

Interviewee: Irma Leone
Interviewer: Charlene L. Martin
Date of Interview: March 13, 2019



Abstract: Irma Leone was born in Vicenza, Italy. In this interview she shares what it was like to meet and marry her American husband in Italy and then move to the United States leaving her friends and family to begin a new life in Massachusetts. She raised three daughters and worked at Phalo Wire and Cable Corporation, Fab Tronic Coil Company, and became a quality control inspector at Raytheon. Although at times it was a challenge to learn the language and culture of a new country, she never regretted following her heart because, as she said, “I had a good man and I knew it.”

CLM: Today is March 13, 2019 and I am here with Irma Leone who has agreed to be recorded for the Worcester Women’s Oral History Project. How are you doing today?

IL: Very well, thank you.

CLM: Thank you for doing this. I am going to start by asking what is your full name?

IL: Irma Bianca Leone.

CLM: And your maiden name?

IL: Pina

CLM: What year were you born?

IL: 1935.

CLM: Okay, and where were you born?

IL: Vicenza, Italy.

CLM: And have you ever been married?

IL: Yes, once.

CLM: And the name of your husband?

IL: James.

CLM: And how many children do you have?

IL: Three. Loretta, Nancy, and Carol.

CLM: Do you have any grandchildren?

IL: Yes, three.

CLM: And so you were born in Vicenza, Italy. Is that where you also went to school?

IL: Yes.

CLM: Did you go through high school or beyond high school?

IL: Just high school.

CLM: What was the name of the school?

IL: Scuola Professionale Femminile.

CLM: You can help me with that spelling later [laughs]. And what year was it when you moved to the United States?

IL: 1963.

CLM: And how old were you then?

IL: 27.

CLM: So were you working at the time in Italy?

IL: Oh yes. I was a jewelry maker, goldsmith.

CLM: In Vicenza or another city?

IL: In Vicenza.

CLM: Nice. Now what made you come to the United States?

IL: I married a nice American boy. Like I said, I was a goldsmith. I was working with my dad and then at that time, all of a sudden, the gold went up in price. So the work stopped for a while.

CLM: People couldn't afford to buy jewelry?

IL: Yes. So my mother said to me, “Irma, you go to this lady that I know. You will learn how to iron the shirts, the pants, the jackets and it will be good for you when you get married.” And I said, “Okay.” I was there a month and all of a sudden came this nice, tall boy. Blonde. And he came through the door and he had the uniform to be dry cleaned. And he looked at me, and I looked at him [sighs], and I fell in love. We fell in love. That day he came back again with some other laundry, dry cleaning. And the lady that I was working for said, “Hmmm. Here’s the boy named Leone,”—because he was a boy, twenty years old—and she spoke a little English and she asked him, “Where did you get the uniform?” He said, “I asked a friend of mine and he said to take it in.” Then he came in again.

CLM: The same day?

IL: Again. And he looked at me and I looked at him and that’s it. I saw his nametag. He was Leone. I said, “Oh, you’re Italian?” And he said, “Yes, but non parlo bene.” This is the way we meet each other.

CLM: That’s interesting. He went back three times in one day [laughs].

IL: And then he came back the day after.

CLM: Oh! [laughs] Did you speak a little English?

IL: No, I didn’t speak English at all and he didn’t speak Italian at all. But we had a little booklet, a little dictionary and he was finding the words. And I had another dictionary which he gave to me and we learned like that. And then we start writing and that’s it.

CLM: Wow. So did he ask you on a date?

IL: Before the date it was almost a month that he was coming daily. He was in the military police so he would work on different days and finally, just about a month after, he asked me for the date.

CLM: So he was a little bit on the shy side?

IL: Yes. And I was too because at that time, in 1958, Italian people still had on their minds that the Americans bombed us, but of course, to liberate us from the Germans.

CLM: You’re referring to World War II.

IL: Yes.

