

Interviewee: Egle Novia
Interviewers: Vincent Colasurdo and Douglas Reilly
Date of Interview: November 13, 2006
Location: Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcribers: Vincent Colasurdo and Douglas Reilly



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Abstract: Egle Novia was born in Rome, Italy in 1930 and lived there until she married an Italian-American and relocated to his hometown of Worcester. In this interview, she discusses her childhood experiences in Rome during World War II, sharing memories of food rations, air raids, and the German occupation and emphasizing the financial and emotional struggles her family endured after the death of her father during this period. Egle goes on to discuss the transition and cultural shock she underwent after moving to Worcester. She talks about the differences between everyday life, community, and transportation between her homes, as well as her experiences learning a new language. Egle reflects upon the many changes that have occurred in Worcester over time, particularly the decline of the downtown shopping area and movie theatres. Egle also discusses the role of the Catholic Church in her life, both as a source of spiritual and material support in Rome during the war as well as a foundation for community and family life through the fellowship of Italian-Americans in Worcester.

DR: May we record your permission... have your permission to record your oral history today for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project?

EN: Yes.

DR: Okay. We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester we are focusing on areas of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus on your experiences with your differences between Italy and Worcester. Thank you for your help. This is an important project. Okay, what is your full maiden name? And your married name?

EN: Oh, the maiden name?

DR: Yeah.

EN: First? Okay, ... Do you need my first name too? No. You already have that.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Yeah, you'll be fine.

EN: My maiden name is ... My married name is Novia, N-O-V-I-A.

DR: Okay. When were you born?

EN: I was born February ... 1930.

DR: Okay, Do you have any children?

EN: Yes, two.

DR: Do you have any grandchildren?

EN: Yes, five.

VC: That's the way to go.

DR: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify yourself with?

EN: Italian.

DR: Italian...

VC: You've been married.

DR: Yes.

EN: I am married.

VC: You *are* married. Yes, I am sorry. Your husband's name was?

EN: Michael.

DR: Michael.

VC: Michael Novia.

DR: Okay.

VC: And your parents are from Italy?

EN: My parents are deceased. They, they...

VC: Yeah. They were from Italy.

EN: Right

VC: Did, did they live in Italy their entire lives?

EN: Yes.

DR: They did?

EN: Well, my mother came here for a while. I was born in Italy myself. And my mother came here for a while, and she passed away in this country. She never went back.

VC: Oh she did?

DR: Okay.

EN: My father was already dead so...

VC: How long did she stay here?

EN: She stayed, let's see, about twenty-five, twenty-eight years.

DR: Oh.

VC: With you in Worcester?

EN: Yes.

VC: That's pretty nice.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Um, let's see here. And then, what part of Italy did you grow up in?

EN: Rome.

VC: You grew up in Rome?

EN: Yes.

VC: God, beautiful. Um, and what was it like there? 'Cause we've never been there.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Yeah

EN: Well it's a lot different now than it was when I was growing up. I was growing up was uh, there was five of us in the family. Three—I had two siblings at the time and my

father was the only one working. And he worked for the government, and my mother stayed home with us. So it was—I had a very happy childhood considering that we were not rich. We were in a nice—we had a nice apartment. It was clean. And we had a decent amount of food until the war started. And then we had a lot of problems. Okay, the war started in 1940. I was ten years old. It started in 1940 over there.

VC: Yeah

DR: Right, yeah.

EN: Yeah, um I was ten years old. So, it, it made a big difference in our lives. Because we started having rations—I don't know how much you want me to talk.

VC: No, do you...

DR: No, that's fine.

VC: As much as you want.

DR: Yeah.

EN: We started—food started being rationed. And there was a lot less of everything. I, I was, like I said, I was little and they tried to keep me sheltered. My sister was already working because she was a lot older than I was. My brother and I were still in school. And I loved school, believe it or not.

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: I still do. But it was hard. It was very difficult. Then when I was twelve years old, my father died. He had a heart attack. So that complicated things even more.

