

**“I WAS A STRONG LADY”:
ITALIAN HOUSEWIVES WITH BOARDERS IN VANCOUVER, 1947-61**

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1992

**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the department
of
HISTORY**

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**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
April 1995**

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Title of Thesis

"I Was A Strong Lady": Italian Housewives with Boarders in Vancouver, 1947-61

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the lives of eight northern Italian housewives with boarders in Vancouver from 1947 to 1961. I argue that the decision to take in boarders rather than enter the labour force was based on two factors: The need to supplement the family income while preserving an ideology that required Italian women to remain in the domestic sphere; and a need by young Italian males recently immigrated to Canada for domestic services. The decision to take in boarders was based more on an idea of social obligation (to the Italian immigrant community) rather than a desire for profit.

I contend that ideals of womanhood changed for northern Italian women immigrating to Canada and becoming housewives with boarders. Female identity models had to be redefined once in Canada because social and economic conditions were different than they had been in rural northern Italy. Maintaining boarders readjusted the traditional role of Italian women as strong guardians of the domestic sphere; i.e., as housewives and mothers, and extended it to include members outside the immediate family. Thus, the keeping of boarders became integral to the identities of the eight Italian women interviewed for this study. Because housewives with boarders could not criticise their work without criticising their identities as women, they created the myth of the “strong lady.” This myth gave women an ideology of strength that compensated for feelings of weakness or alienation.

This thesis argues that an analysis of subjectivity is crucial if historians are fully to understand the past. By examining the narratives of the eight women I interviewed, I attempt to discover how each of them interpreted their individual experiences and constructed their own histories. In doing so I hope to add a dimension to historical analysis that legitimises subjective experience as a tool for historical inquiry.

To the four living generations of women in my family:

*Apollonia Masellis
Laura Tenerelli
Anna Maria Quilici
Apollonia Doreen Tenerelli
Michelle Lola Quilici,*

each a “Strong Lady” in her way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Joy Parr for her generous assistance in the supervision of this thesis. Her critical suggestions for my work have strengthened it in numerous ways. Dr. Tina Loo, committee member, raised challenging questions which I hope adequately to have answered. Other faculty and staff members in the Department of History including Professor Michael Fellman and Ms. Julie Barber-Bowman provided timely assistance throughout the writing of this thesis. My fellow graduate students were extremely influential in shaping my first year of graduate studies. Our engaging discussions, both inside and outside of the classroom, deepened my understanding of important historical and theoretical questions. The eight women whom I interviewed for this study merit special thanks. Without their willingness to remember and share what often was a difficult time in their lives, this work would not have been possible. I hope to have done justice to their stories. My grandmother, Laura Tenerelli, was kind enough to take me to her seniors' club at the Italian Cultural Centre in Vancouver where I met some of the women I eventually interviewed. Trevor Sparrow gave me the assurance necessary to undertake a Master's degree. I likely would not have begun this work were it not for his insistence that I could make a worthwhile contribution to the study of history. Finally, I wish to thank J. Scott Perchall, who gave me the impetus to complete this work. His gentle prodding, much-needed editorial suggestions, and quick wit made writing this thesis a much less traumatic experience than it otherwise may have been.

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I

INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

This thesis examines the working lives of eight Italian immigrant women who took boarders into their homes in post-World War Two Vancouver. The thesis questions why these women chose this type of work rather than enter the labour force. Because the institution of boarding did not exist in Italy, it seems odd that Italian women would have maintained boarders in their homes upon arrival in Canada. The institution of boarding was an immigrant institution born in the New World. This type of employment represented for women a break with Old World employment patterns. Women, therefore, had to make the transition from agricultural workers in Italy to housewives with boarders in Canada. This transition often was difficult, but women employed strategies to ease the change. One of their strategies was to create an identity for themselves as strong matriarchs at the head of households of young men. Women had to redefine their notions of what it meant to be “womanly” in the context of the work they performed in Vancouver. This thesis will examine the process by which this redefinition occurred.

How did women view the boarding arrangement? Was it primarily a business that served to make a profit for the housewife and her husband? Or was the boarding arrangement a way to help out the young, single, Italian men who flocked to Vancouver in the mid-1950s? Robert F. Harney, one of the few historians who has examined immigrant boarding arrangements in Canada, argued that the household with boarders was a frame within which ethnic identity

was defined in North America.¹ Harney insisted, moreover, that the home with boarders was more than a place where immigrants convened to share “fellow feeling” and ethnic identification. He argued that the cash exchange between boarders and their landlords drove the institution of boarding.² In Harney’s view, the boarding arrangement was primarily a business for the family that maintained lodgers in its home, and only secondarily was it a locus for ethnic identification. This thesis will examine whether Harney’s assessment of the boarding institution is accurate for Vancouver’s Italian community in the post-war period.

In addition to the analytical questions this thesis poses, it seeks to include Italian immigrant women in the historical record. Very little has been written about the Italian immigrant population in post-war Vancouver and even less is known about the women of this community.³ How did women envision their role in Vancouver’s Italian community and in the wider Canadian social context? What meanings did housewives with boarders attach to their work; i.e., how did their work contribute to the construction of their identities as women in Canada? How did the migration process differ for Italian women and men? Particularly, how was the working experience of post-World War Two Italian women different from that of their male counterparts?

The purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the subjective experience of eight Italian immigrant women. Their experiences help to illuminate the

¹ Robert F. Harney, “Boarding and Belonging: Thoughts on Sojourner Institutions,” *Urban History Review*, 2 (1978), 11.

² Harney, “Boarding and Belonging,” 13.

³ Kenneth Bagnell’s book, *Canadese: A Portrait of the Italian Canadians*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1989) makes some reference to post-war Italians in British Columbia in ch. 6. See also Giovanni Germano, *Gli Italiani del Canada Occidentale: Come Nasce un Centro Comunitario/ The Italians of Western Canada: How a Community Centre is Born.*, trans. Felicity Lutz and Joyce Meyer, (Florence: Giunti Marzocco Editore, 1978); The Italian Cultural Centre’s “Over 50 Club” has published a booklet containing oral histories, photographs, and recipes collected by its members: see Giovanni Bitelli and Anna Foschi, comp., *Emigrante: Storie, Memorie, Segreti della Buona Cucina dei Nostri Pionieri*, (Vancouver: Grandview Printing Co, 1985).

migration experience of Italian women. The women's oral testimonies show us, for example, the strategies they employed to overcome the alienation they felt as immigrants and as women. Oral history was used almost exclusively for this project. Apart from the requisite secondary research and some census data to provide background for the study, oral testimony was the primary way in which information was gathered. This was a deliberate choice. Written sources would not have answered all the questions the thesis poses. Although census data helped to determine Italian settlement patterns in Vancouver -- how many Italians arrived, when they arrived, and where they lived -- census materials could not describe the subjective experience of immigrants. The census data could not recount how immigrants felt about migration, what it meant to them, and how their identity was affected by the transatlantic move. For these subjective questions, the thesis had to rely on the oral testimony of the immigrants themselves.

This work treats *perception* and *subjectivity* as legitimate tools for the historian; it assumes that the meanings historical actors attach to events in their lives are as important as the events themselves. One way historians can understand the meanings of historical events is to look at the subjective interpretations individuals give to their experiences. The study of subjectivity allows historians to examine the connection between people's interpretations of events and their actions. Following Max Weber, Kathryn Anderson and her colleagues argued that people's subjective interpretations of events structure their action. People continually adapt their interpretations and act within historically contingent perspectives.⁴ This is especially true for women, whose ability to value their own experiences often is hindered by self-doubt and hesitation when

⁴ Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *The Oral History Review*, 15 (Spring 1987), 120-21.

personal experience is at odds with ideal “womanly” behaviour. Looking closely at the myths, desires, fantasies, and expectations embedded in women’s oral narratives can tell us much about how women cope with contradictions between their thoughts and their actions, and thereby adapt to the culture in which they live. According to Paul Thompson, “the importance of oral testimony may often be not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in.”⁵ By examining people’s subjective responses to the events in their lives, we can understand how they perceive themselves in relation to the world around them. Understanding the creation of individual identity helps us to understand social organisation because the social order is a “negotiated order emerging out of social interaction.”⁶

Interviews for this thesis were loosely-structured in order to allow the women to recount their stories using their own narrative construction and their own words. I decided against the use of questionnaires because I wanted to keep myself as absent as possible from the women’s narratives. Each interview began with the open-ended question, “Tell me about your life in Vancouver from when you arrived until you stopped taking in boarders.” This question gave women the opportunity to tell me about their decision to take in boarders rather than enter the labour force, as well as their experiences as housewives with boarders. Although I tried to let the women speak as freely as possible, I sometimes interrupted them to ask what they meant when they used certain words or phrases. For example, when one of the women used the phrase, “I felt responsible for the boys” several times in her interview, I asked her what she meant by that. I wanted to be sure that I understood what images “responsibility” conjured up for her. In order to

⁵ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed., (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 139.

⁶ Anderson, et. al., “Beginning Where We Are,” 123.

explore subjectivity, it was important that I understood the interviewees in their own terms.

Interpreting oral narratives is the most important and possibly the most problematic step for the oral historian. How can one know if one's own interpretations of the events and emotions recounted in the interviews will be accurate? How does one ensure that the information offered by informants is not misused? First, it is necessary to acknowledge that all history is necessarily interpretive. The historian is never entirely absent from her work, regardless of her attempts to be so. For this very reason, Elizabeth Tonkin refers to history as nothing more than the "representations of pastness."⁷ She argues that history can never be "true" or "objective" because it is, at its root, simply a representation -- either by the historian, the informant, or the written source -- of an historical event.

Oral historians are especially aware of their presence in their work because they construct the questions to be asked of the interviewee, and they are free to interrupt, question, or ask for elaboration at any time during the interview. However, historians working with written documents are also implicated in their work for they must give sense to the facts they gather, and embed them in a social context. Evidence, argues Paul Thompson, is never a reflection of physical facts; facts and events must be reported in such a way that gives them social meaning.⁸

To interpret my own findings, then, I began with the assumption that all history is representation and I would necessarily be located in my work through my biases, values, and judgments regardless of how I tried to minimise them. I thus tried to base my interpretations of oral testimony on the language and

⁷ Elizabeth Tonkin, "History and the Myth of Realism," in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 27.

⁸ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 110.

narrative structure of the interviews themselves. I looked for three main gauges of the women's subjectivity -- the *moral language* they used in describing their work and their lives, the *key phrases* of their narratives, and the *logic of the narrative*.⁹

Moral language refers to the value judgments that interviewees use to describe themselves. Statements such as "I'm a failure" or "I don't measure up" allow us to examine the relationship between a person's self-concept and the cultural norms to which she aspires. Moral language helps us to measure the standards an interviewee uses to judge herself. In reading the judgments she passes on herself, we are left naturally to wonder, "what values is the informant striving to attain?"

Key phrases are refrains that appear by way of assertions such as, "I was obliged to," or "we didn't really have a choice," or "I said, 'forget it!'" These phrases catch the attention of the reader because they appear frequently in the narrative. Far from being evidence of repetitiveness, key phrases act as formal markers which aim to define "a type of relation between the self and the social sphere."¹⁰ They help to determine the social norms according to which women define themselves. Key phrases also help us to understand how much control or power individuals feel they have in their lives. Expressing the harmony, indifference, or conflict existing between the self and society, the key phrase is an illuminating element of the oral narrative.

The third gauge of subjectivity is determined by the logic of the narrative. I watched for internal consistency or contradictions in the recurring themes of the

⁹ This method is based on that outlined by Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack in their article, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), in particular 20-21; I also used Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet's article, "Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story," in the same book.

¹⁰ Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures," 79.

narrative. As well, I listened to how my informants ordered their experiences so I could understand the assumptions that guided their interpretations of events in their lives. Several of my informants contradicted themselves in the course of an interview. Mrs. Torturo stated adamantly at the beginning of her interview that she did not take in boarders to earn a profit, but because she wanted to “help out” the young men she took in. However, later in the interview she stated, “Well, if at that time I sold wine and beer to the boarders, I could have made a bunch of money. See, but...in one way I was stupid. Because I charged for the meal, for the laundry, but that’s the only way you made money, for the glass of wine or beer you give them.”¹¹ Even though Mrs. Torturo insisted that she kept boarders because she was obliged to help them in the absence of their own mothers or wives, she later admitted that she felt stupid for not charging them more for alcohol so that she could have earned more money. This contradiction alerts us to the conflict she may have felt between her prescribed role (as a nurturer, “mother,” and helper) and her desire to earn more money for the difficult work she performed.

Oral testimony can provide historians with a unique way to understand the subjective experience of historical actors. By asking open-ended questions to allow narrators freedom in recounting their own stories, probing them when meaning is unclear or ambiguous, and paying close attention to the transcripts so that effective interpretations can be made, historians can use oral history to its full potential. Through these methods, oral historians will undoubtedly be present in their work. But given that historians can never entirely be absent from their work, they must try to set out their biases clearly through their methods. Only then can they present, with integrity, their interpretations.

¹¹ S. Torturo, interview with author, North Vancouver, B.C., 10 September 1993, audio tape. All interviewee names in this thesis are pseudonyms. Audio tapes and transcripts are in the possession of the author.

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION HISTORIOGRAPHY

Oscar Handlin was the first scholar in the United States to view the immigration process from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. Since he wrote in 1951, Handlin's approach has been the trend among immigration historians in North America. While earlier migration studies focused on the impact of immigration on American society and its economy, Handlin's study focused on the impact of immigration on the immigrants themselves. His theme was emigration as a central experience of much of the American population. Handlin concluded: "...broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong. These are the aspects of alienation; and seen from the perspective of the individual received rather than of the receiving society, the history of immigration is a history of alienation and its consequences."¹²

Although many of them do not agree with his arguments, Canadian immigration historians have followed Handlin's lead in viewing migration from a subjective point of view. Scholars including Robert F. Harney, John Zucchi, Franc Sturino, Bruno Ramirez, and Franca Iacovetta have viewed immigration from the perspective of immigrants. In particular, most of these historians have examined processes by which immigrants created a national identity, acculturated, and were assimilated to Canadian life. While Canadian immigration scholars are adopting new methods of analysis and asking more sophisticated questions than they have previously, they remain committed to viewing the immigration experience from the perspective of immigrants.