CLM: That was a little bit after, but it was still fresh in people’s minds?

IL: Yes.

CLM: So was the military base in Vicenza?

IL: Yes, in Vicenza. It was the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization base].

CLM: So the year you met him was 1958?

IL: Yes.

CLM: So how long did that go on?

IL: It went on until we married in February 1960.

CLM: Did you get married over there in Italy?

IL: Yes.

CLM: Tell me about the wedding. Was your whole family there?

IL: Yes.

CLM: His family must have been back in the United States?

IL: Yes. The only guests were the captain and Jim's friends, and we had a beautiful wedding. [Laughs] And everybody got drunk. The Italians got drunk because Jimmy wanted some whiskey at the wedding and all the Italians were drinking. My friends and my relatives, they were drinking whiskey like it was wine. [Laughs] And the American boys, the American guys were drinking the wine.

CLM: And how did your parents feel about you marrying this nice American boy?

IL: At first, when I told them after a couple of months—Jimmy wanted to meet them, but I was a little bit afraid because, you know, a nice girl, quiet girl, they don't marry a military man. But he insisted and I remember as soon as they met him they fell in love [laughs] because he was a wonderful, wonderful man.

CLM: That's so nice.

IL: Yeah. He was very respectful. Very handsome, tall.

CLM: And blonde.

IL: And blonde. Blue eyes. As a matter of fact, he made the *Stars and Stripes* magazine on the front cover. I still have it.

CLM: So, once you got married did you continue to live in Italy for a little longer?

IL: Yes, because he reenlisted in order for us to be able to stay in Italy a little bit longer because eighteen months to the day I was married, my first child was born. My Loretta was born. And she was born in Italy. And he reenlisted for three more years to 1963. And that's when we moved.

CLM: Now is he originally from Massachusetts?

IL: Yes, from Brookline. His dad was from Italy, close to Rome, and his mom was a Canadian.

CLM: So when you came back here with baby Loretta ...

IL: I was seven months pregnant. I came May 2, 1963 and Nancy was born July 12.

CLM: So where did you live when you came here?

IL: I lived with my in laws in Brookline [MA].

CLM: Was he still in the military at that point?

IL: No, he got discharged. When we flew over, he got discharged in New York.

CLM: So what did he do for work once he came back?

IL: He was a donut maker.

CLM. Nice. When you were in Brookline?

IL: In Waltham. He was working for his cousin.

CLM: And when did you end up here in Northborough [MA]?

IL: In September of '63.

CLM: Oh, not too long after.

IL: No, because we had some money that my dad gave to us, and we were looking to buy a house with the GI Loan. So first we looked in Newton, but it was too expensive. So we came over here to Northborough and we bought this house here. And I'm still here.

CLM: That's a nice story. And did he continue doing the donuts?

IL: No. He worked at Greenman Steel on the furnaces.

CLM: And you worked too. What did you do? Did you work from the beginning of when you came here or after the kids?

IL: No, I worked after because Jimmy got sick from the donut shop. He got a rash and he couldn't do it anymore. So he had to start from the beginning. So in 1965, we almost lost the house. Because he was working for his cousin who didn't have any workmen's compensation, no insurance. You know, working sometimes for the family.

CLM: And where did you go to work?

IL: I worked at Phalo [Wire and Cable Corporation] in Shrewsbury [MA].

CLM: And what kind of place was that?

IL: We were doing the wires for Vietnam because at that time it was 1965 and the war was on.

CLM: How long did you work there for?

IL: Five years. And then I went over here in town to a small company, Fab Tronic [Coil Company]. I was winding small, small coil with very fine wire that was like a hair. And I was working at the company that put the coils on the spacecraft that went to the moon.

CLM: Wow, that's exciting! How long were you at Fab Tronic?

IL: Ten years.

CLM: Then what?

IL: And then I went to Raytheon. Over there I started in the assembly and then I got the opportunity to take an inspection job. And I went to school through Raytheon because we were working for the government, and I became an inspector of quality control.