DR: Yeah.

EN: Because then there was only one pay coming in, which was my sister's. And she was, she hadn't been working long enough to make enough money. So it was very difficult for us financially. We had to sell a lot of our possessions. Just to make ends meet. All the gold we owned, and um, different things that my mother had in the house. They were, were, you know, meant a lot to her...

DR: Right. Yeah.

EN: Everything had to be sold. The sewing machine, pretty things that she had around the house. I don't even know exactly what it was that she sold because I was kind of busy living in my own world. I had my friends, I had my school. And so all I know is that I didn't have enough clothes, I didn't have enough shoes. I didn't, I didn't have

enough to eat. I was hungry, most of the time. Which, it's very difficult to understand for anybody else. You tell them...

DR: Yeah 'cause we never had to go through that.

EN: Right. And I mean, yeah you can be hungry if you get up in the morning or something. Or in the middle of the night and you know where you can get the food but when there isn't any. And we were cold. Uh, in the winter it's cold. But the way things are now...hah. It's a lot different, I mean if you go, you're gonna go one of these days right?

VC: Hopefully.

EN: You're gonna find that things are much different.

VC: Well, I mean, were uh, were your friends' families—I mean, would you say it was pretty common that you know...your situation?

EN: We had um, yeah some of our relatives were better off. But they could really help. I had an aunt who was very good to me. She used to—she had a little baby, my cousin. And I used to take care of the baby just so—in exchange for her feeding me lunch. And so that aunt meant a great deal to me. Because she helped us out.

DR: Right.

EN: And then my brother had to leave school when it was reasonable to do so. So he could get a job. And they gave him an office job too, where my father worked. Just out of, kindness of their heart. He wasn't old enough; they kind of fudged the birth date so he could work there. And he worked there all his life until he passed away five years ago. Yeah.

VC: They were trying to help out, that's nice.

DR: Yeah.

EN: Yeah.

VC: Um, when was it that you came to, to America.

EN: I got married in Rome.

VC: You got married in Rome...

EN: Right

VC: And uh...

EN: And then I came to Worcester. My husband is from Worcester. He was born and brought up in Worcester. He's third generation Italian. In other words, it was his grandparents that came from Italy. His parents were both born here.

VC: When was it that you two moved—or that you, I should say, moved from Italy to Worcester?

EN: It was 1951.

VC: 1951, so the war was over, and...

EN: Right, the war ended in '45. And things started getting better pretty fast. I, I was in school and we had—contrary to what's happening now in some other countries, we got a government pretty fast. Over there. And we had a vote the year after, 1946, a year after the war ended. We voted the monarchy out and we got a republican, I mean a democratic government. So things, excuse me, of course, I don't know if you've heard of the Marshal Plan...

DR: Yeah.

EN: That was, that was a general, it was named after a general. And he helped the Italian people get back on their feet with supplies and food. And I don't know what else, but it was great.

VC: I mean would you say that, you know, after what you went through with the war, you were almost looking forward to kind of a fresh start? You know, going to the United States...

EN: Yes, oh yes. Definitely, Definitely. Yeah, yeah. I was very interested in the English language. I was taking English lessons by myself. We had them in school, we had English in school, but I took lessons on my own. Everything that I could get that I could read in English, I really liked it a lot. And uh, I went to the United States Information Service, where they had Italian—I mean American magazines and books. So I spent hours there. Then after I finished, of course, I wanted to continue school, but we couldn't afford it. Again, here we go. Ha, sad stories, ha.

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: I wanted to continue; I wanted to study languages. And I couldn't. That, that was not an option at the time. I had to go to work too. So I got a job in an office again. You know. I was lucky, to even get that. So I got a job in an office, and I liked it very much. And then I met my husband and we fell in love. And we got married. He came back for me. And we got married over there.

VC: How long did, uh—actually that's not what I wanted to say. Did you ever get to continue school? I mean obviously you are taking classes now...

DR: When you came here?

EN: No, I should have. I should have. Yes, you're right. That's a good question.

