work of Italians and fortunately for Albert, only hired Italians.¹⁰ While other factors may have been in play for Thomas Perpoli in his experiences with the interwar job market, he still perceived that, “I may not have been hired at certain places because I was Italian.”¹¹ And finally, not only did these men

⁹ DeFilippo, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 7.

¹⁰ DeFazio, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 30.

¹¹ Perpoli, *Italians in Chicago Oral History Project*, 52.

experience discrimination in the workplace in person, many of them grew up with the knowledge that Italians were discriminated against in the job market. Angelo Palumbo mentioned how his father was discriminated against by an Irish business owner who told him that “We don’t hire Italians.”¹² These examples of discrimination in the job market illustrate the contradiction between inclusion and integration of Italian Americans during the 1920s and 1930s as described in the secondary literature and how these men actually perceived their situations.

As a partial result of their experiences with discrimination, these men saw a clear separation between themselves and the true Americans, a group to which they could not belong. Out of the sixty-two interviews only a single respondent stated that he felt he was an American before World War II. This sense of separation adds to the lack of economic inclusion before the Second World War by also challenging the notion of prewar Italian American social inclusion. Growing up, many of these men did not have deep or sustained contact with the older stock Americans growing up, and many of those who began to when they entered school came away from the experience with a hardened feeling of the divide between themselves and the Americans. As William Grieco (“Gri-è-co”) stated, “...we were the Italians and everybody else was Americans, that’s the way it was.”¹³ Grieco, along with many others, perceived himself and the other Italian Americans as outsiders, separate from the actual Americans. Even if there were actual isolated instances of social inclusion during his early life, it was this sense of separation that stuck with him during the rest of his life. When talking about his life before the Second World War, Philip Passaro said, “...it wasn’t until the Second World War that most of these Americans of Italian descent, they didn’t even realize they were Americans. They were so reminded they were Italians because they were harassed and criticized so much.”¹⁴ He went on to say, “...when we were kids

¹² Palumbo, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 7.

¹³ Grieco, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 7.

¹⁴ Passaro, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 2.

we were all reminded my friends and I were all reminded that we were Italians. We thought we were Italians not Americans.”¹⁵ These statements are just a few of the numerous examples given by these men which challenge the notion that Italian Americans became socially included before the Second World War.

During both of the two World Wars, Italian Americans, along with other European ethnics, did experience various inclusionary trends. The oral interviews, however, illustrate that the inclusionary trends during the first World War were not as thorough or long lasting as those of World War II. There are many reasons why the inclusion that occurred during World War II survived long after the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan while the beginnings of inclusion that began during the First World War did not survive long after the armistice. One such reason was the different levels of the involvement on the part of the United States government and other national institutions to promote unity and harmony during the war efforts. While attempts were made during World War I to partially include and tolerate certain ethnic and religious minorities in order to effectively and efficiently fight and fund a global war, the inclusion of these minorities was still determined by the Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite. As Sterba notes regarding World War I, “The power to accept an ethnic group remained in the same hands during the war as before.”¹⁶ In this situation, ethnic groups and other minorities had no way of influencing their inclusion into society apart from complete assimilation. However, during World War II, the United States government and other national institutions played a much larger role in allowing various ethnic and religious minority groups to be involved in the war effort and actively influence their inclusion.

¹⁵ Passaro, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 14.

¹⁶ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 145.

One area where this was extremely evident during World War II was in the military, where unlike during the First World War, the United States took an active stance to promote unity within its military by providing instruction to its troops regarding ethnic and religious cooperation. Nearly sixteen million men and women in the armed forces during World War II received instruction about the unifying values of the nation.¹⁷ An excellent example of this was how the US Army's Information and Education Division created documentary films for the soldiers on the need to lessen the importance of ethnic and religious divides and instead bring attention to the unifying ideological values of the nation. The Information and Education division even enlisted the help of prominent filmmakers, artists, and writers, such as Theodore S. Geisel ("Guy-zel"), better known as Dr. Seuss, to help create these documentary films.¹⁸