CLM: Did you have to get security clearance?

IL: Yes.

CLM: That's impressive. And was that your final job? Did you retire from Raytheon?

IL: Yes.

CLM: How long were you at Raytheon?

IL: From '80 to '99.

CLM: That's a long time. Those were important jobs.

IL: Yeah, yeah.

CLM: What about your husband?

IL: After Greenman Steel he became a machinist and he went to work for Raytheon.

CLM: Oh, so he was at Raytheon too?

IL: Yes, and then he became a union steward at Raytheon..

CLM: Now backing up a little bit, your parents met him and liked him. But when it was time for you to leave, that must have been hard. What was that like for your family and you?

IL: I remember the night before I left I couldn't find my dad. And I found him down the cellar crying. He cried the day I got married in church. It was a nice wedding. Very nice. But we came over here and bought the house in '63 in September and in '65 he came over by himself to see. Because at that time, they didn't have any phone in the house. In order to be able to make a phone call I had to call the store where they sold vegetables and they'd go and get him and then I could only stay a couple of minutes because it was very expensive to call. So I was writing every week and they were writing every week, but by the time they answered it was a month. So it was very hard, but I had a good man, a very good man, a good life.

CLM: So when your father came out he saw everything was fine and that made him feel a little better?

IL: Oh yes.

CLM: Did you ever go back home?

IL: I went back to visit when Loretta was six. And then my mother came a couple of years after.

CLM: When you first came to the United States what did you think? Was it like what you thought in your mind it was going to be or different.

IL: All different. Because at that time in '58 in Italy not too many had a TV so we did not see too much of what was going on, but I remember in the plane coming to New York and I saw the ocean. And the houses were so big. I remember the Verrazano Bridge. The post where Jimmy had to go and be released from the military was in New York.

CLM: That must have been overwhelming to see New York City.

IL: Yes, very much. And the first impression coming home in the car—because my mother-in-law and brother-in-law came to New York to greet us—so to see all those little houses one right after the other, it seemed like it was a fairy tale, we left Italy in May with flowers and trees all blooming and we come over here and it was freezing. And I remember the road coming from New York to Boston and it seemed like I was on a rollercoaster!

CLM: How were the people to you when they first met you?

IL: Very good. Strange though because in Italy on Sundays we always go in the afternoon and take a walk or go around to some place, but over here we stay home and people came to visit. And it was strange. It was strange to see a lot of cars, big cars. I was stunned. I couldn't imagine me being in America.

CLM: Did you bring some of your customs with you? Your food, your recipes?

IL: No. My mother was a good cook. I learned after. In Italy, the recipes, they don't write them down. A pinch here, a pinch there—it's all in your head. But it was exciting being here. But it took me quite a while to get used to it.

CLM: I can imagine.

IL: To get used to the way of living. The supermarket—you know?

CLM: How did you do your shopping at home?

IL: In Italy, every day we go out. We go to the market—well there was no market, you would go to the individual shops. You would go to the butcher, or to the baker, and you go to the fish store—everybody have their own.

CLM: And then you get here...

IL: It was not like now, but one thing I remember, over here I collected the Green Stamps. I said to my husband, "I would like a set of dishes, I'll collect the stamps." We go to Stop and

Shop, always where they have the Green Stamps. I had fifteen books, it took me a long time. I went to Lincoln Plaza where there was an S&H Green Stamp redemption center where you can order what you want. So I went there with my husband. I said to the lady, "I would like the set of dishes over there." I had ten or twelve books. She said, "Oh, we don't have them here, but we can order them for you." "Okay," I said, "I leave my books here." I trusted people. They wrote to me or called me to tell me the set of dishes was in. I went to pick them up and the same lady said, "It's going to be twelve books." I said, "I left them here." And she said, "No, you didn't." I was so disappointed. So that gave me a bit of a feeling that there are dishonest people all over the world. But, you know, that was one incident.

