Memories of the American Dream
Migration, Assimilation, and the Homeland

Well, the price [of migration, CW] is a loss of continuity and identity and a real shake up of identity. Ahm, especially, somehow, especially where I wasn’t the one who made the choice.

INTERVIEW ANTONELLA LA MOTTA, Interview December 28, 2002, p. 44.

Matt Martone1 and I were sitting on the porch, engaged in discussion, while his wife and sons prepared latkes, chicken, and hamburgers on the grill. During the interview, both his sons and his wife joined in the conversation once in a while. In the following case it was only Matt responding to my question about the migration of his forefathers:

CW: Do you think there was a price paid [for migration, CW]?
MM: Do I? No, I think, my, my grandfather had a ball when he came to the states. I think he had a ball. He could do whatever he wanted to (...) my grandfather would sit on the porch at my father’s house, that was my grandfather’s house. And he just sat on the porch all day long and waved everybody going by. Everybody knew my grandfather, he loved that. So I think he had a ball when he came here. I don’t think...what he liked is that his brothers scattered, his brothers went everywhere and he stayed. But he stayed, he (acc) knew everyone my grandfather. All the Italians his age all knew my grandfather, they all respected my grandfather. My father has that same thing, all the Italians that knew my grandfather have a lot of respect for my father. For me, I’m not 60 years old yet, I don’t know if I’m respected or not, you know (long pause).2

It was not quite evident in this moment if Matt was discussing a Soloperto or a Martone grandfather. In spite of this vagueness his words deliver several hints

---

2 Interview Matt Martone, August 28, 2007, p. 90. The topic ascribed to this segment is “evaluating migration,” and the motif is respect community (good decision).
about Matt’s identity: The essential elements of speech here portray Matt’s value system of respect that one receives from other people in the community; respect that needs to be deserved and worked for, as is implied in Matt’s statement about being too young to receive respect. In his answer he clearly rejected my notion that a price tag could be put on the migration experience. Matt—on the contrary—evaluated the migration and assimilation experience of his great-grandfather as spectacular, entertaining, and enjoyable: “grandfather had a ball.”

The following pages will illuminate these questions: How did descendants of Elvira and Giovanni Soloperto maintain and alter memories of Italy, migration, and settlement in the United States? Again, these memories will be read at the intersection of class, gender, residence, and generation. The questions of migration, settlement, and assimilation are located within the frame of the American dream narrative of hard work and making it in America. To get to the core meaning of the American dream that was intertwined in the narratives, arguments, descriptions, and interactions, I asked my interviewees what they knew about the lives their ancestors led in Italy, the reasons why they left Europe, and how the settlement years in Worcester were experienced. The analysis shows that the interviewees’ speech about the great migration of their forefathers and foremothers is strongly formed by class narratives and values, offering two quite different perspectives on the American dream, success, and the meaning of hard work. The threat of downward mobility has put a damper on the separated group’s collective narrative of the American dream, whereas the Worcester line defines the American dream subversively. Instead of social mobility, the concepts of family, respect, and having work form the Worcester line’s blue-collar memories.

This section relies mainly on the conducted oral histories, and in some cases on public records. Unlike in other chapters, I do not present my close microanalytic and narratological reading of the interviews, and instead focus more on how the individual and familial memories intertwine with societal discourses or contrast with them. The segments of the oral history interviews are not presented in ways that allow the reader to follow all of the rules of transcription,


4 For a description of methodology see appendix. The relevant topics of this chapter are the following: “migration abstract/migration as process”; “reasons for why the ancestors decided to leave Italy”; “settlement”; “assimilation”; “evaluating migration”; “Italy as the homeland/Sava/café”; “returning to Italy/Sava as the homeland.”