¹² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 4.

Most Italian immigration historiography in Canada has focused on the “first wave” immigration period between approximately 1880 and 1930.

Although most Italians in Canada arrived after 1947,¹³ few historians apart from Franca Iacovetta have examined the post-war period. In addition, immigration studies in Canada have a strong central Canadian bias. Indeed, not one scholarly monograph exists on British Columbia’s Italian population despite the fact that B.C. received the third highest number of Italian immigrants between 1947 and 1961.¹⁴

In *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935*, John Zucchi focused on ethnic identification. He questioned why Italian immigrants in Toronto came to identify themselves as “Italians” when in Italy their identity had been tied to their village or region.¹⁵ Like many immigration historians, Zucchi explored the dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity in the migration process; i.e., he tried to understand whether immigration resulted in the continuation of Old World values, customs, and cultural patterns, or whether it disrupted them. In this respect, he was following the paradigm set by Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted*.

In *Forging the Chain: A Case Study of Italian Migration to North America, 1880-1930*, Franc Sturino also explored the continuity/discontinuity question. Like Zucchi, Sturino stressed social continuity in the face of structural discontinuity. Sturino argued that Italian immigrants were influenced more by

¹³ In 1947, Prime Minister Mackenzie King revoked a piece of legislation known as PC 1373 which prohibited nationals from Finland, Hungary, Romania, and Italy from entering Canada as immigrants. See Warren E. Kalbach, *The Impact of Immigration on Canada’s Population*, (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics [hereafter, DBS], 1970), 20.

¹⁴ By 1961, 62.7 per cent of all Italian immigrants to Canada lived in Ontario, 25.1 per cent lived in Quebec and 7.1 per cent lived in B.C. Government of Canada, *1961 Census of Canada: General Review*, Series 7.1, VII:1. (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table IV, 7-32-3.

¹⁵ John E. Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), 8.

Old World patterns than New World changes.¹⁶ In addition, Sturino addressed another question posed by immigration historians: what is the predominant impetus for emigration, factors that “push” people from their country of origin or the “pull” of the New World? The thesis of Sturino’s book, in fact, is that chain migration, a “pull” factor, was more important in the migration process than were “push” factors.¹⁷ The book made three main contributions to Italian immigration historiography: first, it approached the migration experience from a “village-outward-perspective.” Sturino attempted to evoke the *mentalité* of southern Italian immigrants. Second, he defined the boundaries of communities in the way that southern Italian peasants would have defined them. He argued that “social space” was transported to the New World and determined patterns of human relations there. Third, Sturino defined migration chains in the local area “that was home to common people and that defined their interaction.”¹⁸

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin and Donna R. Gabaccia, in the United States, also addressed the continuity/discontinuity debate.¹⁹ Yans-McLaughlin argued that the transition from Old to New World was eased by the presence of the extended family.²⁰ Family ties, she argued, were not destroyed upon immigration. Immigrants were not the dispossessed, uprooted peoples that Handlin had portrayed but rather, they relied on their family ties to ease the

¹⁶ Franc Sturino, *Forging the Chain: A Case Study of Italian Migration to North America, 1880-1930*, (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990), 2; See also Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto*, who argued that for Italians, emigration was a way to preserve Old World values such as home ownership, land acquisition, and the establishment of dowries for female family members. 29.

¹⁷ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 65.

¹⁸ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 3.

¹⁹ See Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930*, (1971; reprint, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977) and “Patterns of Work and Family Organization: Buffalo’s Italians,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1971): 299-314; Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1984).

²⁰ Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 18.

dislocation caused by migration. The extended family, she insisted, became more important than it had been in Italy.²¹ Gabaccia disputed Yans-McLaughlin's assertion of continuity in the face of change for Italian immigrants. Gabaccia argued that pseudo-extended families were forged in the New World because many immigrants did not arrive with extended family members.²² In America, the absence of blood relations meant that friends and co-villagers became more important than they had been in Italy .

Bruno Ramirez and Michael Del Balso have researched Italian immigrants in Quebec. Their book, *The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement*, examined the second largest Italian community in Canada after that of Toronto.²³ Ramirez' more recent study, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* offered a comparative examination of French-Canadians who migrated to the United States and Italians who immigrated to Quebec in the pre-World War One period.²⁴ Ramirez attempted to deal with migration as a multifaceted process, arguing that immigration historians should pay attention to those people who stayed behind in the country of origin in addition to those who emigrated.²⁵ His was primarily a statistical and economic survey of pre-World War One migration patterns.

These studies share common themes. All, for example, limit their discussion to the first wave period of Italian immigration from about 1880 to

²¹ Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 77.

²² Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, xvi.

²³ Bruno Ramirez and Michael Del Balso, *The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement*, (Montreal 1980); for an examination of Italian women in Quebec, see Josephine Atri, "Italian Immigrant Women in Post-War Montreal," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1980.

²⁴ Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991).

²⁵ Ramirez, *On the Move*, 15.

1930. Second, the studies focus only on southern Italian immigrants despite the fact that a fairly large proportion of Italian immigrants to Canada were from northern Italian regions such as Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Veneto.²⁶ Finally, none of the studies use gender as a category of analysis.²⁷ Not only do these studies leave women out of the immigration picture, speaking instead of the “family” as an ungendered unit, but they also fail to view the immigration process as one which is itself gendered.

The recent publication of Franca Iacovetta’s, *Such Hardworking People*, has unsettled Italian immigration historiography in Canada. While she generally worked within the dominant paradigm of immigration history in Canada (which focused on questions of continuity and discontinuity, whether the impetus to migrate originated from the Old World or from the New, and on questions of acculturation/assimilation), Iacovetta focused on the immigration *process* using the intersecting axes of ethnicity, class and gender as tools for her analysis. In addition, Iacovetta posed questions about the relationships between immigrants and the host society. She viewed the relationship between immigrants and their hosts as a symbiotic one; she was not interested in how quickly immigrants assimilated to the host society, but rather how immigrants and their hosts reacted to the postwar immigration influx to Toronto. Indeed, Iacovetta was one of the first scholars in Canada to discuss Italian immigrants in the post-World War Two period.

The present work contributes in four ways to the study of Italians in Canada. First, the study focuses on the Italian community in Vancouver -- the

²⁶ Clifford J. Jansen and Lee R. La Cavera, *Fact-Book on Italians in Canada*, (York University, 1981).

²⁷ The work of Yans-McLaughlin perhaps is an exception here. She contends that Italian women in Buffalo worked outside the home only when their work was temporary and did not pose a challenge to men’s authority as breadwinners. Although her work does examine Italian women’s work specifically, it does so within the context of the family economy and the family structure.

third largest Italian community in Canada, and probably the most ignored in the literature on Italians in Canada. This study examines why, for example, employment opportunities for Italian women were more restricted in Vancouver than in Toronto or Montreal. The geographic, economic, and social conditions in post-war Vancouver were different than those in other parts of Canada. These differences meant that the experience of Italian immigrants in Vancouver varied markedly from the experiences of Italians elsewhere.

The second contribution of this thesis is its emphasis on post World War Two immigration. Like the work of Franca Iacovetta, this study restricts its focus to the second wave of Italian immigration to Canada. Until very recently, historians have paid little attention to post-war Italian immigration despite the fact that more Italians immigrated to Canada in the 1950s than in any other period. In fact, the 258 071 Italians that arrived in Canada from 1951 to 1961 surpassed the total number of Italian immigrants in all periods since 1871.²⁸ This historiographical gap has left an erroneous impression of the Italian population in Canada because the experience of second-wave immigrants differed greatly from that of their predecessors. For example, because there were more of them, post-war immigrants could create more cohesive communities than could the Italians who immigrated at the turn of the century or after the first world war.

The third contribution of this thesis is its specific focus on the gender history of Italian women. Until Franca Iacovetta published several journal articles focusing specifically on Italian women and a major monograph analysing the gender history of both Italian men and women, gender was not widely used as an analytical tool in Italian immigration studies. In most other Italian immigration historiography, if they were at all addressed, women were only

²⁸ 1961 *Census of Canada, General Review: Native and Foreign-Born Population*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table I, 7-27.

included under the rubric of the non-gendered family, and not as subjects in their own right. The exclusion of women has left a huge gap in Italian immigration historiography which the present work seeks to help fill. The fourth contribution of this work is its examination of the experience of Italian immigrant women in a *subjective* way. By taking subjectivity seriously, and by addressing the myths, hopes, and fears of my subjects, this work hopes to add a new dimension to immigration studies.

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA - BACKGROUND

The wave of Italian immigration to Canada in the years immediately following World War Two was the result of both “push” and “pull” factors. Many Italians left Italy after 1945 because of the country’s political instability and economic disruption (push factors). However, the choice to immigrate to Canada -- as opposed to the United States, Australia, or Brazil which were other destinations for Italians after 1945 -- was based on pull factors. These included the relative ease with which Italians were admitted to Canada after 1947 and the migration “chains” which developed whereby people emigrated to areas where their family members or co-villagers already had established themselves.²⁹

Many Italians left their home country because the collapse of Fascism and the end of World War Two left Italy’s economy in a shambles. In 1945, for example, agricultural production was cut by 40 per cent. Industrial production at this time was only one-quarter of the 1938 level and almost equal to that of 1884. Merchant shipping was reduced to one-sixth of its wartime peak. Real income per head slipped to less than half what it had been in 1938 and below that at unification. In addition, almost two and a half million people -- 12 per cent of the

²⁹ For a discussion on the importance of chain migration in Italian immigration overseas, see Sturino, *Forging the Chain*.

active population -- were out of work by 1947. Mean caloric intake in this year was 1737 per head compared to 2652 during 1936-40; many Italian people were on the verge of starvation.³⁰

Although by 1950, Italy largely had recovered from the war, it was still a poor and underdeveloped country. Although 44 per cent of the population was employed in agriculture in 1950, most farms were small-scale family enterprises that largely were unprofitable. Agriculture contributed only 23 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product in this year. Farming was essentially a “refuge sector” for people unable to find other work.³¹ By the early 1950s, Italians living in rural areas were beginning either to relocate in Italian urban centres or to emigrate to cities abroad. Rural poverty was the main factor in this rapid urbanisation; farmers could not support their families and therefore flocked to new employment opportunities in cities within Italy or abroad.³² For over a century, Italians have shown one of the highest “propensities to emigrate” in the world. Their emigration patterns have been particularly high when Italy’s unemployment levels have been high. Thus between 1946 and 1955 when unemployment reached its post first world war peak, net emigration from Italy totaled 1.57 million.³³

The main factor which pulled Italian immigrants to Canada after World War Two was the revocation in 1947 of a piece of legislation prohibiting Italians from entering Canada. Italians and other Europeans had been viewed as “enemy aliens” until after the war when Canada faced economic expansion and ensuing

³⁰ Russell King, *Italy*, Western Europe: Economic and Social Studies Series, (London: Harper & Row, 1987), 41.

³¹ King, *Italy*, 42.

³² King, *Italy*, 60.

³³ George H. Hildebrand, *Growth and Structure in the Economy of Modern Italy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), 116, 118.

labour shortages. In January 1948, a Canadian embassy was opened in Rome housing an immigration office where Italians could undergo Canadian medical and administrative checks before departing Italy. At the same time, Ottawa enabled Italians already living in Canada to sponsor not only immediate family members but also more distant kin.³⁴ In 1948, then, the post-war wave of Italian immigration reached Canadian shores. In that year, 3202 Italians arrived in Canada compared to only 139 the previous year.³⁵

Of all post-war Italian immigrants to Canada, 96.5 per cent settled in urban centres, particularly the country's three largest cities, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.³⁶ Because jobs were easier to find in urban centres, most Italians eventually settled there. About 18 300 Italian-born people resided in British Columbia by 1961. Of these, 12 941 (about 70 per cent) lived in Vancouver.³⁷ Post-war Italian immigrants gravitated to an already existing "Little Italy" in what is now the residential part of Chinatown. Italians who had come to Vancouver during the first wave of immigration had established a community which included in 1905 the *Società di Mutuo Soccorso Figli d'Italia* (Sons of Italy Mutual Aid Society). The charter members from this first Italian community numbered over fifty.³⁸ Also in 1905, the first Italian church in Vancouver was established when a former Protestant church at the corner of

³⁴ Franc Sturino, "Post-World War Two Canadian Immigration Policy Toward Italians," *Polyphony*, 7:2 (Fall/Winter 1985), 67.

³⁵ Sturino, "Post-World War Two," 67.

³⁶ *1961 Census of Canada, General Review: Native and Foreign-Born Population*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table I, 7-33.

³⁷ *1961 Census of Canada, Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table I, 4.

³⁸ A.V. Spada, *The Italians in Canada*, *Canada Ethnica* VI, (Ottawa and Montreal: Riviera Printers and Publishers Inc., 1969), 367.

Keefer Street and Campbell Avenue was reconsecrated as the Church of the Sacred Heart. By 1911 the church had its first Italian pastor. Other churches serving the Italian community were Our Lady of Sorrows, established in 1913 on East Pender Street, and the Monastery of Saint Francis of Assisi, established in 1923 on Semlin Drive and Napier Street.³⁹ Italians in Vancouver tended to cluster their residences around these places of worship. Indeed, a small but well-organised community of Italian-Canadians existed prior to the second World War. These pioneers already had marked out the territory of the city to which later arrivals would gravitate.