VC: It was a hard time

EN: No it wasn't because I was living with my in-laws, with his parents. And they, I don't know whether they were—they've been gone now for a few years and I don't want to say anything bad. But, they kind of protected me too much. And they didn't want me to branch out on my own. They thought that I was too naïve and too young and this and that; they sheltered me. So, but if I had realized at the time, I should have gone to school. I should have continued school. I mean, they lived right near Worcester State. And I could have gone to school there.

VC: How—when you first came to Worcester, how did it compare to, you know, what you might have thought?

EN: It was culture shock.

VC: Really? Not quite what you expected?

EN: Well, I'll tell what. First of all, where I was brought up...we had everything within walking distance, okay? It was uh—Rome is made up of all neighborhoods. Okay? Every neighborhood has the people who live there and the merchants and the market. The open-air market. And everybody knew everybody. You know. Which was good because there wasn't any animosity. People just helped each other. And uh, so just to be able step outside the door—and we lived in a high-rise by the way, five story building—so you just step out the door, and everywhere you go, "Good morning," by name.

DR: You knew everyone.

EN: By name. You know, by name. And then you went to the market, which was open-air. And you pick out your fresh vegetables and fresh meat, fresh cheese, and all those delicious things. And uh, the school was walking distance. The transportation was excellent, anyhow. I mean, it still is. But uh, so when I got here I found out I couldn't go anywhere without a car.

DR: Yeah.

EN: Because I didn't drive. So it was very hard, you know, because I said, "How am I going to get around?" There was nothing to walk to, you know. Can't walk to the market, you can't walk to the theatre.

DR: Everything is far away.

EN: Yeah.

VC: No buses or anything...I know it's different. Let's see here...and then—so you never went back to any school other than what you're doing now?

EN: Right .

VC: You got a job and...

EN: Right.

VC: What does your husband do?

EN: My husband worked as a public relations photographer for twenty-five years. And, then there was cut in personnel so he got different kinds of jobs. He freelanced for a while, he did wedding and... because he had he had a lab down where we lived. Down in a basement. So he did his own printing. That's before digital.

(Everyone laughs.)

VC: Has he switched over yet?

EN: Oh yeah.

VC: Oh.

EN: He has a digital camera but he doesn't do anymore photography. Now just for our own, just family stuff.

VC: Yeah.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Did he go to college or anything?

EN: No.

VC: No.

EN: No.

VC: He made it through without that, that's pretty good.

EN: Yeah, yeah.

VC: Um, let's see... how was it, you know, when you and your husband moved out from your in-laws, you know, and are kind of going on your own?

EN: Right, we got our first apartment. I insisted on that.

VC: Get on it!

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: I still had a little bit of gumption left. They didn't stifle me completely. No, I thought we should have our own place. So we got a little apartment; it was very nice. And bought our first car. I still didn't drive.

VC: No?

EN: It took oh, how many years before—I had two children already before I first started driving. Yeah, and—but anyhow, so we got a little apartment and we got pregnant. And we had a little car. And it was a riot. It was an old car, it was twelve years old. And it was a convertible. And when it rained, the rain came in the back seat.

(Everyone laughs.)

VC: Oh no. Oh no.

EN: And then we couldn't—what was the problem—we had to park it always on a hill because it couldn't go down...I don't remember now what the problem was. We had to park on a hill all the time.

VC: Laughs. It wouldn't start or something.

EN: Something. I don't remember now what it was. So anyhow...

VC: Was it hard, you know, getting the kids around and everything without driving?

EN: Yeah, oh yes. Oh yeah, but I didn't know any better. I just—we went food shopping. I don't remember if we went together, or if maybe he went. And, or we—see in those days they didn't even have car seats for the kids. Imagine how dangerous that was.

VC: Yeah.

DR: Yeah.

VC: All the things that can go wrong.

EN: So, I'm talking fifty-three years ago. You know, so yeah. I just—not many women drove at that time. I don't know if they did or not. But none of my friends have, could drive.

