

Interview with Lydia Gorman

August 2, 1999, Sutter Creek, California



Amy, Uncle Gigi, and Lydia

Interviewer: Nancy Rudolph

Mamam is going to tell us about going to Rome with Uncle Gigi when she was four years old. I just want to know what you remember about Uncle Gigi, and going to Rome.

Well, it was just walking on the piazza...is that what they call it?... and the coliseum, I remember that a little bit. And then walking around, and I remember at the time, they had little food stalls, and they had these "ottencinis"—deep-fried rice balls, and we ate those. I don't remember much more after that.

Do you remember Uncle Gigi in general?

Vaguely...very vaguely.

He was your mother's brother?

She had three brothers.

Three brothers? What were their names?

Roberto, I think, and Gigi, and Luigi, I don't know...we didn't have much contact because they were in the army, fighting Mussolini.

Did they survive?

Oh yes, but I don't know what happened to them, because we left (Sicily). By that time, I was six. And I remember more, the trip on the big ship, where we all got sick and the main thing—I couldn't stand the smell of the rubber sheet they put on the ship floor outside. Everybody was sick. And then I remember landing in New York City, and the most amazing thing in New York City was going into the five and ten cent store, because coming from a small town like Palermo, we didn't have any huge five and ten, with everything out in the open...and I do remember the food they had, in the little "go-round"—they used to have things like in the bakery, now you see different pies and cakes and everything... they would go around in a circle (like a lazy-susan) and all the desserts and things there, I do remember that.

And then we came across the country on a train from New York to...not San Francisco, we ended up in Northern California someplace...Oroville, I think it was. We lived there just a very short time, and I remember very little of that, but then we came to San Francisco and my father rented a flat on Bryant Street and that was so scary for me.

And you were just a little girl and it was a new country...



Paul, Maria, Amy, Sil, Terry, and Lydia Riedener

Then we moved to Portrero Avenue, you saw the picture of the five of us out on Portrero Avenue...I'll have to look for it...the big house is still standing there, great big three-story Victorian, and it's still standing there the last time we went by...on 16th and Portrero. Then my father was working at S&W at the factory right down in that same area, and we lived on the top floor and I remember some Italians on the bottom floor—they were raising snails. That's where we got all the snails in San Francisco...and they would eat them! And that's where that picture of my mother making wine, that was on Portrero Avenue...that's the house. And then my father bought the house on Brighton Avenue.

Your mother looked happy in that picture. Was she pretty happy with most things, except it was just difficult for her to...

Well, she was happy, but it was kind of tough at first. It was 1928, and I guess there was no money, my father had a job, he came here with a job already established for him. But my mother had a hard time shopping, she'd go to the butcher shop and say, "Quanto?" How much? And they would say, 25 cents or something, and she didn't know what they were talking about—she didn't know the money yet. It was tough, but it didn't take her very long. She became a US citizen, she answered all the questions. Then of course, it's all very clear, we went to grammar school in the Engleside district, walking distance. I still dream about that, walking to school, then walking back—it was a long walk.

What was the name of the grammar school?

St. Immedias, it's still there. Then I ended up at Balboa High School, then I went to City College, then I went to work for my father, because Amy wouldn't go because she didn't want to work in Oakland. And he pulled me out of city college to work for him...made me go to night school with Mr. Kopley, who was the accountant for the company, and he tried to show me how to do accounting. That was fun.

That's how you learned to do accounting, then, wasn't it?

Well, it wasn't really learning how, well I did everything in the office, hired and fired people, and got up at five o'clock in the morning to drive with my father to work, and then I met Daddy, and then I left!

Do you remember your grandmother at all? Sacchiero?

A little bit, but I don't remember too much because she wasn't around that much. There were some pictures there of aunt... Zia Cina...let's see, that's what her name was in Italian, Zia Cina...but I don't remember what her real name was...it was sort of a nickname; she was my mother's sister...she had a sister and three brothers that I know of.

You didn't keep in touch with any cousins from Sicily?

Not after we moved here, even when my mother's mother died. Did I give you a little birthday card? Somewhere I have a little birthday card that I got, from my grandmother to me, I think, but I don't know if I ever got it back from my mother. She had quite a bit of correspondence, but I never got it; maybe Amy has it.

Do you have any memories of Sicily besides playing on the beach?



Lydia and John Gorman and Maria



Little Lydia on a beach in Italy

I remember getting food from the vendor, from the balcony—that was fun. My mother would send a note down to the vegetable man, and he would put in the basket whatever she ordered, and we pulled the basket up; and they did that quite a bit. I remember their eating little birds...in Europe they do that...little canaries, but they cook them and eat them—I remember that. I don't think I did (eat them), but I know they did. I read somewhere in Europe where people eat these little birds.

Do you remember anything about where you lived, your house, or your address in Sicily, in Palermo?

Well, Amy said that we lived in a very nice home in Rome for a while—that's where those pictures are, of the beach, and the coliseum, but I don't have many memories—we didn't live there long enough. We lived in Palermo for a while, but things are kind of vague, we didn't really go to school.

Do you remember when Terry was born, or when Sil was born?

No, because then I was even younger...Sil was born in Europe. He was six months old when we came over and we didn't think he'd make it, he was such a sickly little thing. He was given special food for survival, but he made it. He (still) died too soon.

I just think it's so interesting about your memories of the trip over on the boat. So many immigrants did that.

We're all immigrants...I had no idea it took that long to make it (over), but it did take a long time to make it.