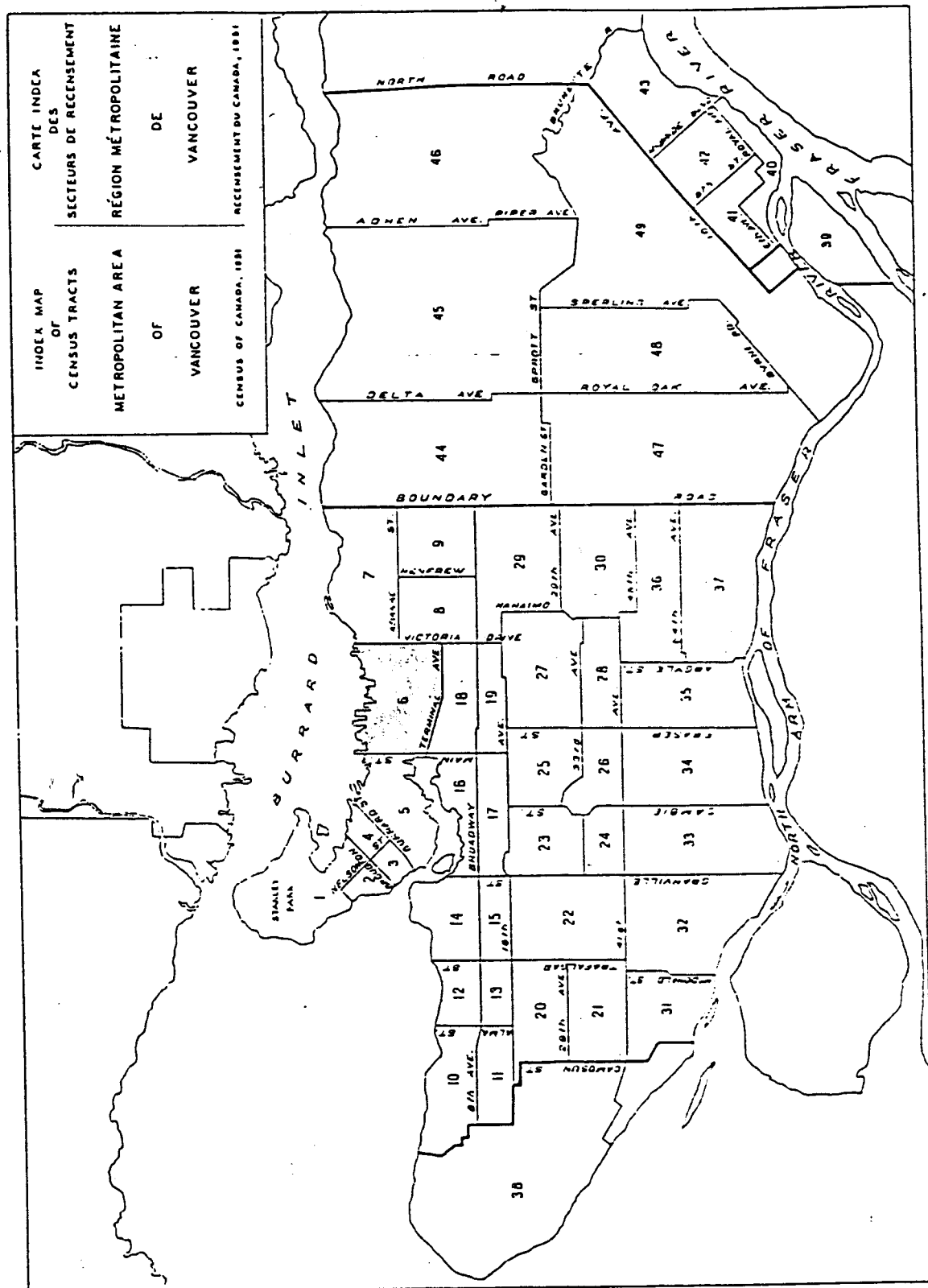
In 1951, Italians in Vancouver were concentrated in an area bordered by Main Street to the west, Terminal Avenue to the south, Victoria Drive to the east and the waterfront to the north (See Fig. 1, zone 6). Although this zone had less square mileage than some of the other zones in the city, it had the largest population, numbering 19 649 inhabitants. Zone 6 included a large number of immigrants from Asia, Scandinavia, the Ukraine, and Ireland. Italians formed 6 per cent of the total population of the zone. The highest proportion of inhabitants listed their religion as Roman Catholicism.⁴⁰ The relatively high population of Italians in this zone likely occurred because of the presence of two Italian parishes here.

Between 1951 and 1961, the number of Italian-born people in Vancouver doubled. Between these two census years, the boundaries of census tract areas in Vancouver were reduced (see Fig. 2). Italians now were concentrated in three adjoining areas of the city. That containing the highest number (1568 persons) was the area bordered by Victoria Drive, Terminal Avenue, Renfrew and Adanac

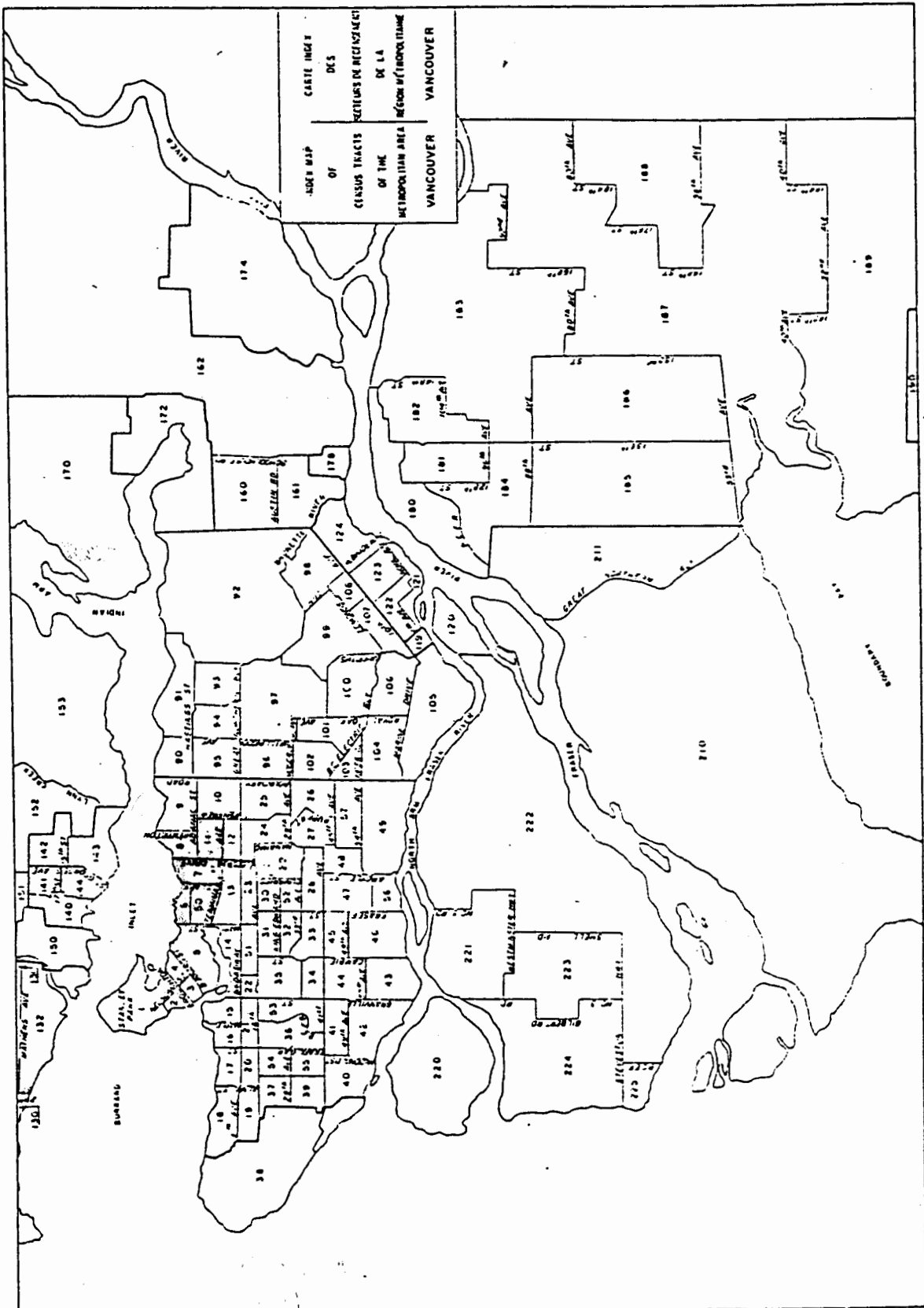
³⁹ Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 369.

⁴⁰ *1951 Census of Canada: Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts (Vancouver)*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1951), 3.

Map 1 Index Map of Census Tracts of the Metropolitan Area Vancouver, 1951
 Source: 1951 Census of Canada: Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts (Vancouver), (Ottawa: DBS, 1951).



Map 2 Index Map of Census Tracts of the Metropolitan Area of Vancouver, 1961
 Source: 1961 Census of Canada: Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts (Vancouver), (Ottawa: DBS, 1961).



Streets (zone 11). Zone 7 housed the second largest number of Italians (1094 persons); it was bordered by Clark Drive, 1st Avenue, Victoria Drive, and the waterfront. The third area housing a high number of Italians (1069 persons) was zone 8 bordered by Victoria Drive, Adanac Street, Penticton Avenue and the waterfront. Almost 30 per cent of the Italian immigrant population inhabited these three areas of Vancouver by 1961.⁴¹ When new immigrants arrived in Vancouver, many sought out areas in which Italians already had established themselves. Young single Italian men came to the sections of the city where they would find households in which to board.

Most Italian post-war immigrants to Canada were male. Between 1947 and 1961, 127 701 male immigrants arrived from Italy compared to 106 117 females.⁴² Many men who immigrated to Canada did not have dependents and so came alone or with other members of their village or town. Other men brought their immediate families. Often, men preceded their wives and sent for them once the men had found work in Canada. Many wives made the boat journey from Italy to Canada alone, with their children, or with other women.⁴³ Between 1947 and 1951, 46.75 per cent of all immigrants from Italy were listed as “dependents.”⁴⁴ There is little evidence to suggest that many single Italian women came to Canada alone between 1947 and 1961. Single women emigrating from Italy likely accompanied their parents or older siblings.

⁴¹ *1961 Census of Canada: Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts (Vancouver)*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), 3 and Table I, 4-5.

⁴² Kalbach, *Impact*, Table C1, 437.

⁴³ Mrs. A. Tonetti., interviewed with A. Amalfi by the author, Vancouver, B.C., 27 July 1994, audio tape.

⁴⁴ *1961 Census of Canada, General Review, Series 7.1, VII:1.* (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table IV, 7-11.

By 1961, 6963 Italian males lived in Vancouver compared to 5978 females.⁴⁵ Moreover, twice as many men were single as women.⁴⁶ Given that most Italian men did not immigrate with their parents, initially the men had to find independent accommodations. Because of budgetary constraints, most young, single men did not live alone. Instead, they either rented a house or apartment together with other young Italian men, lodged in a rooming house, or boarded with a family.⁴⁷ Many Italian families in Vancouver filled the housing needs of their young compatriots by offering them room and board.

It is impossible to determine exactly how many Italian families had lodgers in Vancouver. This is largely because both census data and Municipal Assessment Rolls are sketchy on this subject. Because boarders usually occupied illegal suites in family homes, home owners may not have disclosed the presence of boarders. In his monograph about the Italian community in Vancouver, former Italian consul to western Canada, Giovanni Germano, pointed out that discrepancies exist between statistical information taken by consular offices and that taken by the census. He argued that the method used by census takers often skewed data about new immigrants to Canada. He wrote,

Many Italian families (and also families from other ethnic groups) either because of language difficulties or because they were still Italian citizens (and therefore [did] not have the right to vote, which [was] sometimes mixed up in their minds with census taking) [did] not send back the completed form as required by the central office of statistics.⁴⁸

Despite these qualifications, census data and oral testimony suggest a relatively high number of Italian families with boarders in Vancouver. In the

⁴⁵ *1961 Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*, I:3 (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table 82, 82-25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Table 109, 109-4.

⁴⁷ A. Astorin, interview with author, Vancouver, B.C., 26 July 1993. Audio tape.

⁴⁸ Germano, *Gli Italiani*, 72.

census of 1951, 966 lodgers were reported for the Vancouver census tract with the highest proportion of Italian immigrants. This figure was the highest for all census tracts in Vancouver. Although it is impossible to determine how many of these lodgers were living in Italian homes, the presence of a large number of boarders in this zone suggests a correlation. Similarly, in 1961, the zones housing the highest percentage of Italians also contained high numbers of lodgers.⁴⁹

Oral testimony is consistent with these inferences from census data. In her interview, Mrs. Astorin commented, “all the Italian ladies [in Vancouver], they was full of boarders” because so many young men who needed the services of these women were present in the city.⁵⁰ All the informants admitted to turning men away because they could not take in any more boarders. Mrs. Padovan revealed that the priest of Sacred Heart Church urged her to take in boarders because other housewives with boarders did not have room for any more men.⁵¹ To this day, housewives with boarders are remembered fondly in the Italian community. Although no one is quite sure how many women performed this work, it appears from oral testimony that most young single men who came to Vancouver after 1948 lodged with a family at least in the initial months after their arrival.

All of the women in this study came from northern Italian provinces. One of the women came from Lombardy, two were from the region of Trentino-Alto Adige, while the rest were from Friuli Venezia Giulia. All three of these regions are in the northeastern tip of Italy. All of my informants came from rural, mountainous areas in their home regions. When I asked some of my informants

⁴⁹ *Census of Canada, 1951: Population and Housing Characteristics (Vancouver)*, Table 2, 8; *Census of Canada, 1961: Population and Housing Characteristics (Vancouver)*, Table 2, 12.

⁵⁰ A. Astorin.

⁵¹ I. Padovan, interview with author, Vancouver, B.C., 31 July 1993, audio tape.

why women from southern Italy were not as likely to maintain boarders in their homes, most answered in ways that reflected their prejudiced assumptions about people from *la bass'Italia*.⁵² Women from southern Italy, my informants maintained, were watched too closely by their husbands and other male kin to be allowed to have so many male strangers in the house. While there may be some truth to the fact that southern Italian social mores as transported to Canada were stricter than those in the north, it was impossible to determine to what extent the informants' disdain for their southern compatriots influenced their answers.

Only two women in my study maintained boarders who were not Italian. Both Mrs. Astorin and Mrs. Peluso took in Yugoslavian boys who needed room and board. When I asked her why Italian women would take in Yugoslavian men but not men of other nationalities, Mrs. Peluso explained the similarities between northern Italian and Yugoslavian men. Probably because of the proximity between northeastern Italian regions and what was then Yugoslavia, Italian women felt that the ethnic distinctions between the two countries were not that great. Mrs. Peluso even taught one of her Yugoslavian boarders how to speak Italian. She said, "In ultimo...parlava bene. Parlava bene perche e' stato assai in casa siccome non trovava lavoro per tanto tempo. (In the end...he spoke [Italian] well. He spoke well because he was at home a lot as he could not find work for a long time)."⁵³

In this opening chapter, census data and oral history have been used to sketch an outline of Italians in Vancouver. The size of the Italian community, areas in which Italians were concentrated, demographic patterns, and the presence of relatively high numbers of boarding homes have been discussed. In addition,

⁵² Literally, "the low Italy", as southern Italy is sometimes referred to. The implication is, of course, that southern Italians are themselves "lower" in the social scale than northerners.