VC: Was it like that back in Italy? I mean, did women drive?

EN: There were, when I left, by the time I left there weren't many that did. But now, everyone drives. They're maniacs!

(Everyone laughs.)

VC: Around here at least.

EN: You should see my cousin, the one that was a baby that I took care of, that I was telling you about. She is unbelievable. She drives this little car, but she goes everywhere! She goes down one-way streets. Oh, dangerous. She's dangerous. She's sixty-two years old.

VC: Oh no, she's going all over the place.

EN: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Oh yeah, they really are—everybody drives there now, like all the women. They all have two cars. They all have two houses. They have a summer home. One at the beach—oh, I'm telling you, they've become rich. They wear designer clothes and everything.

VC: You mentioned that your mother stayed at home with the family.

EN: Yes.

VC: Would you, would you say it was like that for probably for your friends and things back home? Or?

EN: Yes. Yeah, there weren't many women working.

VC: What about...

EN: Then.

VC: Yeah then. Oh yeah, of course now. What about when you came here? I mean did—were there lots more women working? Or still pretty kind of the same?

EN: Um, well, I started working before I had my babies. And there were a lot of women there. And then after the babies were born, I don't—there wasn't that many. I think they were mostly at-home mothers.

VC: Yeah.

DR: Uh huh.

EN: And the radio used to be our big thing.

DR: Yeah.

EN: You know, we used to listen to the radio. And pick up the phone and say, “Did you like that song? I’ll play it for you.”

VC and DR: (Laugh.)

EN: Yeah, we had vinyl records, and forty-fives. You don’t know what that is.

VC: I don’t know what that is.

DR: I don’t—forty-five’s the little one right?

EN: Yeah, it’s a small...

DR: And then seventy-two is the big one?

EN: Seventy-twos, yeah, they are big. And then...

VC: Is that just the radius or whatever...

DR: What?

VC: Is that just the radius or...

DR: Yeah, it’s like a seventy-two millimeter or centimeter or something like that.

VC: Huh. Um, did you ever get involved with any volunteer or community work or anything?

EN: Oh, I did that after I retired. Yes, oh yeah. I volunteered for ten years. But it wasn’t anything really, uh social, women or whatever. It was in a gift shop at the hospital, at the hospital. But it was in the gift shop. So, I’m not saying it was very—trying to save lives or anything.

VC: Yeah.

DR: Yeah, uh huh, yeah.

EN: You know, but I did work for ten years after I retired. I did volunteer work in the gift shop.

VC: Everything helps, you know, in the hospitals.

EN: Yeah.

VC: Um, would you say you were actively involved in politics? You know, either here or in Italy? Obviously, you know, in Italy, you were very young.

DR: Yeah.

EN: Yeah, no I couldn't. Over here, yes, I was very interested in the, what was going on. I followed a couple of—well, first of all, I didn't like the Vietnam War. I didn't approve.

DR: I don't think a lot of people did.

EN: No, my nephew was, my nephew was in Vietnam. He served two terms. And it was just horrendous. We would watch the news at night on pins and needles wondering what was going to happen to him. But so maybe it was because of his connection or I don't know of whatever.

DR: Did he make it out alright?

EN: Yes, yeah.

VC: Thank god!

EN: Yes, thank you. So, I got involved with that. Not involved but I mean I followed that. And the presidents. At the time I liked John Kennedy very much. We thought that he was great. I voted for him of course. And uh...

VC: Yeah that was...

EN: That was about the extent. And when—I went with, my daughters talked me into going with the one day. And hold the signs at the corner, "Clinton-Gore."

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: That was about the extent of it. I said, "I'm too old for this."

VC: Yeah that wasn't that long ago.

DR: Yeah.

VC: I remember Clinton.

EN: Yeah, right.

VC: You said you had a nephew in the Vietnam War. Did you know—have any family in World War II? It was so close, you know.