Another difference between the two World Wars that helps explain the more complete and lasting inclusion of the Second World War was the very nature of the military itself. At least in comparison to the Italian men from New Haven during World War I studied by Sterba, the makeup of the United States military during the Second World War was much more national and diverse in focus. According to Sterba, the divisions from New Haven during World War I did not make an effort to diversify their ranks and in many regards the makeup of these divisions simply mirrored the separation of culture and society that these Italian American men experienced in their civilian lives.¹⁹ He goes on to mention that for the most part, these Italian men did not mingle with soldiers of other ethnicities, as they tended to stick to themselves.²⁰ As a result, he states that "...the Italian soldiers had only a fleeting sense of belonging to a larger, national

¹⁷ Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 107., Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Wall, *Inventing the "American Way"*, 107.

¹⁹ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 184.

²⁰ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 104.

culture.”²¹ However, the testimonies of the Italian American men who served during World War II tell a very different story.

According to these men their military service put them in contact with various people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Numerous interviews stressed the fact that their units were made up of “all different kinds,” of people.²² For many of these men, their military service presented another opportunity to have deep and sustained interaction with people of different religions and ethnicities. According to Michael Cocchiola (“Ko-chi-ola”), the fact that the soldiers were put into barracks alphabetically, rather than by locale, region, or ethnicity, presented the soldiers with a tremendous opportunities to converse with people who were different from each other. He goes on to say that “It was just who you were with; nobody even thought about that, what your nationality was.”²³ The organization of the armed forces during the Second World War facilitated greater contact between people from different backgrounds much more so than what was seen during World War I, where the military experiences of the Italian division from New Haven only seemed to replicate their civilian lives, with all its separation and exclusion. The makeup of the military during World War II encouraged greater inclusion by breaking down regional and ethnic boundaries with the intent to increase the focus on national boundaries. The diversity of the military was seen as a source of strength and celebration during the Second World War and this had a largely positive impact on the inclusion of Italian Americans.

In addition to the attempts of the United States government to actively include certain ethnic and religious minorities, the work of other national institutions also had much success during the war effort, a situation not seen as much during the First World War. The national institution that

²¹ Sterba, *Good Americans*, 102.

²² Bruno, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 11.

²³ Cocchiola, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 6.

put in the most effort and achieved the greatest results was the National Conference of Christians and Jews, hereafter the NCCJ. The emergence and successes of such inter-faith movements and organizations shortly before and during the Second World War highlight one of the main reasons why the inclusion which occurred during World War II achieved much greater and longer lasting results than was seen during and after the First World War. Unlike in World War I, where certain religious and ethnic minorities were partially accepted due to the need to effectively fight a global war, the very nature of the United States shifted during the Second World War as the notion that America was solely a Protestant nation began to be replaced with the belief that what actually made the United States exceptional was its identity as a Tri-Faith nation, made up of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. This shift in the identity of the nation did much to pave the way for the inclusion of the heavily Catholic Italian American population.

Similar to the work of the United States government to foster unity and harmony within its military, the NCCJ sought to do the same both in the military and civilian populations of the United States shortly before and during the Second World War. Similar to what was seen during the First World War, World War II contained an imperative for unity and cooperation in order to successfully fight a global war. However, World War II also saw the emergence of Fascism and the fall of the eugenics movement both of which placed an additional impetus to downplay racial, ethnic, and religious differences and to replace them with a focus on what made the people of the United States diverse yet united. The NCCJ took advantage of this unique atmosphere of the Second World War to accomplish its goal of a Tri-Faith version of America. In order to accomplish this goal the NCCJ carried its Tri-Faith message into hundreds of United States military camps.²⁴ It passed out millions of Tri-Faith prayer cards, created a literature series

²⁴ Wall, *Inventing the "American Way,"* 109.

called “Why We Fight,” and a film called *The World We Want to Live In*, all of which promoted the idea that a diverse Tri-Faith America was what the nation needed to become if it was to thrive both during and after the war. Also this version of America would provide a defense against the plans of totalitarians like Hitler who stressed uniformity instead of unity.²⁵ The activities of the NCCJ within US military camps during World War II created a place of ethnic and religious cooperation not seen during the First World War as enlisted men and women were exposed to its material through its prayer cards, literature, films, or through an NCCJ Camp Program meeting. The inclusion that occurred during the Second World War did not require the complete abandonment of ethnic identities as the nation came to except some of these identities in its definition of what it meant to be an American and this was a key difference between the two World Wars.