⁵³ M. Peluso, interview with author, Burnaby, B.C., 16 August 1994, audio tape in Italian. My translations in brackets.

the scope and methods used in the thesis have been elaborated, paying particular attention to the uses of a subjective analysis in history. The remainder of the thesis will be laid out in the following manner: Chapter Two discusses the decision of the women to take in boarders rather than enter the labour force, the composition of the boarding household, and the work involved in maintaining boarders. One of the central questions of the chapter is whether housewives with boarders viewed the boarding arrangement as a profit-generating operation or as a social obligation. Chapter Three examines the way ideals of Italian “womanhood” were altered by transatlantic migration. I will discuss the nature of dominant models of womanhood in northern Italy and how these models were redefined once women immigrated to Canada and began to take in boarders. Finally, I will examine why many Italian women with boarders described themselves as “strong ladies” and what purpose this self-description might have served. Chapter Four will conclude the thesis with a brief synthesis of my findings.

II

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS OR BOARDERS?

In post-World War Two Vancouver, hundreds of Italian immigrant women provided room and board for young, single, male newcomers to the city. Despite the high demands of the work, the limited profits they earned, and the discomfort they felt surrounded by male strangers in their own homes, many Italian women chose this type of work rather than enter the labour force. This chapter examines the factors that contributed to this decision. In particular, the chapter tries to determine why women maintained boarders in Vancouver when the institution of boarding did not exist in Italy. Why did these women not rely on their work experience in Italy to influence them in their job choice in Vancouver? Why was boarder-keeping an option in Vancouver but not in Italy?

This chapter will also present a detailed examination of the institution of boarding in post-war Vancouver. Individual boarding arrangements, spatial boundaries and codes of conduct within the home will be analysed. I will assume that boarding was an immigrant response to limited work options for women in the New World; Italian women were but one group of immigrants who maintained boarders in Vancouver. This chapter will assess the impact of boarding on the lives of the Italian women who maintained lodgers in their homes. In particular, I will determine whether the housewife with boarders viewed her work primarily as a business enterprise or as a social obligation.

THE DECISION TO TAKE IN BOARDERS

As a temporary strategy for family survival, keeping boarders was effective. By taking in boarders, women could keep intact the illusion of their husbands' domestic power while contributing to the family welfare. Silvia Pierini immigrated to Canada in 1954 from the province of Treviso in northern Italy. Her brother had left for Canada several months earlier and had sent for his young sister as soon as he could pay her boat fare. Being single when she began the trans-Atlantic journey, Silvia was chaperoned by a male friend of her brother's whom she had never before met. Soon after she arrived in Vancouver, Silvia met and eventually married Italo Torturo, her brother's best friend, who also was a recent immigrant from northern Italy. The couple's early married life was difficult; Italo could not find a stable job because he did not speak English. In addition, Italo did not condone Silvia's desire to contribute to the family's upkeep by working outside the home. He told her, "Do you think I married you so I could come home from work and start to cook supper and do my own laundry? Forget it. You stay home."

By incurring loans from friends and family, the couple struggled for almost a year to make ends meet. By 1958, however, Italo's prolonged unemployment began significantly to bother Silvia. Early in January, she flatly told Italo, "You got no job, you won't let me find a job either. We have to do something, you know." And so, against her husband's wishes, she began to take in two or three young men as boarders. Eventually, she kept four boarders and cooked supper for an additional seven men each night.⁵⁴

In Italian peasant society, a dichotomy existed between *ideal* and *real* gender roles. The *ideal* roles of men and women differed substantially.⁵⁵ Wives

⁵⁴S. Torturo.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the dichotomy between real and idealized gender roles in Italian peasant society, see Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, in particular chapter 3, "Everyday Life and Sicilian Society."

were defined primarily by their abilities in the domestic sphere. Good cooks and nurturing mothers, for example, earned the respect of friends and neighbours. Husbands, on the other hand, garnered respect by being good providers and by giving the impression to the outside world of their authority over their wives and children. Italian society affirmed that male authority within the home was necessary to maintain family and community stability. In general, male dominance within the home was more illusory than real.⁵⁶

In contrast, *real* gender roles in Italian peasant society necessarily were blurred by the labour-intensive nature of farming. As Franca Iacovetta has noted, “The dictates of the household economy regularly drew women outside of the home to participate in agricultural production. Though the supposed natural link between women and domestic labours persisted, women’s work roles included domestic and farm duties.”⁵⁷ Men had to relax their hold on their wives because women’s labour was needed outside the home. Wives, along with other family members, were expected to work alongside their mates during busy periods in the agricultural cycle.⁵⁸ The relaxation of male authority was possible in Italy because a wide community, including the extended family, existed to regulate women’s activities outside the domestic sphere. When women in Italy worked outside the home, they remained under the watchful gaze of that community. Indeed, women learned how to turn the community’s ever present eye onto themselves so that they effectively became their own regulators.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 49.

⁵⁷ Iacovetta, *HardWorking People*, 80.

⁵⁸ A. Tonetti.

⁵⁹ See Michel Foucault’s discussion of “panopticism” (internalising the “watchful gaze”) as a way to exercise cultural discipline in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 206-213. See also Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 16.

Women in Italian peasant society also were able to work outside the home because of the homogeneous nature of the community. Men did not fear a threat to their sexual hegemony because the society effectively was closed to outside cultural interference. Italian males were assured social power over women of their own class. The only threat to an Italian male's power came from other men of a higher class.

The reality that met Italian immigrants to post-war Canada was very different from that articulated by an old Italian proverb: "The husband is like the government at Rome, all pomp; the wife is like the Mafia, all power."⁶⁰ Donna Gabaccia has suggested that male domestic power was idealised in peasant society to compensate for its absence. In Vancouver, this was not the case. Italian immigrants to Vancouver could not rely on the wider community to regulate female sexuality because that community, which encompassed the extended family, did not exist. Young men usually came independently of their parents, grand-parents, or aunts and uncles while female immigrants either accompanied their immediate family if they were single or their husbands if they were married. In addition, the Italian community in Vancouver was very small, numbering just under 13 000 by 1961.⁶¹ Italians were not concentrated in one section of the city but rather, were scattered among areas including Grandview, Strathcona, and Renfrew Heights.⁶² This meant that Italians did not generally interact exclusively with other Italians. Unlike Toronto or Montreal, Vancouver did not have a sizable Little Italy until the late 1950s, several years after most Italian immigrants arrived. All of this suggests that the Italian community in

⁶⁰ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 49.

⁶¹ 1961 *Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 83.

⁶² 1961 *Census of Canada, Population and Housing Characteristics by Census Tracts*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 1.

Vancouver was relatively fragmented. In Italy, the community took responsibility for regulating female morality; in Vancouver, husbands took over this role in the absence of a homogeneous Italian population.

Like other sojourner institutions including extended families, boarding-houses, padrone-run bunkhouses and commissaries, informal *paese*⁶³ clubs, mutual aid and burial clubs, the household with boarders was forged through the migration process and the New World environment.⁶⁴ Various borrowed English words were used to describe boarding arrangements. The *padrona*⁶⁵ of the household with boarders alternately was referred to as the “bossa” from the English word “boss.” Similarly, the boarder in such a household was called the “bordante,” borrowed from the English root word “board” because an Italian equivalent does not exist. When families offered room and board to lodgers, they referred to the arrangement as “il bordo” rather than *prendere a pensione* which in Italian means “to give food and shelter.”⁶⁶ Perhaps, as Robert Harney suggested, “an ethno-linguist could explain what qualities in the Italian North American household were sufficiently alien to require such borrowing.”⁶⁷ Boarding was alien enough to Italians to require them to use borrowed phrases to describe the arrangement.

The household with boarders was a response to the needs both of male migrants and the women who took them in.⁶⁸ For the boarders, these homes

⁶³ Hometown [masc.]

⁶⁴ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, xvi.

⁶⁵ Boss [fem.] *Padrone* is the plural form of this word.

⁶⁶ From Garzanti Editore, *The Hazon-Garzanti English-Italian Dictionary*, (Milano: Garzanti Editore, 1961).

⁶⁷ Harney, “Boarding and Belonging,” 22.

⁶⁸ Harney, “Boarding and Belonging,” 11.

provided accommodation, loci of “fellow feeling,” familiar cuisine and language, and places where they could be looked after by women in the absence of mothers or wives. Women who took in lodgers, on the other hand, could contribute to the family income while assuring the preservation of their “female honour” by remaining tied to their homes.

In Italian peasant society, the *casa*, or home was defined as the space occupied by the nuclear family. A couple’s extended family did not usually share their home.⁶⁹ At most, the aging parents of either spouse lived with the couple but only when they were too old to care adequately for themselves. Alternately, when one parent became widowed, he or she would move into the adult child’s home to stave off loneliness. This notion is contrary to the stereotype of Italian peasants sharing their living space with family members including cousins, aunts, uncles, and adult siblings. As Donna Gabaccia has cogently argued, nineteenth century Italian peasants were not “amoral familialists” whose main social unit was the extended family.⁷⁰ In fact, Gabaccia maintained that the concept of *famiglia* which included members of both the immediate and extended family, actually was invented in the New World. Not all members of the immediate household were able to emigrate together. Often, migrants had to leave behind parents and siblings. The *famiglia* was born when new ties were established to compensate for old ones that had been severed.⁷¹

Although the nuclear family had been the main social unit in Italian peasant society, the wider community played a part in supervising the actions of its members. To ensure the maintenance of the community’s stability, neighbours, co-villagers and extended family members kept a close eye on each

⁶⁹ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 27, 32.

⁷⁰ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 10.

⁷¹ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 60.

other. Neighbourhood gossip was one of several powerful tools used to ensure that young women, in particular, adhered to a strict moral code.⁷² Thus, although the nuclear family lived independently of extended family members, the eye of the community always observed from a distance its activities.

If Italian peasants were not used to living with people outside their own immediate families, why was boarding practiced once they immigrated to Vancouver? Most Italian families who immigrated to Canada in the post-war years needed the income of both spouses to achieve their financial goals of security and eventual home ownership.⁷³ Economic constraints including unstable, seasonal working conditions of most primary breadwinners often meant that wives and children became secondary wage earners. As Franca Iacovetta has documented, secondary wage earners were common in Italian immigrant families and this strategy was effective in most cases.⁷⁴

Iacovetta noted that in 1961, one third of the Italian female adult population in Canada worked outside the home.⁷⁵ This figure seems skewed, however, because most Italians in Canada were concentrated in Toronto and Montreal which were both burgeoning industrial cities in the post-war period. In particular, Iacovetta's study, like that of Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, is based on the Italian immigrant population in a large industrial city. The authors' respective case-study cities, Toronto and Buffalo, offered a variety of occupational opportunities which allowed Italian women to choose jobs that would conform to the moral code requiring them to be supervised while working outside the

⁷² The regulation of young women in Italy is elaborated in chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁷³ Many Italian immigration studies discuss the importance of home ownership to Italian immigrants. See in particular Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 26, 180-81.; Yans McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 171-75; Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto*, 29, ch. 3.

⁷⁴ Iacovetta, *Hardworking People*, 72.

⁷⁵ Iacovetta, *Hardworking People*, 92.

home.⁷⁶ In addition, both Toronto and Buffalo's Italian populations were large enough that women could work in industries where other Italian women were concentrated. The textile, leather, tobacco, food, and beverage industries are such examples.⁷⁷ The concentration of Italian immigrant women in these jobs created a "watchdog" community. Married and even single women could take jobs in these industries without fearing male encroachment while their husbands and fathers were assured that the women would be supervised in the same way the extended family would have done so back in Italy.

In contrast, post-war Vancouver was not an industrial centre, nor did it have a large Italian population. Consequently, Italian women were not concentrated in particular industries where community regulation could take place. In 1961, only 5.2 per cent of Italian women in British Columbia worked outside the home. Out of the 2828 Italian women that worked outside the home in B.C., 515 were listed in the census category of "craftmen, production process and related workers" and 884 worked in the service and recreation occupations.⁷⁸ These two industries -- production and service -- retained a significant plurality of Italian women who worked outside the home. But even these industries employed relatively few Italian women. This meant that Italian women in the province had to find options other than the labour force to meet their families' economic needs. Both Yans-McLaughlin and Iacovetta agreed that family obligations and cultural preferences shaped how and when Italian immigrant women would work. Following these arguments, we can understand why some women in Vancouver chose to take in boarders rather than enter the labour force.

⁷⁶ Yans-McLaughlin, "Patterns of Work," 305.

⁷⁷ Iacovetta, *Hardworking People*, 93.

⁷⁸ 1961 *Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 82, 25; 1961 *Census of Canada, Labour Force*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 22, 39,40.

This work allowed women to contribute to the family income while remaining within their own homes.

In the community, there were four main beliefs about why it was impossible for Italian women to work outside the home. These beliefs included: first, that it was “natural” for mothers to stay home with their children; second, that wives should remain closely tied to the home in order to protect their “honour;” third, that the difficulties of learning English made it virtually impossible for women to find paid work outside the home; and fourth, that young, single men in the Italian community needed women to look after them.

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin maintained that most Italian women immigrants believed that mothers were obligated to stay home with their children.⁷⁹ My own research confirms this argument. Consider the case of Mrs. Larosa whose decision to take boarders into her home was based on the conviction that her place was at home caring for her 7 year old son.⁸⁰ Mrs. Casolin similarly chose to work inside the home so that she could look after her four young daughters. She stated, “I started taking in a few ‘bordanti’⁸¹ because I had small children. I couldn’t leave the house to look for work -- I needed to stay home to take care of my family.”⁸² The women in my study confirmed the prevalent Italian immigrant notion that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home once their children are born. They decided what jobs they would take on accordingly.