EN: I know, I know. That's true. Um, no. None of my cousins in Italy were in it. My father was in World War I, believe it or not. Well, towards the end of it. He was a lot older than my mother. But there was nobody. That's strange that you mentioned it. There was nobody in our family, and we had a large family. My father had lots of brothers and sisters. And my mother had a lot of brothers and sisters, but nobody went. It was just probably the age was on the cusp. You know.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Yeah, I know because you were so young during that time. Especially, it's just funny. 'Cause, you know, Vietnam War you know seemed close to you because your nephew was in it, and of course World War II you were practically in the war.

DR: Right next to your home.

EN: I was right there.

DR: Yeah.

EN: I mean, you know, the Germans were walking right downstairs from our windows.

DR: Oh wow.

EN: Yeah, patrolling the streets. See, what happened was after Italy surrendered, let's put it this way, because there was no way that Italy was going to make it. The Americans—you know how Italy is shaped like a boot—well, the Americans were coming up from the South. And the Germans were already there fighting the allies. You know, the British and American troops. And so, they were already there. Okay, so there was something that had to give. So, the Italians just could not hold on. And they, just gave up. So what happened, when the Italians gave up, the Germans took over. And so they used our soil for their battleground. And so the Italian people got involved like what's happening now in Iraq. The civilians got involved with the war because they are right there. So they took over their homes. There was refugees. People had to leave. We didn't because we lived in a big city. But the people that lived in the country, they're the ones that had to leave. They, they couldn't stay. So, this is what happens. They took over Rome. Rome was bombed only twice. And then they declared it open city. Because of the art treasures and the Vatican, and whatnot. They said that no more bombing. I don't know who said that, but somebody did.

DR: Was the bombing near your house?

EN: No, oh it was...

DR: It was like across town?

EN: Yes, yeah. But we heard the air raid. We used to have air raids all the time. And um...

DR: But Italy had a lot of bombing right?

EN: Oh yes. Oh yes. Especially up North. And well—the South end, like I said the South end, we were pretty lucky in Rome. But we had the air raids and the shelters. The shelters were horrendous. They were in the basement of the five-story building. So my sister wouldn't let us go to the shelter.

VC: No way?

EN: No, because she said—she took over because my poor mother was so distraught with all this. So she said, “You're not going because if the bomb falls, the building's going to fall right on top of you in the shelter. So you're gonna suffocate to death.” So she wouldn't let us go. So she said, “We'll just stand. We'll just find the best wall to stand on. And that's where we'll stand.” So the air raids would ring and then they would clear. A message would come that it was clear. So the day, the first time they bombed Rome, we were in a park. Because it was June, I don't know why weren't in school.

(Everyone laughs.)

VC: Taking the day off.

EN: Ehh, we didn't do that. Maybe it was a weekend.

DR: Yeah.

VC: Yeah.

EN: Okay, but we were in a park. My brother and I and some friends, we always had friends around. So we went to this park, and we heard the air raid. And somebody right away started to say, “Oh, the bombs are here; they are in the city. You better run.” So we ran home, out of breath. And sure enough, that was the first time they did. They said they bombed right near a cemetery and a church because they said, afterwards, they said that there was ammunition dump, the Germans had put ammunitions there. They hid them in the church. Like what they do now with the mosques.

DR: Right, yeah.

EN: You know, so I don't know whether that was true or not.

DR: Who was bombing, Germans or Americans?

EN: Americans. Sorry.

(Everyone laughs.)

DR: My bad.

VC: Don't say sorry. You are right here with us now, too. Not at the time, but you know, what are you going to do about it?

EN: So the war was pretty bad. From '40 to '45—five years, my life, my childhood that it was affected. Very much so, very much so. And then losing my father in the middle of it, you know it was worse.

DR: Right, yeah.

VC: Luckily, you know came here, not bombing.

EN: I know.

VC: Got out of it, ah...

DR: Has religion been a major part of your life?

