

Interview with Piera Solender - 2/21/89

By Helen A. Oxman

Photograph of Mr. Corleoni - collage of photographs w/children

One of the sons died in an accident in 1945

Nice piece in Jewish Exponent - wants to interview you. Barbara Spector from Exponent.

Daughter is still alive.

Bob: Received call from someone who saw article in the paper--a Jewish man who is a printer, who is going to Assisi, Italy next week to meet the mayor and to give the mayor an award because of what the people of Assisi did for Jews. Apparently, there was a monastery. They were responsible for many thousands of lives saved. Then I got a call--you're generating a lot of interest--from a woman whose husband is an artist who has just sculpted a piece that's going to be displayed in Washington honoring the Italians. I asked her to send me some information. All kinds of little side issues. P: How come that after so many years--I'm here since 1950--almost 40 years, nobody knew about the Italian Jews? I have a very hard time, especially the Italian people, believe me, that I was Italian and Jewish. How come, after so many years, all this comes out? Bob: All this interest? I'm not sure I can answer the question. Part of it is, I think, that people don't like to talk about periods of time in history about which they're uncomfortable. Many survivors may not like to talk about. Many Italians may not like to talk about it, even though they're many wonderful stories. We only became aware of it because of the film. We learned that the film was made in 1987, so it is a new film. The moment we learned that the film was available for showing in Philadelphia, that's when we began to study. We called Gratz College. You'll meet tomorrow night, Nora Levin, who is a Holocaust scholar, who teaches at Gratz. There's also another woman, Mary Costanzo. P. This is an Italian name. Bob: She teaches Holocaust art at Gratz College. They'll be a very interesting group of people tomorrow. We're sure that the turnout will be superb. We're going to be turning people away. P: I hope so. It doesn't matter to me to speak to 35 people, 50 people. I'm used to it. Even 300 people--more than that. I don't think it makes any difference. I hope they understand me. I had a little trouble with Mr. Dubin on the phone. He asked me again on the phone. I show you the map.

P: My name is Piera Solender. I'm an Italian Jew. I was born in Tuscany, exactly in Livorno. Livorno is situated on the coast of the beautiful Tyrrhenian. I grew up in Livorno. I was able to finish my education just in time for the racial laws that forbid the Italian Jewish people to attend public schools, work for the government, working in the banks, be part of the Army, and many other things. Because of this situation, it was very hard to find a job. My family and I decided to move to Milan--bigger and more industrial city. That was in 1941. In 1943, August, we went on vacation, because it's traditional for the Italian people in this month of August to take a day vacation. The cities are deserted, especially Milan, which was not on the coast. We took separate vacations. My mother was with my brother and his family in Rimini. My sister and myself went to Val D'Aosta, near the border of France. While my sister and I were there, one night, we heard constant noise of motors from planes continuously for hours and hours. We then found out that those planes had been in Milan, did a lot of damage, not too many dead, as I said before, as the city was almost deserted. We couldn't come back to Milan, because our apartment had been destroyed. We joined the rest of the family in Rimini, leaving our jobs and everything else we had in Milan. We stayed there for a while--no trouble because we were Jewish, the only trouble, like any other Italian person, during the war. Then at that point, we heard that the German were looking for Jewish people to be taken to a concentration camp to be killed. We thought it would be too dangerous to be in Rimini, especially because we were a few people in the same family. We decided to split. My brother and his family went to Switzerland, where he joined my father and my other sister. My mother, sister and I decided instead to go south, desperately, to join the American Army, which was stationed at that time near Pescara. We started the voyage. In those times, there was no transportation. Trains were very scarce. Most of all they needed them for the soldiers in the army. Cars couldn't go, because there was no gasoline at all. The only way we could travel, and probably it was the safest way, too, was by horse and buggy. We started our voyage. At a certain point, after two days, we were going south, the horse fell. He couldn't make it any more. We were in Senigallia. The owner of the horse said, "I cannot kill my horse. I cannot take you any farther." We didn't want to go back. We asked him maybe you can find somebody also, who

Finally, between these three or four days that we were travelling South, we encountered some other bombs and planes. We did not have any shelter, especially the old man, Mr. Corleoni, did not want to leave his horse in the middle of the street--for him to take shelter. We didn't want to leave the horse nor the man by himself. We stayed there hoping that like it was that we didn't get any harm. At that point, we almost reached the front, but it was still a few miles to go. We decided that maybe this was the place to stay until the Allies would come to liberate us. When we asked for a room, for shelter to stay, the people of this little village got suspicious. They could not imagine why three women were going to meet the war in the worst place they could do it, there must be a reason. They didn't know, but the second one was a good reason. They denied us any shelter, anything. At this point, I got very discouraged. I started to cry. I started saying, "Where are we going, what shall we do?" Gigi Corleoni (GiGi is a nickname) He almost was crying himself. He hugged me and said, "Don't worry, Signorina, I don't leave you here. You come back with me, and I'll take care of you--all three of you. This he did. He didn't want any money for the trip back. He said, "I have to come back anyway, and you don't have to pay me. You already paid me enough. We couldn't stay in his home, which was in Senigaglia.

Senigaglia is not too big a town. We couldn't stay there. First of all, he didn't have room. Secondly, he thought it was a little too dangerous for all of us and his family, too. So he found a place, almost a mile from Sinigaglia, in a borough. The lady who gave us shelter was his sister-in-law. We stayed there until the American Army passed through. We started in Rimini in 1943 until we went back to Milan was two years.

In those times in Italy, food was scarce, and people were supposed to buy food with coupons. We had a card, milk, eggs, flour. When there was a certain amount of this quality food that they could sell to the population, we had to cut those coupons and give to the seller. Of course, there was a limited amount for each coupon--one coupon per person. We couldn't even use these coupons, because on our cards,, there was a big red stamp, "Jewish Race," so we could not give away that information. But Mr. Corleoni took care of that too, and he found food for us through the black market at reasonable prices. I'm sure he didn't make a penny on the food that he provided for us.