The Italian immigrant woman often continued to stay home once her children started school. Rather than entrust the children to a baby-sitter (who was

⁷⁹ Yans-McLaughlin, “Patterns of Work,” 301.

⁸⁰ L. Larosa, interview with author, Vancouver, B.C., 7 June 1993.

⁸¹ Boarders.

⁸² V. Casolin, interview with author, Vancouver, B.C., 18 February 1992, audio tape in Italian.

considered a “stranger”⁸³), a mother preferred to take on work that enabled her to be home when her children returned from school. This was especially true if she had daughters who, by virtue of their sex, required more vigilant supervision than sons. In Italy, grandparents and some extended family members often were entrusted to provide child care so that husbands and wives both could work during the *raccolta*⁸⁴ or during other busy seasons. This option generally was not available in Canada, however. Most young immigrant husbands and wives were not joined in Canada by their own parents. In 1961, there were only 650 men and women between the ages of 55-64 in Vancouver compared to 2752 persons between the ages of 25-34.⁸⁵ This meant that trusted grandparents could not be counted upon to provide child care. Looking after children was solely the responsibility of wives. The need to juggle child care and work often meant that Italian immigrant women preferred to find paid work they could do inside their own homes.

Considerations of “female honour” were the second factor that shaped Italian immigrant women’s work patterns. In her study of southern Italians in Buffalo from 1880 to 1930, Yans-McLaughlin noted that women were more likely to take in boarders because their husbands rarely permitted them to work outside the home as maids, cleaning women, or factory hands.⁸⁶ These were some of the few jobs available to immigrant women at the time. In post-World War Two Vancouver, similar notions of “female honour” influenced the decision to take in boarders. Often, women did not risk finding paid work outside the

⁸³ In Italian, this translates as *straniera* [fem.] whose meaning connotes even more distance and distrust than its English equivalent.

⁸⁴ Harvest [fem.]

⁸⁵ See *1961 Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*, (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 83.

⁸⁶ Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 53. See also Yans-McLaughlin, “Patterns of Work,” 307.

home for fear of upsetting their husbands. In addition, because their husbands' jobs often were seasonal, they could be unemployed for several months of the year. Wives were careful not to usurp their husbands' role of primary breadwinner. If a woman took boarders into her home, the sum she earned each month could "help" the family make ends meet but usually would not be more than the wages of her husband, even if he worked only several months of the year.

It seems paradoxical that women were not encouraged to work outside the home for fear of jeopardizing their honour; but could take in young male strangers to live in their homes . This contradiction seems to resolve itself when we examine how the women perceived their relationships to their boarders. When I asked Mrs. Torturo how she viewed her boarders, she explained:

[The boys] talked to me -- they talked about their jobs, about their girlfriends, about their families...It was quite a bit open to talk about everything. I felt comfortable the way they talked because, you know, we was all poor in the old country and they talked about everything... They weren't strangers, you know, just eat and go. It was pretty open here.

Q: Did you like that?

Oh, it was good, yeah. It was lots better than having strange people around. You come here only to eat or for the boarding room and say, "That's none of my business. I eat and pay and forget about it."⁸⁷

For Mrs. Torturo, her boarders did not seem like strangers at all. She regarded them more as her sons. Mrs. Padovan expressed a similar sentiment. She stated, "I trust these boys. It's just a part of the family, believe me." Mrs. Padovan

⁸⁷ S. Torturo.

recounted that at the wedding of one of her boarders, she and her husband were presented to the guests as the groom's "uncle and auntie."⁸⁸

The *padrona* of a household of boarders was treated as a mother figure by the boys. Her primary role was as "mother" to the boys that paid money to obtain her care. This role was not far removed from the function most women in Italy were raised to fulfill. In many ways, the housewife with boarders was fulfilling her maternal duty by taking in boarders. For this reason, she and her husband did not have to worry about sexual threats to her honour. The *padrona*'s sexuality was peripheral because her central role was that of "wife" to the man of the house and "mother" to her boarders. Lodgers in the home could not conceive of the *padrona* in sexual terms -- she was as inviolate as would be their own mothers.

For Mrs. Torturo, working outside the home seemed impossible because she could not speak English. When I posed the question, "did you ever consider working outside the home?" she replied, "Oh yeah. I look for a job. I go to the laundry, to a lot of factories, but no job at all. Well, because you can't speak and this and that. You can't speak English -- that was the only reason there was no job at that time."⁸⁹ Language barriers were a further impediment to Italian immigrant women's entry into the labour force. Nearly all did not speak English when they left Italy and many were not encouraged to learn the language once they arrived in Canada. During the early years of immigration to Vancouver, Italian women did not necessarily need to learn English. Apart from the minority that worked outside the home, most newly-arrived Italian women found paid work that they could perform in their homes. In addition, most Italian families

⁸⁸ I. Padovan.

⁸⁹ S. Torturo.

continued to speak Italian in the home after immigration.⁹⁰ It was therefore not imperative that Italian immigrant women learn English right away. This they left to their husbands who, through their work, generally had more contact with the wider Canadian community. However, once children began to go to school, many women began to see the merit in learning the language that was most familiar to their children. Many women took matters into their own hands. Mrs. Astorin, for example, registered for English classes at the local community centre and began to read English language magazines including *Chatelaine*.⁹¹ She also read her children's story books in an attempt to teach herself the language. Even though her husband discouraged her learning English, Mrs. Astorin felt that she needed to be able to communicate with her children in their own language.

Finally, women took in boarders to meet the needs of the thousands of Italian male newcomers to the city. Most men were young when they arrived. By 1961, five years after the height of Italian immigration to Vancouver, most men in the city were between the ages of 25 and 34.⁹² In addition, a slight sex ratio imbalance existed until after 1961 among Italian immigrants. The census of that year reveals that 6963 Italian males lived in Vancouver compared to 5978 females.⁹³ Male newcomers to Vancouver were in a state of transition. Most were unmarried when they arrived. In addition, they came independently of their parents. In Italy, young men continued to live in their parents' home until they married and established their own living quarters. But when they left Italy, these men necessarily severed ties to their own parents. They could no longer rely on

⁹⁰ Germano, *Gli Italiani*, 28.

⁹¹ A. Astorin.

⁹² 1961 *Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*. (Ottawa: DBS, 1964), Table 82.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

their mothers to clean and cook for them, and as they had not yet married, wives could not fulfill this role. They were in transition between their mothers' homes and those of their wives. The boarding-house was a perfect alternative for young men in this transitional stage. The housewife who kept boarders fulfilled the role of the surrogate mother/wife who could take care of the young man's domestic needs while he earned enough money to establish his own home and family in Canada. In addition, the housewife with boarders negotiated a compromise between the conflicting positions of remaining within the domestic sphere while contributing to the family economy.

Boarding was a temporary institution both for the boarders and the families that maintained them. Boarders tended not to move around from boarding home to boarding home but rather remained in one home until they married. Mrs. Torturo remembered, "[The boarders] moved out to get married. They never moved out of my home to go to another one. No, they stayed here. As soon as they got married, they moved out."⁹⁴ The housewife with boarders eased her lodgers through the transition from single migrant worker to married immigrant.

For the housewife with boarders, too, boarding was a short-term arrangement. She kept boarders only until her children were old enough to be left alone while she worked outside the home, or until her husband made enough money so that she did not have to work. Mrs. Peluso could not work outside the home because she had to accompany her mentally handicapped daughter to school and back each day. Mrs Peluso thus began to take in boarders in 1952. She noted:

⁹⁴ S. Torturo.

Lo fatto per 7 anni, poi quando la bambina e' stata meglio, ho cercato di trovare la posizione che il bambino la portasse con lui a scuola...Quando ho visto che dopo con la bambina si poteva arrangiarsi un pochettino,...erano piu grandi, allora ho detto, "That's enough. Adesso siete apposto. Lavorate, andate per conto vostro." Certi poi si sono sposati.

I [maintained boarders] for 7 years, then when the little girl was better, I tried to find a way for my boy to take her with him to school... When I saw that my girl could make do a little bit...[the children] were older, I told [the boarders], "That's enough. Now you are all well placed. You are working, you must go and live on your own." Afterwards, some of them got married.⁹⁵

For Mrs. Peluso, two factors influenced her decision to stop taking in boarders: her daughter's increased independence, and the fact that the boarders had stable jobs and had grown accustomed to life in Canada. After she stopped taking in boarders, Mrs. Peluso was free to work at a "real job" outside the home at Olivieri Foods in Little Italy. Once the boarders were stable and had settled into their new society, the job of housewife with boarders was no longer necessary. These women had fulfilled their obligations to their community and were free to move on -- to more lucrative or less demanding jobs -- as well.

Keeping boarders was not a very profitable venture. As Mrs. Torturo remarked:

Not very much profit [in keeping boarders]. I would have made more profit if I had gone to work [outside the home]. I think I didn't charge enough. At that time, we felt sorry too because, you know, it was all young guys. They didn't have too much money, you know, we felt sorry for them. The poor guys, you know. They got the pay cheque and they have to pay for the boarding room and at the end it's finished. They got no money to save a little bit. I don't make very much profit. So when my husband got a good job I said, "that's enough. I work for free. That's enough." It helped a

⁹⁵ M. Peluso.

little bit but not that much. I never counted my hours of working, eh. Just counted the profit.⁹⁶

Franc Sturino has made a similar point. He noted that, “from the point of view of the *paesano* landlord, the collecting of rent was usually seen as an aid in meeting necessary household expenses rather than as ‘business.’” Taking in boarders was a strategy for families to *tirare avanti*, or “pull ahead” and in general not, as some have suggested, a profit-making scheme.⁹⁷

Evidence for this comes from the women’s own testimonies. Each of those interviewed for this study spoke of “helping out” the young men more than they did of making huge sums of money. In fact, most mentioned that the money earned from taking in boarders barely covered their expenses. Mrs. Astorin’s husband told her, “Anna, instead of making money, you’re losing money!” to which she replied, “o.k., next month, I’ll tell them I want 5 dollars more.’ When I said 5 dollars more, they was so mad. Well, there was not so much wages. They worked, they no worked, they was broke, eh. But I can’t keep them for nothing, mamma mia!”⁹⁸ Although housewives rarely kept boarders “for nothing,” they were prepared to wait for the rent money until the boys found jobs. In the words of Mrs. Torturo, “They weren’t the kind to pay you every month exactly because sometimes they don’t got no job. [So] they don’t pay and you have to wait for the money. It was really hard times, you know. It wasn’t like at the end of the month they said, ‘here’s your money.’ Sometimes they got no job and you have to understand that you can’t have the money.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ S. Torturo.

⁹⁷ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 129.

⁹⁸ A. Astorin.

⁹⁹ S. Torturo.

Several factors influenced Italian women's decision to take boarders into their homes. First, in their first few years in Canada, most married couples needed the income of both spouses to survive. Women's labour was thus essential to ensure the family's long-term goals. However, four main beliefs within the community made Italian women reluctant to find employment outside the home, at least until their families became more adjusted to life in Canada. These shared values were that mothers should stay home to care for their children, that wives should remain within the domestic sphere to protect their "honour," that failure to learn English made it impossible for women to enter the labour force, and that young, single men in the Italian community needed women to look after them. Maintaining boarders was an effective compromise between the dilemma that many Italian women in Vancouver faced. In addition, housewives with boarders provided a necessary service for the young, Italian male newcomers to Vancouver in the post-war years. As a temporary measure for both boarders and the families that took them in, boarding was a necessary feature of early immigrant life.

Gender roles were transformed substantially by the migration process. Italian immigrants to Canada confronted a foreign society within which they felt dislocated. Their typical response was to turn to their Old World notions of ideal gender roles. In a society with which they felt at odds, they clung tenaciously to these values, hoping to regain some sense of familiarity. Because of the pressure to maintain cultural integrity in a society in which Italians were outsiders, an attempt was made to transform the myth of Italian male dominance into a reality in Canada. Italian women in Canada, therefore, chose employment that would not disrupt ideal family arrangements.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ For a similar situation in Buffalo, N.Y., see Yans McLaughlin, "Patterns of Work," 305.

COMPOSITION OF THE BOARDING HOUSEHOLD

In his case study of Italian immigrants in North America between 1880 and 1930, Franc Sturino noted that boarding arrangements varied from household to household.¹⁰¹ Decades later, the same was true in Vancouver. The number of boarders taken in by Italian households, for example, varied considerably. Size of the house, number of children in the home, and workload of the women were factors which determined how many boarders could be taken in. The women I interviewed housed between three and eight boarders at any given time. Women determined how many boarders could be taken in. If they did not have rooms available or felt that they could not handle the work or the expense an extra boarder necessitated, the women simply refused to accept a boarder. Mrs. Padovan took in boarders at the request of Father Della Torre, priest of the first Italian parish in Vancouver, Church of the Sacred Heart.¹⁰² She recalled,

Father Della Torre, you know, he asked me, he phoned me, he say, "Mrs. Padovan, we got boarders for you." ... I say, "O.K., we keep just a few..." And after few, we got 5 all together... He said, "we got some more." And I said, "no, father, no more because the rooms are all full. And plus, I got to buy everything. It cost lots of money. And we no got money. You need beds, you need everything."¹⁰³

Mrs. Padovan initially accepted boarders out of respect for Father Della Torre. Her husband had already paid off their house before he married her. He had a reasonably well-paid job as a cook, and they did not have any children. Within the Italian community, the Padovans were comparatively well off and they did not take in boarders to make extra money. Despite her respect for the Father, Mrs. Padovan refused on several occasions to take in more boarders. Once, when

¹⁰¹ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 128.

¹⁰² Germano, *Gli Italiani*, 38.

¹⁰³ I. Padovan.

she felt an extra boarder would lessen the private space she and her husband shared (because a den would have to be turned into an extra bedroom), Mrs. Padovan flatly told the priest that she would not accommodate the extra man. Clearly, she had final say on how many lodgers she would take into her home.

In addition to the number of boarders in the home, the individual arrangements between the boarder and the *padrona* varied significantly. Some men paid for room and board, while others paid only for their rooms, and still others paid for a room and dinner only. Some women did all of the boarders' washing, ironing, and mending, while others did not. In some households, home-made wine was provided as part of the meal, while in others, owners charged for alcohol.