CLM: Yeah, it doesn't feel good when you are taken advantage of.

IL: Yeah. But that's okay.

CLM: I remember Green Stamps. My brother used to like them and stick them in the books. Let's see what else do I have to ask you.

IL: I told you I don't have too much to say.

CLM: These are great stories. So when you first came over, you were married, you had one little girl, you were about to have another baby, and you eventually had a third baby, before you came here did you have any dreams of what it would be like here for your children that might have been different if they had grown up in Italy? Or were your hopes and dreams the same, didn't matter where you were?

IL: Yes, I cannot say I had any dreams. My dreams were my family, my husband, to live a nice life, and be happy. And I'm glad I came. It took me a few years to get used to everything because of the melancholy, the sadness at the time it was difficult, but I was happy.

CLM: I can't imagine leaving a family and a country that you were born in. It had to have been difficult. On the other hand you were a young, married woman with a new family and did that help take the edge off of homesickness?

IL: Yes, in Italy I had my mom, my family, my brother, my cousins, my friends and over here I had to start all over again.

CLM: Well, on the flip side I'm thinking your family and children helped you get over it, but now that you're saying that, because you had young children you weren't able to go out and about too much to make new friends.

IL: But even in Italy, I had friends, a lot of friends that I still have. I talk to them almost every day, every week. But over here, it was funny because we moved here in September and I was here a couple of days and the Welcome Wagon came to the door. They explained to me and it

was good. And then a couple of days after, my neighbors came, three neighbors came and it was good. But I didn't make too many friends because between working and the first couple of years I was home but the children were small. And then I went to work and I was working days and my husband was working nights and we would leave the children an hour or hour and a half when we had the change of shift with the lady next door. Which was good.

CLM: Did you become an American citizen?

IL: Oh yes.

CLM: And when was that?

IL: 1970. I was very excited to become an American citizen. It was good, but I have dual citizenship.

CLM: Does your first daughter because she was born there?

IL: She could be, even Nancy because I was pregnant with her there.

CLM: When was the last time you went back to visit?

IL: After Jim was gone. The last time was six years ago.

CLM: Just a couple more questions. A general question: how do you get through tough times, what keeps you going when you are going through a rough time? Like years ago when your husband was sick or more recently when I know your husband passed away? Everybody has a different way of coping.

IL: Every morning I get up, say thank God. I'm here today, I'm here for my girls, for my grandchildren. I miss my husband because we were married 45 years. I have some good friends, some good neighbors.

CLM: So if you were going to give some advice to a young woman today what would you tell her?

IL: [Sighs] Go with your heart. Be a good person, honest, get a good education because me, I just went to high school. And be honest.

CLM: I like go with your heart because that's what you did. You took a big leap by going with your heart and it worked out for you.

IL: Yes very much so. If I turn around and had to do it all over again I would do it.

CLM: Does it kind of surprise you now, looking back, knowing what you were like at that young age, does it surprise you that you did?

IL: Yes, I feel like how did I do it? How did I get to this point, to be happy in this house, in this country, with the people around me, how did I do it? But you see, I had a good man and I knew it.

CLM: As soon as you laid eyes on him and he laid eyes on you.

IL: Unbelievable. Yes, it was love at first sight. I can see him now like that first time. The sun was at the door, at the back of him, and he had the military hat, the military uniform. The fatigues, they called it. And the smile was like—how can you say? An apparition.

CLM: And he did not know what he was going to get into when he stepped into that shop [laughs]

IL: [laughs] But you know, he was three years younger than me and I told him right away, after a month. I said, “I’m older than you are.” He said, “It doesn’t matter.”

CLM: He knew he had a good thing when he saw you. Age didn’t matter.

IL: [laughs] Yes, age didn’t matter.

CLM: That’s a wonderful story. Thank you so much. This has been a wonderful interview and I really, really appreciate it.

IL: Thank you.