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I never had to be in line for food. Convenience in that house was very primitive.

Q: What did you do in the American Army? P: Working in the office.

The only death in the family. My first cousins's two sons, but not because they were Jewish. They were at the wrong place at the wrong time. They were near Rome at the time some German soldiers were killed. They took a certain number of men, who were then executed. These young fellows were there with two friends--so all four died. They were going to visit some girlfriends in Rome, and they died.

Not because they were Jewish. They probably did not know they were Jewish.

We couldn't change our name, at that time, or even now, you couldn't go out without a document--an identity card with picture, dob. everything they want to know about you. Not only during the war, but when the country was at peace, a policeman would stop you and say, "Let me see your document." If you didn't have it, they could take you to prison until they found out about you. It was manatory to have this I.D. which was also stamped "Jewish Race."

Q: What did the Corelino family do for a living? P: They owned two or three horses with carriages to move things. They moved furniture; they provided wood for the stove, for heat. At that time life reverted to the past--no gasoline, everything was scarce. Q: What did your family do before the Holocaust?

P: The family had a store--two fabric stores--one wholesale, the other retail; they were closed before we left for Milan. I was working as a bookkeeper. When we came back in 1945, I got a job in the Jewish community in Milan for two years in the tax office. Family name--Dello Strologo. It was recognized as a Jewish name--not like Levy or Cohen. Q: Did you ever think what would happen to you if you got caught? P: Not really. Because,

we found out much later what was going on. We didn't know about any concentration camp because, first of all, no one wanted us to know; secondly, communications were interrupted every place in the world. Once it was over, I was working for the Jewish community. People coming from concentration camps related their horror stories. They came to have identification cards--to be helped in some way. Then, at that time, we realized how bad it was. Later on, I met my husband. He came as the only survivor of a large family. He was from Poland. He went through five concentration camps. Thank God, he survived. We married in Italy and then came to the United States. Our two children were born here--Bella and Alan.

They divided the men from the women. The people who had children had cabins, maybe two families in the same cabin, but cabins. My husband and I were in different compartments? We were down, down, down--the lowest we could go. I was very very sick. It took 12 days, because we went through a big storm, the ship had to change its course. It took three days longer than it was supposed to.

Finally, we arrived in New York. We saw the Statue of Liberty. It was very emotional. As a matter of fact, my husband was liberated from a concentration camp on May 5, 1945, and each May 5th, I used to give him a little Statue of Liberty--a little memento of freedom. He was very pleased with it. He passed away Oct. 6, 1976. He was only 57. Q: Did you ever hear the Corleoni family talk about what would happen to them if they got caught hiding you? P: They never mentioned they knew, even after we told them, the man said, "I knew you were Jewish." He couldn't even say the word properly. In Italian, Jewish is said "EBREI." He said "ABREI." He never mentioned, but I'm sure he knew, because in Segaglia, there were other Jewish families. The population knew about these people. A lot of them had stores, they were professional people, so people were well known in town. They knew who the Jewish people were.

Q: Have you been to Italy since? P: Yes, I was back in 1983 and 1984. In 1984, I went back for a class reunion, which I gave them the idea in '83. In the United States, they have such a nice way to get together, and they liked the idea. It was high school. They said to me in '83, "If you promise that you'll be back next year, we'll make a class reunion. I said, "Of course, I'll come."

At that time, I knew it wasn't like Australia. I knew I would come back. It just happened that my big satisfaction and pleasure that at that time, I considered the Jewish holidays--Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur coincided with the reunion. I had the opportunity to go back to my old synagogue, which was destroyed by the bombs but was rebuilt, different but still in the same place, the same people. I had to tell them I was Piera Dello Strologo. They said, "Oh, yes." Many years had passed and we didn't recognize each other. It was a very satisfactory period. I stayed two months at that time.

There's a Survivors of the Holocaust. Do you think, after this presentation, that there will be some people who'll want to form a group similar to that--survivors of this Italian. P: How can they form a group, as there are no Jewish Italian people in Philadelphia. I can count two, now. I had a friend who died. That's all I can think about--my sister and I--another one; he's a member of the Mikvah Israel Synagogue at 5th and Market Streets.

He came here when he was three or four years old. Q: What section of Philadelphia do you live in, Piera? P: In the Northeast. Q: When you first came here, you said you lived around the Italian Market. P: I lived at 8th and Tasker in South Philadelphia. P: Don't mark down. When I was here, my sister and I had a very hard time to make our Italian neighbors that we are Jewish and Italian. They couldn't understand that. They said, "If you're Jewish, you're not Italian, if you're Italian, you're not Jewish. They said, "You changed your religion, because you married a Jewish fellow. I used to get very mad about this. Even though I changed my citizenship three times, I feel very Italian, very American. Italy is still very dear to my heart as is the U.S. To hear somebody say you're not a real Italian, that I don't like. It's like someone saying I'm not a real American. Q: Even during the Holocaust, no one told you that you were not Italian. P: Life was totally different. When I came here (now it's much better) I found groups--Italians by themselves, Polish by themselves, Germans by themselves. Jewish here is a nationality. To me it's not a nationality. It's a religion. In Italy, we're all together. We don't worship together, because they go to church, we go to synagogue. During the Jewish holidays, stores are closed; the others are open--that's the only difference. I was the only Jewish girl in my school (30 people). Everyone who made the class reunion, not one was Jewish. Q: Did you have Jewish friends when you were growing up? P: Yes. Q: Did you find out what happened to them? None of these friends were my own age.