Many of the women who kept boarders took in additional men at mealtimes. Usually, weekly or monthly arrangements for meals were made between young men and the women. For a set price, men could go to the home at the appointed dinner hour and join the family and lodgers for their evening meal. Mrs. Torturo often cooked dinner for 4 or 5 young men in addition to her own boarders. These men either lived independently and could not cook for themselves, or resided in rooming houses where board was not provided. Often, young men went to Mrs. Torturo's for dinner simply because they enjoyed her cooking. She said,

Well, the boys said, "I like coming here for supper because, you know, you change every night. I don't have to eat the same stuff every night." So many people asked me to come over for supper. I said I can't, you know. I say I got enough because the boys talk to the others and say, "she's a good cook." I'm not really a special cook, you know, but [I] change every night. If you don't have to eat the same stuff every night, you know, you make people happy.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ S. Torturo.

Mrs. Torturo took a great deal of pride in her ability to cook well. Her mastery of this task added considerably to her worth as a boarding-house keeper and as a woman. The status accorded a good cook stems from the importance of food in Italian culture, but more importantly, in Italian immigrant culture. Much can be understood about Italian immigrants' sense of community through an examination of their regional cuisines. Robert Harney has argued, "For historians and social scientists who fear that contemporary emphasis on varieties of ethnic cuisine may trivialize ethnicity, the study of the place of food in boarding is instructive." Harney urged historians not to "deny the centrality of familiar cuisine to [immigrants'] maintenance of popular culture while away from the homeland."¹⁰⁵

Through the sharing of food, such as traditional *polenta* from northern Italy, immigrants felt a sense of familiarity and understanding with one another. Knowledge of how to prepare regional meals was one of the few things that immigrants easily could bring with them to their new country. The keepers of this knowledge -- women, for the most part -- were held in high esteem for their ability to replicate an important aspect of life in Italy. Thus women like Mrs. Torturo, who cooked meals for their boarders and other men of the community, had a special responsibility to preserve Old World regional cuisine. This responsibility was taken very seriously by them and their clients.

While many different permutations existed of boarding arrangements, many of the rules governing boarder conduct were similar. In the household with boarders, behaviour tended to conform to moral codes established in Italian peasant communities.¹⁰⁶ Rules about obligations and expectations were usually

¹⁰⁵ Harney, "Boarding and Belonging," 27 and 30.

¹⁰⁶ Franc Sturino makes a similar point with regard to boarding house arrangements among Italians in the United States in the late nineteenth century. See Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, p. 129.

articulated at the outset. Mrs. Padovan, for example, clearly stated that the boys would have to obey her rules if they wanted to remain in her home. She made her point early in their relationship, before they actually started lodging with her. One of her main rules was that girlfriends not be permitted in the boys' bedrooms. She said, "I don't want those things. Because I respect the boys and the boys they got to respect my home, my husband, plus the father Della Torre...You got to talk in the face to the people. Before [they] started coming in this house."¹⁰⁷ Other women who kept boarders also were strict about allowing women into their homes. Often, boarders' girlfriends could stay for dinner if they wished and could be entertained in the living room for several hours afterwards. But once the evening ended, girlfriends were ushered firmly out the door.

The importance of this issue to most *padrone* likely has to do with their own status among the boarders. Housewives with boarders were treated with respect and deference by their lodgers. As was pointed out earlier, the *padrona* was viewed as a mother figure and exerted control over the events that occurred in her home. In the absence of the boarder's immediate family, it was her job to regulate his moral conduct as well as that of any romantic partners he might have. The *padrona* therefore had to be vigilant in her duty. Her function was to ensure that the traditional taboo against unsanctioned sexual liaisons (i.e., those taking place outside of marriage) between young men and women was maintained in Canada.

Spatial arrangements within the home conformed to its moral code. Rules establishing boarder/family boundaries usually were entrenched physically. Most boarding homes were large early twentieth century wooden structures with several floors and many rooms. Within a boarding home's walls, spatial divisions existed between boarders and the family who owned the house. Often, boarders'

¹⁰⁷ I. Padovan.

bedrooms were on a separate floor from those of the family. In Mrs. Casolin's house, the boarders' rooms and a common bathroom were in the basement. She and her family slept on the top floor of the house. The main floor which contained the kitchen, living, and dining rooms was a common space where the boarders and the family came together to share meals, discussions, or entertainment.¹⁰⁸ Thus her home was divided evenly between private family space, boarder space, and common space.

Although the women did not usually fear for their own sexual safety within the boarding home, they did monitor carefully the interaction between their daughters and the boarders. Women ensured that their daughters were separated spatially from the boarders within the home. As noted above, Mrs. Casolin's family, including her four daughters, slept on the top floor of the house while the boarders' rooms were in the basement. The daughters were strictly forbidden to go downstairs into the boarders' bedrooms and the boarders, conversely, were not permitted upstairs where the family slept.¹⁰⁹ Not all boarding homes, however, were as neatly divided as the Casolins. Mrs. Peluso, for example, lived in a small house where it was impossible for all the boarders' rooms to be separate from those of the family. In her home, the spatial divisions between boarders and family were symbolic. She recalled:

I bordanti avevano due camere da basso. E sopra avevo una camera e un'altra che era tutta aperta. Io dopo avevo chiuso -- dov'erano le scale in mezzo -- avevo chiuso un pezzettino di qui e un pezzettino di qua. Qui dormiva il bambino dove passavano gli uomini, e qua dormiva la ragazza dov'era chiuso e non aveva nessuna comunicazione con loro.

¹⁰⁸ V. Casolin.

¹⁰⁹ V. Casolin.

The boarders had two rooms downstairs. And upstairs I had one room and another one that was very large and open. I had put in dividers -- where the stairs were -- I had closed off a little piece this way and a little piece that way with a curtain. [My] little boy slept this way where the men passed, and my girl slept over here where it was closed off and she did not have any communication with them.¹¹⁰

In addition, Mrs. Peluso's children did not eat their meals with the boarders.

While Mr. Peluso ate in the dining room with the boarders, the children ate in the kitchen where their mother could keep an eye on them while cooking and serving the men.

Spatial divisions within the home -- be they physical or symbolic -- ensured the safety of the female members of the family. The housewife with boarders was relatively safe from any sexual threat posed by the boarders by virtue of her status of "mother" within the home. Her children -- daughters, in particular -- did not share this status, therefore, the family entrenched spatial divisions between young girls and boarders. In most cases, this arrangement succeeded in keeping young daughters safe from the men that surrounded them.

In contrast, when boarders and family members were not separated physically, regrettable results could ensue. One woman I interviewed lived in the two top floors of a small house that housed the family's bakery downstairs. For several years, her husband was absent and she was left solely responsible for earning enough money for her and her two young children. Because the house was small, she slept in the bedroom on the lower floor with her four-year old son while the boarders slept in two of the upstairs bedrooms. In the third upstairs bedroom slept the woman's twelve-year old daughter. One morning after the boarders had left for work, the woman's daughter came to the breakfast table

¹¹⁰ M. Peluso.

visibly upset. When her mother questioned her silence, her daughter recounted that the previous night, one of the boarders entered her bedroom, crawled into her bed and molested her.¹¹¹ Because in Mrs. Astorin's home, space could not be divided between the family and the boarders, the boarder in question probably felt he could get away with sexually abusing the *padrona's* daughter. Thus the entrenchment of spatial boundaries was crucial in demarcating a division between the family and the boarders they took in. Spatial divisions increased the safety of the female members of the home.

The composition of the boarding home varied considerably. Boarding arrangements differed as did the number of boarders women took into their homes. Despite these differences, however, the spatial divisions in most homes conformed to the moral boundaries the *padrone* expected of their boarders. Homes were usually divided between boarder space and family space, with the kitchen and living rooms serving as common areas where the family and lodgers came together. The major reason for these spatial divisions was to protect the family's children from the sexual threat posed by the boarders. When it was impossible to entrench these spatial boundaries, the results could be disastrous.

WORK INVOLVED IN KEEPING BOARDERS

Housewives with boarders viewed their work as exceedingly important. The women knew that they performed a crucial role for the men they took into their homes. In many ways, these women served their boarders in ways resembling the duties of a peasant wife to her husband. Mrs. Padovan explained, "You got to ...wash everything and prepare everything, you know. Everything. Same, you know, as you do for your husband."¹¹² Mrs. Casolin recalled with

¹¹¹ A. Astorin.

¹¹² I. Padovan.

unconcealed pride, “my ‘bordanti’ never once went out with a dirty shirt. I kept them like princes.” Regarding how she was viewed by her lodgers, she said, “They always respected me. They would tell me, ‘you are like our mother, Mrs. Casolin. We miss our mothers but we have found another one.’ We needed to help them, you know.”¹¹³ The relationship between boarders and the women who took them into their homes had at least as much to do with the needs of the boarders as with those of the women and their families.

All of the women interviewed for this study agreed on one basic feature of the work they performed in keeping boarders: it was exceedingly difficult. Not only was the work itself hard, but the sheer quantity of it meant that the women worked long hours and had little time for recreation or entertainment. Mrs. Larosa noted that she, “went to bed with the moon and rose with the moon.”¹¹⁴ Mrs. Casolin’s experience was similar. She described a typical day:

I worked very hard. I never went to bed before 1:00 or 1:30 in the morning. I had to work in the evenings mending clothes, ironing, because during the day I was busy cooking. I had to get up at 5:00 a.m. in order to make bag lunches for the “bordanti” that went to work. I did everything for my “bordanti” - I gave them 3 meals a day to eat. There were 12 of us to feed at dinner.¹¹⁵

Mrs. Padovan pined for a paid job outside the home where she could work fewer hours and be paid a wage commensurate with how much work she performed. She mused, “too bad I not working for the government. It’s more easy working 8 hours a day, you got your holidays, paid and everything, every year. You know, it’s nice. It’s a different life altogether.” Like other women, she complained that she did not make very much money while she kept boarders because her expenses

¹¹³ V. Casolin.

¹¹⁴ L. Larosa.

¹¹⁵ V. Casolin.

often exceeded what she charged the men for room and board. Why then, was this strategy exercised as a way to meet family expenses?

The household with boarders served the needs of both the lodgers and the families that took them in. Franc Sturino noted that, "The boarding relationship offers us an important example of the nexus between the *paesani*'s¹¹⁶ social obligations and economic reality that was worked out in the new world."¹¹⁷ Robert Harney offered a slightly different perspective. He argued that the household with boarders served 3 main functions. It was a form of entrepreneurship for the family who took in lodgers, a social institution fulfilling most of the needs of Italian sojourners, and a "frame within which aspects of North American ethnicity were defined."¹¹⁸ My own view is somewhat different than each of these. I suggest that the household with boarders was a temporary measure negotiated by women to bring in an income while remaining within the bounds of the domestic sphere. At the same time, women could play out their prescribed identities as nurturers by fulfilling the needs of male boarders who needed someone to care for them while they found wives.

The boarding arrangement, then, cannot be seen as purely a business relationship. At best, boarding barely helped to meet the family's financial needs. Its major function was to help women out of the dilemma resulting from cultural and economic imperatives while providing housing, care, and guidance to young Italian males in a state of transition. As a strategy of both Italian housewives and the young men they took in, boarding was a useful and effective temporary measure.

¹¹⁶ Co-villagers [Masc. pl.]

¹¹⁷ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 130.

¹¹⁸ Harney, "Boarding and Belonging," 11.

III

CONTINGENT WOMANHOOD: THE ITALIAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

This chapter will examine the ways in which the ideal of “womanhood” changed for a group of Italian immigrants to Canada. My central premise is that gender identities are altered through time and space; they are contingent upon the circumstances that men and women face in their daily lives. I will argue that the boarding arrangement in post-World War Two Vancouver provides a window through which to analyse how womanhood was redefined for Italian immigrant women. Is it possible, for example, to define what it meant to be a peasant woman in northern Italy? If so, what were the central features of her identity? Were definitions of northern Italian womanhood different in Italy than in post-war Canada? If so, which aspects were different and how? How did Italian women maintain Italian definitions of womanhood once they came to Canada? And finally, how did the institution of boarding facilitate, for some women, a continuity of Old World gender patterns?

Historians of gender are beginning to look at their subjects with an awareness of the complexity of gender relations. No longer content to accept unequivocally the fixed nature of gender relationships, historians have begun to examine the fluctuating meanings of “women” and “men.” At the beginning of her excellent essay, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History*, Denise Riley contended that, “‘Women’ is historically constructed, and is always relative to other categories which themselves change; ‘women’ is a

volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of 'women' isn't to be relied upon..."¹¹⁹ Riley argued that "women" is an unstable category of analysis. Being a "woman" is contingent; its definition changes across cultures, through time and from place to place. The way womanhood is defined, "fluctuates for the individual, depending on what she and/or others consider to characterise it..."¹²⁰ This notion is especially important in immigration studies because the process of migration often modifies and redefines gender relationships. Once women came to Canada, they had to reconstruct an identity which partly had been lost through the process of migration. In Italy, "woman" meant not only idealised female subordination to idealised male dominance, but simultaneously the recognition of female physical and moral strength.¹²¹ Women displayed this strength through their ability to provide household care and by working alongside their husbands in the fields. Strength enabled them to provide for the economic, as well as the domestic, stability of the family.¹²² Once in Canada, however, female identities had to be redefined because social and economic conditions were different than they had been in rural northern Italy. Concepts such as strength, for example, may not have held the same meaning for Italian immigrants to Canada as for Italians in Italy. This chapter will examine how the process of redefinition occurred and the effects of this "rebalancing" on Italian immigrant housewives with boarders in Vancouver.

¹¹⁹ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1-2.

¹²⁰ Riley, "Am I That Name?" 6.

¹²¹ Anna Bravo, "Solidarity and Loneliness: Piedmontese Peasant Women at the Turn of the Century," *International Journal of Oral History*, 3, 2,(1982): 82. The women interviewed for the present study were born between 1908 and 1934.

¹²² Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 44-51.