The oral interviews illustrate the successes of the efforts of the United States government and the NCCJ to promote religious and ethnic tolerance and harmony among the military. Referring back to the issue of discrimination, for most of these Italian American men, the discrimination that was all too prevalent during their childhood and early lives was no where to be seen during their years of military service. The efforts to promote ethnic and religious unity and harmony must have had some success as compared to thirty men experiencing discrimination before the war, only four men mentioned discrimination during their years of military service, and one of those four even linked it to his status as a replacement rather than his Italian heritage. I believe the reason for this decline in discrimination was due in no small part to the efforts of the United States and the NCCJ to lessen the importance placed on ethnic and

²⁵ Kevin M Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47-48.

religious differences in the armed forces and the nation in their efforts to promote a more tolerant and inclusive Tri-Faith version of America.²⁶

A final area of discussion on the differences between the inclusion of the two World Wars concerns which characteristics would define the American identity. During World War II, the very nature of what constituted the American identity, something which remained fairly static during the First World War, changed greatly. The less regionally focused and more diverse military and the tremendous efforts to promote ethnic and religious unity and cooperation in the armed forces and across the nation both point to a greater shift in what were the defining characteristics of the American identity. The American identity shifted away from ethnic, racial, and religious terms towards more ideological ones. The beginnings of this shift were seen during the First World War, but once the armistice was signed and the external enemies of Germany and the Kaiser no longer presented a common enemy to rally around, the defining characteristics of the American identity shifted back to their prewar terms of race, religion, and ethnicity. The Second World War was similar in this respect as the external enemies of World War I were replaced by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during the war. But a crucial difference between the aftermaths of the two World Wars helps explain the different impacts they had on the American identity. While the external enemies disappeared after World War I and were not replaced until the Second World War, the enemies of World War II were quickly replaced by communism and Soviet Russia which made sure that the changed definition of the American identity which reemerged during World War II would continue to be described in ideological terms. In other words, following the Second World War, being American now became synonymous with being anti-communist, ensuring that the American identity would continue to

²⁶ LaCivita, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 8. Botti, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 14.

be defined by ideological terms like liberty and democracy rather than reverting back to its prewar focus on race, religion, and ethnicity as was the case after World War I. As a result, Italian Americans could now actively influence their inclusion into the American identity as their ethnicity and religion no longer presented an obstacle to their chances of becoming included members of American society.

Due to the efforts of the United States government and the NCCJ, these changing definitions of what constituted an American along with their military service allowed these Italian American veterans to reconsider and adjust their personal identities. In the minds of many of these men the defining characteristic of the American identity both during and after the Second World War was not a specific ethnic identity or religious affiliation, but a shared willingness to fight for America and its ideals. Compared to the single respondent who stated that he felt he was an American before World War II, twenty-five of the sixty-two respondents identified as such during the post war years. In contrast to a solely Italian ethnic identity, Albert DeFazio Sr. stated that after the war he felt he was now an American of Italian descent, which shows that in his mind being Italian was no longer a barrier to being an American.²⁷ Louis LaCivita, who stated that he "...grew up as Italians; we did not grow up as [Americans]," went on to answer the question if his experiences during the war made him feel more American than Italian, to which he answered with "I was an American."²⁸ He went on to state that "They were Italian American War Veterans, not the Italians. They were American veterans."²⁹ For Mario Avignone, it was not until World War II that he ever noticed a change in the identity of the Italian Americans in his community, when he noticed a rise in an American identity in contrast to the previously solely Italian identity. These statements mentioning the changing identities of

²⁷ DeFazio, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 30.

²⁸ LaCivita, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 3, 6.

²⁹ LaCivita, *Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection*, 33.

these men highlight the importance of perception, memory, and active participation in ethnic identity formation and serve to challenge the timeframe of Italian American assimilation and inclusion.