EN: Oh always, always. Religion was a big help in our lives. My mother was very religious, and the church was very important. As a matter of fact the church did help us some. But they had so many people to take care of that they really doled it out very, you know. But they did help some because she wasn't afraid to go cry to anybody. "I have three children, you gotta help me!" So, but we were always attended mass and communion and uh... You want to hear about my first communion? That was pretty sad. That was pretty sad. Because the girls that had money—there was still people who had money—they all wore these pretty dresses, very pretty dresses. Do they still do that?

DR: Yeah, everyone gets all dressed up.

VC: Not when I did it.

DR: Oh yeah, my church they still do it. The girls wear nice dresses and the guys wear suits.

EN: Oh, oh I mean they looked like brides, they wore real pretty dresses.

VC: Yeah, we didn't go that far.

EN: And I didn't, I didn't match well. You wouldn't have the money, so consequently, the church gave me a dress. And it didn't look anything like the other kids did. So ask me how I felt about that. Ask me how I felt

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: I was pretty upset. Thank goodness had my faith though.

VC: You guys were still able to go to Mass and everything throughout?

EN: Oh yes.

DR: The war.

EN: Yes, yeah, we had always went. Yeah, yeah.

DR: And when you came here, how long before you found a church? Right away?

EN: Before I find a church?

DR: Church. Right away?

EN: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Well first we went to Our Lady Mount Carmel Church. Which is an Italian church in Worcester. Have you ever heard of it?

DR: No, we're both not from here.

(Everyone laughs.)

EN: Oh, that's right. See, you are living in a cocoon at Assumption College.

VC: The church is right there.

EN: I know, I know. The chapel is pretty here. Um, yeah we went to the Italian church because that is where my husband was, you know, raised. And his father and mother were very active in that church. And so we went there for a while, but when you start moving it's too far to send the kids to a lot of CCD lessons and whatnot. So we just joined our own parish.

VC: What, I mean, what would you say is the biggest change that you've seen since here in Worcester you know since..

DR: You got here?

EN: The biggest change in Worcester....

VC: Maybe nothing.

EN: Well, there has been a lot of physical change. Buildings gone up and buildings gone down. Different kinds of, different people trying to do things. Uh, which some of them I didn't approve. I didn't think it was right to destroy downtown. But I guess that was happening in all the cities all over our United States anyhow.

VC: What happened?

EN: Well, it used to be—when I first got here—used to be that you could go down and call downtown. You ever heard that expression?

VC: Yeah.

DR: Yeah.

EN: And it was beautiful department stores, not big, but nice department stores. Nice clothing line. And there was theatres. There was...one, two, three, four...at least four theatres that I can think of. One, two, three four...maybe even five. And restaurants, I mean it was hopping. It was really nice. So, somehow—this was the fifties, and people started moving out because that was the trend then. Everybody wanted to go to the suburbs and have, you know, a little house with a picket fence and a place for the kids to play. Nobody wanted to live in the apartments anymore. So people moved out. So consequently, there was nobody to shop anymore. So the stores all slowly started closing. And so they closed all the stores and there wasn't anything else to go there for. So then they built that monstrosity. It was like supposed to be an indoor mall. And uh, that didn't work out. They changed it three times. The theatres were all closed.

DR: Oh really?

EN: Oh yeah, the theatres are all closed.

VC: You mean, you mentioned the theatre. You mean like a play theatre or like a movie theatre?

DR: A movie theatre.

EN: A movie theatre, yes. I'm sorry. Oh, I mean, not like New York City with live plays. Although when my husband was growing up, they had live shows in on theatre in Worcester. Yeah, I call them theatre but they're movie theatres.

DR: Oh yeah, same thing.

VC: Same thing.

EN: Cinema.

VC: Oh yeah, there you go.

(Everyone laughs.)

VC: Um, we're—I mean, we're at the point that we've basically gone through everything that we have.

DR: If there are any questions you have. If you want to talk about anything else...

VC: If there is anything that you want to include.

EN: Uh, no, no. I, I can't think of anything.

VC: Perfect then, Thank you very much for helping out with the project and that's...

DR: Thank you very much for your help.

EN: Oh okay. Good luck.