Your mother had a tough time on the boat, with all those little children, and a sickly baby?

Yes, and they had to leave the dogs back there, those two little tiny dogs in the picture, my father was heartbroken, two little special dogs...some kind of dog that's popular there. My father and I have always been the dog lovers. Amy, no, Theresa, no—Sil and I loved the dogs. We always had one...on Portrero Avenue, we had a dog, a beautiful German shepherd that went down on Portrero and got bopped by a car.



Lydia and Amy

We had a hard time once we moved to Portrero Avenue, then we started going to school, and we went to...I thought it was St. Peter and Paul school, but it was a school right there in that area, in the industrial area. I wish I could remember the school. But there we went to school and were treated like anybody else—we were not special, no one said, "Do you understand English?" We just went to school.

Did the other kids tease you at all because you were (immigrants)?

No, nobody bothered us. We learned English.

Were there a lot of other kids who couldn't speak English right away?

No, we went to school with kids who were born here, Americans—that's where the school was, and that's where we went, and it was a Catholic school. The nuns didn't give us any special treatment. I remember all the kids were going to go to communion, in that school, on Fridays after school, we all went to receive communion and have a mass. You had to go to confession first, and I followed the kids, and I went into this little booth and the father said (something to me), and I said, "(I) don't...speak...English." I didn't know...I just followed the kids. I don't think we were actually given first communion here, maybe we were there (in Sicily), I don't remember. I probably haven't been baptized, for all I know...I don't have any baptismal papers. Maybe they did, there, but I don't have any proof.

So you must have started (school in America) in first grade. What did you have to do to become an American citizen?



Maria Amalia

We just became "derivative" citizens because of our parents. I don't know if they do that anymore. I can't prove that I'm a citizen, except that I have copies of my mother's and father's citizenship papers...my mother's signature, just the way she always signed her papers... I have to hand it to her, to learn English. And she spoke very well.

How old would she have been when she came over here?

Well, my mother was 28 years old when they were married, and she died at age 55. I guess she got her heart trouble from something, she had a very bad heart.

How did the family cope with that, when she died? You were all grown.

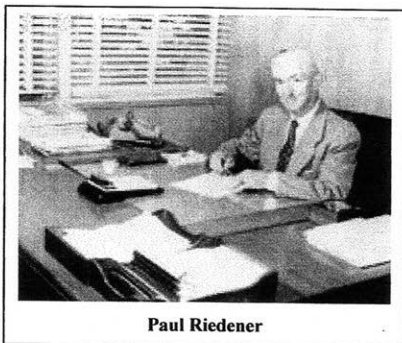
Amy was married, I was married; Daddy's father died just before, at age 55; the two of them both the same age. I was married, I don't know where Terry was, Sil was in the Navy. I think he volunteered... and he was in Okinawa or somewhere, and the Navy sent him home, and then he went back in. But (my mother) was doing very well—she was shopping at the City of Paris (store) and was buying something, and fell over. That was it. She was by herself, she was laughing and talking to the clerk, she was buying cosmetics or something, then...what they call DOA. My poor father had to be told. One of his friends told him, and my father said, "Oh that's too bad about your wife." He thought (his friend) was talking about his own wife. He didn't take it too well. He had planned a very nice, long trip to Italy. She died in February or something, but at Christmas he gave her a very pretty slipper and in it was an announcement telling her that he was taking her back home. And they never made it.

And that would have been her first trip back home to see her relatives?

Yes, her mother had died by that time, I wish we had some of those letters...if they're around, Amy has them.

You have such a fascinating family history for us.

Well, it's different...my father did really well, when he was with S&W, he was in charge of their glase fruit department, that's the fruit mix and cherries, and all that—then he went on his own and opened a business; I guess he worked out of Stockton for a while, then he opened his business in Oakland—Treasure Island Food Products—and he still had cherries processed in Stockton, and Frank Sylvestri went there to oversee things, which did not go well with Sil—because Frank didn't know anything about cherries or that kind of business. So there was a rift, and they never got over that. (My father) did very well, but towards the end, Sil was—he had such a successful business that he gave people cars, and paid for their insurance, had good money, and it started to go down the drain, and finally had to close it all up.



Paul Riedener

Did your father have anything left to live on?

Oh yes, he was doing very well, he had money. I think one of the worst things that happened to him was meeting and marrying Vera. My father was very charming when he was younger, he was very gracious, knew (social) graces, and she fell for him. She was recently divorced, and had this little eight-year-old kid, and I guess she was looking for a little stability. And then after a few years, she figured he was getting a little too old, too unable...and they divorced, she divorced him. They had to go to court in San Mateo and we were sort of against her as witnesses; I didn't have too much to say, I didn't know anything. But she wanted half of the business, and she got the beautiful house he bought in San Mateo, they had only lived there for about a year or so. She had us all there for dinner one time and Pauly knocked over a glass full of milk—she had crystal for the kids, and a gorgeous house with brand-new carpeting, and set this table for all these children, and you know they're going to knock over crystal goblets full of milk. It didn't go over too well.

Did you ever run into Vera around town?

When I broke my collar bone, I couldn't do my hair, I couldn't lift my arm, so I was going to this beauty shop on Taravel Street. I don't know what happened, either Vera found out I was going there... I think Vera told the guy, "Don't schedule me with Lydia Gorman." I had nothing against her, she had nothing against me, but I guess it would have been embarrassing, awkward.

[The end.]