DOMINANT MODELS OF WOMANHOOD IN NORTHERN ITALIAN PEASANT SOCIETIES

A dominant model of womanhood in northern Italy affected all peasant women's lives. Even those women who did not conform to the dominant model were still defined in terms of *how* they did not conform. For example, marriage and motherhood were integral aspects of a northern Italian peasant woman's identity, however, not all women eventually became wives and mothers. Spinsters, women who took the vows of the Church, and women who left their home communities out of shame (due to rape or the birth of a child out of wedlock, for example) may not have married. But even these women were defined (albeit in an oppositional way) by a model of true womanhood. Women who either would not or could not marry were measured against a social identity which prescribed marriage as the only true vocation for women. Women who did not marry often took on their identities (as "rebels," for example) in opposition to social norms. Therefore, whether as a measure of women's adherence to her femininity or her rejection of it, the ideology of the "true woman" was ever-present.

Representations of "woman" by such institutions as the Catholic Church, schools, and the family served to circumscribe women's choices. A dominant ideology about how women *should* be defined in society conditioned their choices. Women in northern Italy were defined and defined themselves in a myriad of ways -- as grandmothers, sisters, wives, mothers, seamstresses, school teachers, Catholics, and Venetians. The construction of female identity involved a careful -- although often unconscious -- negotiation of these and other roles for women. A woman's identity might encompass some of these roles as part of her identity, or it might encompass none of them. In addition, which of these roles she assumed at a given time depended upon the circumstances that met her. For instance, while working with her family to pick fruit in the fields, a woman might

see herself foremost as a “labourer.” At other times, when she was caring for a sick child, for example, a woman might identify herself primarily as a “mother.” A woman’s different roles came to the fore and receded into the background based on different situations in her life. A woman could choose from a limited number of options available to her as a woman. But the roles themselves, i.e., what constituted a “woman” in northern Italian peasant culture, were prescribed.

As Riley has argued, ideas of what constitutes “women” vary spatially as well as historically. It is thus false to assume the existence of a single dominant model of womanhood consistent throughout Italy. The roles expected of women varied regionally. The most marked regional disparity in Italy existed -- and indeed continues to exist -- between the northern and southern parts of the country. Italy is divided by a tacitly recognised line running horizontally through the middle of the country. Lazio -- the region with Rome as its capital -- is generally understood as the boundary between North and South. This division is based on economic, cultural, and historical differences in the development of the two regions.¹²³ Because the women in my study are from provinces in the North, my discussion of dominant identity models will be confined to this area. In particular, I limited my research for this chapter to the regions of Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Northern Italian women were defined in terms of their social and familial relationships with men. Women were expected to subsume their own needs into those of the family, particularly the male head of the household. Adult women had rights and obligations within the family including the obligation to become a mother and wife. In addition, women were supposed give help and assistance to those who needed it outside their families. Women were expected to possess moral and physical strength and to be willing to sacrifice present comfort and

¹²³ Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto*, ch. 1.

happiness for future economic security. In return for these various obligations, women could expect to be “taken care of” by their husbands. Their husbands were obliged to protect both the economic stability of the family and their wives’ honour. This patriarchal construct of social control dispossessed women of their independence in return for economic security and social stability. It is interesting to note the contradictory nature of a woman’s role. Her submission to her husband and nurturing attitude toward others seem curiously at odds with the physical and moral strength also expected of her.¹²⁴ An ideal woman had to incorporate both the traits of submission and strength into her character.

The model for men’s roles contrasted markedly with the female identity model. Whereas women were defined primarily as “givers,” a man’s worth was measured by his ability to assume “responsibility” for his family. Specifically, he was expected to provide an adequate standard of living for his wife and children. His central role as provider was deeply intertwined with the peasant ideology of hard work and sacrifice.¹²⁵ Men, as well as women, were expected to submit to exhausting agricultural work patterns for their young adult life in order to ensure future financial stability. The pay-off for their hard work was the hope of eventual land and home ownership. For Italian peasants, owning a plot of land meant freedom from obligations they owed to a landlord.¹²⁶ In addition to his first role as provider, a husband and father was expected to monitor his wife and daughter’s actions so that their “female honour” would remain intact. He was responsible for ensuring that the family name not be shamed publicly by a

¹²⁴ Bravo, “Solidarity and Loneliness,” 80, 82.

¹²⁵ Franc Sturino, “The Role of Women in Italian Immigration to the New World,” in Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into My Sister’s Eyes: an Exploration in Women’s History*, (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), 25.

¹²⁶ For an examination of the socio-economic background of Italy and its peasant societies, see Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, particularly chapter 1.

rebellious daughter, adulterous wife or indolent son. Like women, men in northern Italian peasant society were identified in relation to the nuclear family. Both sexes had rights and obligations within it but because the family, not the individual, constituted the basic unit of society, men and women often had to subordinate their own needs and desires to those of the family.¹²⁷

A northern Italian woman's identity was tightly wrapped up in her ability to become a wife and mother. Motherhood, in particular, was deemed the most important role to which a woman could aspire. The importance of the mother-figure in Italian society stems partly from influences of the Catholic Church. Lesley Caldwell has argued, "Religion, particularly organised Catholicism, has consistently spoken out on the status of women as mother, and prescribed certain restrictions on her other activities in the wake of an imputed natural mission."¹²⁸ This is corroborated by oral testimony. Mrs. Amalfi spent her adolescence at a convent boarding school in Switzerland run by the Ursuline order. When I asked her how she envisioned her future as she was growing up, she emphatically said, "As a mother with children who could cook, wash windows very well, make a very good bed, and be an obedient woman, and obedient wife. Respect your parents, and that was the main goal of your life."¹²⁹ Motherhood fulfilled a woman's presumed biological destiny. A woman's social identity was implicit in her biological ability to conceive, give birth, and suckle children.¹³⁰ A woman's first duty, therefore, was to her children. Women were the main agents

¹²⁷ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, 22.

¹²⁸ Lesley Caldwell, "Madri d'Italia: Film and Fascist Concern with Motherhood," in Zygmunt G. Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall, eds., *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 61.

¹²⁹ A. Amalfi interviewed with A. Tonetti by the author, Vancouver, B.C, 27 July 1994, audio tape.

¹³⁰ Franca Bimbi, "Three Generations of Women: Transformations of Female Identity Models in Italy," in Mirna Cicioni and Nicole Prunster, eds., *Visions and Revisions: Women in Italian Culture*, (Providence and Oxford: Berg Publishers, Inc., 1993), 149.

of socialisation within the family. But, however important childbirth was in Italian peasant life, it was sanctioned only within the context of marriage. A woman who became a mother out of wedlock faced the worst sort of social disapprobation and ostracism. The primacy of motherhood so permeated constructions of northern Italian womanhood that if a woman did not have children of her own, she was expected to look after the children of her family members.¹³¹ This particularly affected women whose families could not provide them with dowries. It was assumed that rather than marry without a dowry, these women would become spinsters and content themselves with caring for their relatives' children and aging family members.

Coupled with the assumption that women eventually would become mothers was the expectation that women would help others outside their own families. In Italian peasant society, love and solidarity meant helping each other to survive; it entailed working and helping others work.¹³² As Anna Bravo notes, "The identification of women with the needs of other women, intertwined with a generic feeling of religious pity for those who suffered, was an expression of a deep internalization of their role as women."¹³³ Women were expected to engage in charity work of some kind, whether it was taking food to indigent neighbours, helping to deliver the baby of a co-villager, or maintaining the grounds of the local cemetery. As a young girl, Mrs. Tonetti helped her mother and aunts to exhume cemetery graves and transfer the ashes to urns because the cemetery was overcrowded.¹³⁴ Like other civic chores, this work was largely the responsibility

¹³¹ Piera Carroli, "The Role of Women in the Lullabies of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany," in Cicioni and Prunster, 132.

¹³² Bravo, "Solidarity and Loneliness," 83.

¹³³ Bravo, "Solidarity and Loneliness," 80.

¹³⁴ A. Tonetti.

of women. A woman's role as nurturer to others, however, came second only to the needs of her own family.

Despite the fact that northern Italian peasant women spent as much time as their husbands working outside their homes,¹ they were associated more closely with the domestic sphere. Although she tilled soil, sowed seeds, and harvested crops along with her husband, a woman also was responsible for cooking, cleaning the home, and preserving fruits and vegetables grown in her garden. Fulfilling these various duties necessitated physical strength which equaled, if not surpassed, that of her husband. Northern Italian women, like their male counterparts, were accustomed to hard work. Intense physical labour was viewed as an integral component of a woman's femininity, not a rejection of it.

Alternatives to marriage and motherhood were limited for northern Italian women. Bravo noted that in Piedmont, women who did not wish to marry did not often rebel. Bravo gave three main reasons for this lack of overt mutiny: the obstacles that existed in the development of women's individual identity, the difficulty women had in formulating their individual desires, and the absence of alternatives to marriage.¹³⁵ While it is true that alternatives to marriage were limited, they did exist nevertheless. The most socially acceptable was to take the vows of the Catholic Church. When I asked Mrs. Amalfi and Mrs. Tonetti, who both had spent their adolescence at convent boarding schools, whether alternatives to marriage existed for them, they both replied emphatically, "Yeah. Become a nun. That was very common in those years."¹³⁶ By becoming a nun, a woman made a commitment to serve God similar to the commitment married women made to their husbands. Alternately, women who became spinsters surrendered their lives to their families by caring for their relatives' children or

¹³⁵ Bravo, "Solidarity and Loneliness," 78.

¹³⁶ A. Tonetti and A. Amalfi.

aging family members. Because they had no husbands to care for, spinsters were available for whatever duties or chores the family imposed. The third alternative, flight from the community, was rarely practised among northern Italian peasant women up to 1945 because, “family sentiment [was] still solid and tenacious” in the Italian countryside.¹³⁷ Still, some women were so severely ostracised by their community for shaming the family name, for example, that they were forced to leave.

Women’s work in Italy often was performed in the company of other women in the community. Because most peasants lived in what Donna Gabaccia called “agrotowns” -- densely populated rural settlements -- the *cortile* was the main focus for community activity. Throughout agrotowns in both southern and northern Italy, streets opened onto hundreds of small *cortili*. These semi-enclosed courtyards were usually surrounded by six or eight attached houses. Like the streets, these courtyards theoretically belonged to the town, but homeowners who bought all the houses surrounding the *cortile* sometimes erected a gate across its entrance and turned it into a private central courtyard.¹³⁸ Whether or not women of the *cortile* belonged to the same extended family, they often worked together. Tasks within the household were defined by gender which meant that women gathered together and performed their work with other women. They would often sit together in the *cortile* as they sewed, peeled vegetables, or made clogs.

A woman’s *cortile* neighbours constituted a stable group that shared gossip as well as labour. As Gabaccia noted, “This exchange of information was both the basis for social relationships and the means of evaluating them.”¹³⁹ By

¹³⁷ See Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 107.

¹³⁸ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 16.

¹³⁹ Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 48.

participating in an ongoing exchange of neighbourhood gossip, women were able to exert some influence in maintaining social and moral stability. A young woman knew that if she was seen in the *piazza* with a boy, news quickly would spread to the women of her *cortile* and, most likely, to her mother. This was often enough to stop young women from attempting to engage in surreptitious rendezvous with members of the opposite sex. Because the worst imaginable situation for a woman was to be seduced and subsequently abandoned, mothers carefully monitored the actions of their daughters. Carroli argued that, "In warning children of this danger, mothers became agents of male hegemony. They had to promote values that they may have regarded as hypocritical and unfair and that restricted women's freedom."¹⁴⁰ Mrs. Tonetti recalled that while she was a teenager, her mother closely monitored her actions. When she sent her on an errand -- to the bakery to buy bread, for example -- Mrs. Tonetti's mother would say, "I'm going to spit on the floor. And you better make sure that you get back before the spit dries up. Because if you come later, tonight it's *botte!*"¹⁴¹ Mrs. Tonetti continued, "So I had to run and if she sent me to a store and there was a line up, well, I used to get [a] stomach upset because I knew that that spit was drying up. It's true, I'm not kidding. This is how it was."

In northern Italy, women were defined primarily as mothers and nurturers. Women also had to incorporate the seemingly contradictory traits of submission to authority -- usually their husbands' -- and an autonomous sense of strength. In addition, women often worked and socialised together in the *cortile* in which they lived. Women monitored the actions of other women in the community, especially their own daughters. The process of migration altered Italian women's

¹⁴⁰ Carroli, "Role of Women," 135.

¹⁴¹ A beating.

conception of what it meant to be “womanly” and thus forced them to invent a new way of viewing themselves.

WOMANHOOD REDEFINED: ITALIAN HOUSEWIVES WITH BOARDERS IN VANCOUVER

Upon immigration to Canada, circumstances changed markedly for northern Italian men and women. Not only did Italian immigrants face a new country with different sets of social mores and values, a new and difficult language, and prejudices against “southern Europeans,” but the agrarian social relations to which northern Italian peasants were accustomed did not exist in Canada. Italian women in Vancouver experienced dislocation from their families and home communities. Most Italian women, including those that maintained boarders, felt an extreme sense of isolation from other women in particular. Men and women who had never been farther than the capital city of their home region suddenly were placed into contact not only with a heterogeneous Canadian population, but with other Italians whom they previously had regarded suspiciously.¹⁴² The general youthfulness of the Italian immigrant population meant also that few elders existed to monitor and regulate the actions of young people seeking to marry and establish themselves in Canada.¹⁴³ These factors played a major role in realigning gender definitions among Italian immigrants. Women with boarders in Canada altered their image of themselves as “women” in order to accomplish the work that was necessary of them.

¹⁴² Although he focuses specifically on Toronto, the general process of ethnic identification is described cogently by Robert Harney in “Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods,” in Robert F. Harney, ed., *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*. (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985).

¹⁴³ 1961 *Census of Canada, Population: Cross-Classification of Characteristics*, (Ottawa:DBS, 1964), Table 83.

The household with boarders provides a window for observing redefinitions of gender roles in a select group of Italian immigrant families. Because the institution of boarding was forged in the New World, men and women who participated in this arrangement necessarily had to construct new ways of interacting with one another. They had to redefine their notions of what it meant to be “women” and “men” in this new context. Although these gender definitions were new, they were influenced by Old World norms. Gender relationships were not so much recast from a new mold as they were grafted on to an old mold which was no longer totally useful.

