

Interviews with Emigrants

Interview to Ms. Pierina Menichini, emigrated from Italy to Belgium

Interviewed by Prof.ssa Claudia Membola from ICSIM (IT)



Personal Data

First Name: Pierina Menichini

Age: 78

Country of origin: Italy

Year of emigration: 1958

Country of destination: Belgium

Now living in: Foligno - Italy **Since:** 1958

Interviewed by: Prof.ssa Claudia Membola

Date and place: 15/04/09 – Foligno (PG), Italy

Personal History of Emigration

Before leaving

- *How old were you when you left your country? Moving to another country was your own decision?*

I was 22 when I left, in 1958

- *Did you leave alone, with your family, or with other people you knew? How many relatives did you leave behind?*

I joined my husband with other women who had their husbands there and with our children. I left my family and my parents-in law in Italy.

- *Why did you leave your country? Were you looking for a job? Had you religious or political problems? Did you just wish to know new countries and new people? Other reasons?*

Here, unfortunately, it was impossible to work; my husband worked just seasonally at the sugar factory. There were a lot of us in the family: brothers and sisters in law, parents in law...; there was just this little shop but it wasn't enough for all of us. Moreover, a cooperative store had just opened in the nearby and it competed with us, so we earned very little.

- *Were there many people who choose to leave their country?*

Yes, there were. Just from S.Giovanni, our little hamlet, at least fifty people had left for Belgium.

- *How did you choose your destination? Did you know where to go and what to do? Did you know the language?*

My husband had a friend in Belgium, so he asked me if he could leave, too. This friend found him a job in a steel mine. We shared a house with other Italian friends. They welcomed us heartily, they were all Italians and neighbours. I didn't know the language and I never think of studying it because I found it very difficult. Anyway, a friend of mine taught me some terms.

- *Tell me something about the expectations you had when you left your country: did you think to remain in the country of emigration, .or to come back home ?*

Before leaving I was very worried and I used to cry a lot because I was leaving the house, my relatives in Nocera Umbra and my parents in law in Foligno. I didn't know what I would have run into, but I knew I wasn't leaving alone.

Travel

1. *Which means of transport did you use?*

I left by train. We went to Milan by train and then we went on to Belgium.

2. *How long was your journey?*

The journey was long and tiring, because there were no seats, the children were sitting on our knees and we on our suitcases.

3. *Tell me something about your feelings along the journey.*

I can't say how hard it was, I've never forgotten it. Anyway I was happy to see my husband again since I hadn't seen him for two years.

4. *Did your child remember his father?*

No, not much.

First Impact

1. *Tell me something about the first impact with the new country. What first happened when you got to your destination?*

The welcome was favourable since we all knew each other.

2. *How much time did you need to find a house?*

My husband had already found a house.

3. *How much time did you need to find a job?*

I didn't work since I had a little child. Anyway, Italian women could find work easily. And after a while I found some little jobs, too. For example I used to sell sausages made by a fellow countryman, house by house.

4. *Did you keep your Italian traditions there?*

Yes, we did. Even if we exchanged recipes from other regions too. Most men couldn't cook and asked us to help them. We used to gather to celebrate Christmas and Easter all together.

5. *Which were the main difficulties you encountered within the first period? what did you mainly miss (home, friends, language, food, tradition, other issues) ? Were there any countryman of yours waiting for you ?*

I didn't have many difficulties because my husband used to help me doing shopping at the supermarket while I was buying something at the nearby shop. As for the language, since I didn't know French, I used to make gestures and point at objects. Even Belgian shop-keepers had learnt a bit of Italian. But I missed my family, and my mother in law missed his little nephew a lot. We used to write and send photos to each other very often.

6. *Did you feel “different” ? what did you think about that people? what did they think about you?*

I didn't feel different, I felt at ease there. People were as they are in Italy, good and bad. Our landlady used to tell us off because she was afraid our child could have ruined her house while playing. Some people called us “dirty Italians”.

After some time (6 months/one year)

1. *What have you done in order to try and integrate in the new country?*

Well, I tried to do some little jobs. For example I did the washing and ironing for a nurse. No Italians had a washing machine in order to save as much money as possible. Then I worked in a bar in the morning while the child was at the nursery school.

2. *Did anybody (institutions, associations, single people, native or guest) help you to integrate into the community?*

For a while we stayed at some Italian friends of ours', then we found a little house by our own. A Belgian family gave us some furniture, dishes, cutlery, everything you could need to set up home.

3. *Did you feel that the help you received was enough? What could have been done and was not to help your integration.*

Since I didn't know the language, I've been always among Italians.

4. *What did you feel was the most effective help you received?*

Actually, I didn't need any help myself.

Now

5. *Is the country in which you actually live the one you reached first ? did you achieved citizenship? or have you moved again? and why ?*

We decided to go back to Italy after about two years and a half in order to allow our child to attend the primary school in Italy. The shop we had in Foligno was going better so we were earning enough to live. During that period only few Italians used to go back home, some of them stayed in Belgium since their children had made up their own families, others to save more money.

6. *Is there any unpleasant event (racism, indifference, coldness, etc.) you went through, or you witnessed ?*

Well, Italians were considered rather badly.

7. *Do you think that the differences between this country and your motherhood have increased or decreased by the time? or did they remain the same?*

They have decreased.

8. *How do you look back to your experience?*

With a bit of nostalgia. I remember I cried when I left Belgium to go back to Italy.

a. *Is there anything you "learned" from your new fellow citizens (job, culture, food, lifestyle, social or political institutions, etc.)?*

Yes, from them I learned how to clean. In the morning they cleaned the pavement, the "trottoir"; they cleaned deeply, throwing some liquid soap and water and then they cleaned it with the broom. There were much more cleaning products.

b. *Is there anything you think they "learned" from you ?*

No, there isn't, because we were not used to go to their houses. They didn't invite us. I tried to cook that "soup" they cooked putting all the vegetables together with meat.

c. *Is there anything you think they could "learn" from you, if only they knew you better?*
Sure.

d. *Which actually are your feelings? Have you any regrets? If you could go back in your life, would you come in the same place? or would you go elsewhere? or would you stay home?*

I don't have any regrets but I think at my stay in Belgium as a positive experience.