The reasons northern Italian women chose to take in boarders rather than enter the labour force were outlined in Chapter Two. Married Italian immigrant women faced a dilemma: their husbands rarely permitted them to find paid work outside the home; on the other hand, the family needed more than one wage-earner to ensure its survival. Taking in boarders resolved this quandary for many Italian women in Vancouver. As one woman said during her interview, the area around Sacred Heart church in Vancouver (what is now the residential part of Chinatown) “was full of Italian women who kept boarders after the war.”¹⁴⁴ Although some women took in laundry and sewing to earn extra money, for those who owned or rented large homes, maintaining boarders was the preferred employment option.

By taking boarders into their homes, women drew upon notions of womanhood which they brought with them from northern Italian peasant societies. As in Italy, women subordinated their own needs to that of the family. Although most women felt uncomfortable accepting virtual strangers into their homes, they knew that boarding was a temporary measure which would help the family make ends meet until it was financially secure. When Mrs. Torturo

¹⁴⁴ A. Astorin.

suggested she felt very disconcerted with so many men around her, I asked her if she meant that the boarders invaded her privacy. She replied, “Well, not my privacy really because I got my own washroom, you know, and the boys --I got everybody sleeping upstairs. I got my bedroom downstairs with my husband, you know. It’s not for the privacy, it’s just because the boys come in and out screaming and I can’t do anything...we got so many people around the house, you know.”¹⁴⁵ Later in the interview, however, she stated, “Oh, I don’t feel comfortable at all [having boarders in the house] but the reason I have to do that kind of job was because [we] needed money to live, eh...But as soon as my husband, he start working at a good job, I said, ‘that’s it, no more boarders.’”¹⁴⁶

In northern Italy, a peasant woman’s primary role was to be a mother. Her ability to raise and educate children was considered the epitome of her status as a woman. Once a woman immigrated to Canada and became a housewife with boarders, however, motherhood assumed a secondary role in her life. Indeed, motherhood continued to be important but other characteristics, such as her strength, appear to have assumed a more privileged role. At the same time, however, definitions of “motherhood” were expanded to include other people besides a woman’s own children. Many of the women I interviewed emphasised their maternal qualities while keeping boarders. Indeed, most women compared their relationships with their boarders to the bond between mothers and their children. Mrs. Peluso noted that, “[Ero come] una madre per loro. Perche ci facevo tutto. Ci spedivo soldi in Italia quando prendevano i soldi, li cucivo, li aggiustavo, facevo di tutto. (I was like a mother to them. Because I did

¹⁴⁵ S. Torturo.

¹⁴⁶ S. Torturo.

everything for them. I sent money to Italy when they got paid, I sewed for them, I mended, I did everything).”¹⁴⁷

Housewives with boarders exercised their maternal role in a variety of ways. Mrs. Casolin woke unemployed boarders up at five o'clock on weekday mornings with the call, “boys! Get up! It's time to look for jobs in the factories.” She continued:

On Sundays, I sent [the boys] to church even though they never wanted to go...At eight o'clock in the morning I would always start an earthquake in my house. I would go downstairs and bang on the doors. “Boys!” I would shout. Saturdays and Sundays they didn't go to look for work so I would say, “It's time to get up and go to mass,” and they would answer, “you're not going to let us sleep in even today?” “No, no. It's church day today,” I would say. They would laugh. I was always a strong woman - in work, in moving my boarders.¹⁴⁸

Other women offered words of advice to their boarders. When the boys went out for the night, *padrone* often cautioned them against drinking excessively or getting into fights. Mrs. Torturo said, “you know, I worried because I said, ‘oh, you come home late, you know, be careful,’ ‘don't drink,’ or whatever...like they were my sons.” She also expected her boarders to be home on time for dinner so that all the members of the household could eat together: “I liked them home in time for supper...sometimes they had to work [late] and this and that, you know, but if not, supper time was at 6 o'clock and they had to be there.”¹⁴⁹ In order to command respect from her boarders, a woman established clear guidelines for behaviour within her home.

¹⁴⁷ M. Peluso.

¹⁴⁸ V. Casolin.

¹⁴⁹ S. Torturo.

The work of an Italian housewife with boarders entailed the ability to cook breakfast, lunch and dinner for up to 25 boarders plus her own family; wash, iron, and mend their clothes; shop for groceries and organise meals; cultivate a vegetable garden, and keep the house (including the boarders' bedrooms) clean. Most women who maintained boarders in their homes worked exceedingly long hours. Mrs. Larosa was not atypical in saying, "I arose and went to bed with the moon."¹⁵⁰ Like women's work in general, that of Italian housewives with boarders was interminable. Often, these women found that they had little time for their own enjoyment or relaxation after a day's work. Mrs. Padovan asserted, "It was not an easy life. It was a lot of work. Because I got 5 boys plus me and my husband -- 7 people -- I had to be working all day long. Cleaning, shopping, preparing food, everything. I no got time for me!".¹⁵¹ Reflecting upon their lives as housewives with boarders, many of the women marveled at how hard they had worked and commented that their workload seemed more than they could bear.

In addition to the capacity to work hard, the *padrona* commanded respect from the men she took into her home. A housewife with boarders established rules in her home which the men usually followed. Although most women did not mind catering to some boarders' idiosyncrasies (for example, cooking different meals for men who did not like certain foods), in some situations, the women would not compromise. Some rules could be easily transgressed; when a boarder could not pay his rent on the first of the month, the *padrona* either waited until he had money available, or often, waived rent money for a month. However, in matters she deemed important, such as attending Sunday mass, the housewife's word was law with boarders.

¹⁵⁰ L. Larosa.

¹⁵¹ I. Padovan.

Although strength and the ability to work hard were integral parts of peasant life in Italy, these two features assumed the predominant features of life for these women when they moved to Canada and became boarding-house keepers. A housewife with boarders fulfilled many functions for her lodgers. She was responsible for her boarders' meals, including bag lunches for the men that were employed, laundry, and housekeeping. In addition, the *padrona*, or owner mended her boarders' socks and shirts when they could not afford to buy new clothing. She served as confidant, nurturer and disciplinarian. These boarding-house keepers were both businesswomen and surrogate wives/mothers. In fulfilling these various roles, Italian housewives with boarders were attentive to a set of prescribed characteristics including chastity, maternal duty, sacrifice, ability to work hard, and almost superhuman mental and physical strength.

THE "STRONG LADY:" CONSTRUCTION OF A MYTH

Oral historians' focus on the potential of oral history to understand subjective, as well as objective experience, has expanded the boundaries of historical study. To study subjectivity, defined here as the way an individual makes sense of the events in his or her life, one necessarily must blur the traditional distinction between the real and the imaginary.¹⁵² Subjective experience includes the imaginary world of dreams, desires, fantasies, and myths that are part of the human experience. The work of oral historians recently has recognised the importance of myth and myth construction in oral narratives. I would like to draw attention to how myth operated in the narratives of the women interviewed for this study. The main myth contained in most of the women's narratives is that of the "strong lady." I define the term "strong lady" as a myth,

¹⁵² Luisa Passerini, "Mythbiography in Oral History," in Samuel and Thompson, eds., *Myths We Live By*, 52.

not because the women in this study were not strong, but because there is a deeper purpose for which the term was used. The phrase may have been used to construct a sense of community among women who felt alienated from their new society, the members of their own households, and other women. In addition, it is possible that the myth of the “strong lady” helped to ease the tension between the real lives of these women and the ideal of womanhood expected of them.

As I began to read over the transcripts of the interviews conducted for this study, I was surprised to find that many of the women, without prompting, used the very same words to define themselves. Many of the women echoed the views of Mrs. Astorin when she said, “I was a very strong lady -- work, work, work, you know...”¹⁵³ I began to wonder what meanings this phrase, “strong lady” conveyed to these women. How did the notion of “strength” fit into the role of the *padrona*? What did “strength” mean for these women and why was the phrase “strong lady” used so consistently by them?

Myth is embedded in real experience; to identify “the element of myth in oral sources is certainly *not* to say that we are working with memories of a false past.”¹⁵⁴ Rather, historians can interpret the myths found in oral narratives to reveal metaphors and stereotypes individuals use to express their place within a social group. According to Luisa Passerini, oral testimonies -- particularly life stories -- are not solely personal, but usually carry elements of a collective identity.¹⁵⁵ Myths are collective stories, images, or fantasies whose origins have been obscured. Myths appear timeless; their historical roots have been long

¹⁵³ A. Astorin.

¹⁵⁴ Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, “Introduction,” in Samuel and Thompson, eds., *Myths We Live By*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Luisa Passerini, “Women’s Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions,” in Personal Narratives Group, eds., *Interpreting Woman’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), 190.

forgotten, removing them from the social context in which they were conceived. Myths in oral sources are excellent clues to the way historical actors give shape to the events in their lives. Myths show us how people may draw on a shared, common culture in recounting their personal lives and also how individuals attempt to ease the tensions and contradictions that occur in their pasts.

One such tension for Italian housewives with boarders was the transition they had to make between the Old World and the New. Most interviewees admitted to feeling dislocated and frightened when they arrived in Canada. Mrs. Casolin, like many of the women, considered returning to Italy. She said, "I almost wanted to return to Italy. I was so depressed that I wanted to return there. And when I arrived in Vancouver...I had to live in [a] horrible rented house because no one [else] would let us rent."¹⁵⁶ Mrs. Torturo and her husband actually did return to Italy for a six month visit in the early 1960s. Even though she had been in Canada for a decade, she admitted that she did not yet consider Canada her home. While they were in Italy, Mrs. Torturo did not want to return to Canada. She recalled, "I said I would never go back to Canada. So my sister packed all the suitcases and she said, 'you have to go with your husband.' I said, 'my husband is here, he can stay here too.' I said, 'I don't want to [go] back anymore.'...I'd had enough and I said 'no more.'"¹⁵⁷

Most of the women interviewed felt alienated from Canadian society primarily because they could not speak English well enough to make new Canadian friends. All but two informants admitted that the language barrier was a major impediment to their feeling comfortable in Canada. Many women felt they could not adequately perform daily tasks, such as grocery shopping, because they could not make themselves understood in English. Mrs. Peluso did not like

¹⁵⁶ V. Casolin.

¹⁵⁷ S. Torturo.

leaving her home because, as she said, “Tu avevi paura ad’andare fuori perche non sapevi neanche parlare [se ti trovavi] nei pasticci (You were scared to go out because you didn’t even know how to speak,[if you found yourself] in trouble).”¹⁵⁸

In addition to feeling alienated from the wider Canadian society, many housewives with boarders felt distanced from the members of their own households. Most of the informants felt at least occasional discomfort with young, single men in their homes and many women did not like their work maintaining boarders. Women did this work because they felt their options were limited in the job market and because it was expected that married Italian women would “help out” the community by cooking and cleaning for single Italian men. Women were drawn into this work because their sense of duty was called upon. Mrs. Astorin was urged by her husband’s co-worker to take in boarders. He asked her, “Please, Anna, take these two boarders, they don’t speak English at all.” Although she was not interested in maintaining boarders and told the man emphatically, “I don’t want boarders!” her husband convinced Mrs. Astorin to take in the men. In contrast, Mrs. Torturo came to the decision to accept boarders on her own, against her husband’s wishes. Despite his protests, she felt that she had to do something to pull them out of their dire financial straits. But she was not keen on the work. She said, “For me it was hard. It was a job I really didn’t like. I did it because I had to do it but it wasn’t for me.”¹⁵⁹ Whether or not a woman herself decided to maintain boarders, she was not usually comfortable with the job.

Housewives with boarders in Vancouver were isolated from other women who performed similar work. In Italy, women were accustomed to working with

¹⁵⁸ M. Peluso.

¹⁵⁹ S. Torturo.

other women of their *cortile* but this option did not exist for Italian women in Canada. Because women maintained boarders in their own homes, they had little opportunity to interact with other women. Consider the following excerpt of an interview with Mrs. Torturo:

Q: How much contact did you have with other families that were keeping boarders? Did you know a lot of them?

A: Well, not really, no. Well, because all the people that had boarders were lots older than me. Maybe 8,9,10 years older than me. So I was not really close to these people. I knew them if I walked on the street and I see them I say “hi” but not really close like friends.¹⁶⁰

Other interviewees agreed with Mrs. Torturo. Few of the women I interviewed had close friends who also kept boarders in their homes.

Many women felt threatened by other women who kept boarders. Perhaps, because women regarded the boarding arrangement partly as a business, they felt that other women were potential competitors for profits. In addition to being a business, however, the boarding arrangement was an obligation to measure up to the ideal of womanhood women carried with them from Italy. Thus, women may have been competing not only for profits, but also to keep their sense of womanhood intact. The comments of Mrs. Peluso may clarify this point. She commented, “Sai, io facevo tutto per i miei bordanti. Le altre donne che tenevano bordanti non li cucivano, non li davano tanto da mangiare, non li aiutavano. Io ero l’unica. Per questo i ragazzi mi piacevano e’ ni piaceva a stare qui (You know, I did everything for my boarders. The other women who kept boarders didn’t sew for them, they didn’t give them very much to eat, they didn’t help them out. I was the only one. This is why the boys liked me and liked

¹⁶⁰ S. Torturo.

staying here).”¹⁶¹ Like Mrs. Peluso, many housewives with boarders viewed other women who did this type of work as rivals. Often in the interviews, the women spoke disdainfully of other boardinghouse keepers. Even when these women were friends, they viewed each other as competitors. Mrs. Torturo had a friend, Mrs. Schiavelli, who was a well known boarding-house keeper in Vancouver. Once when the two women were talking, Mrs. Schiavelli told Mrs. Torturo, “You’re young, you don’t have [many boarders]. Look at how many I have in here!” Mrs. Torturo countered, however. She told me,

But she had a lot of help from [her daughter] because she was a pretty big girl at that time and her mother and father helped a lot. You know, but I was just by myself with my husband. We had small kids, you know, that’s all. It was harder for me. I don’t think Gentile did the laundry too. She kept the beds clean and everything in the room clean but I don’t think she did the laundry for the guys.¹⁶²

Women who maintained boarders worked in isolation from other women who did similar work. This occurred partly because the work itself was solitary; it took place within the confines of a family home which is usually regarded as private space. Even the women of the Italian *cortile* typically worked outside the home in a common courtyard. Housewives with boarders remained isolated because they viewed other women who did this work as competitors. They did not compete for “business” so much as they felt their womanliness was being put to the test. Women who “took better care” of their boarders, cooked tastier and larger meals, and did extra work such as the laundry or mending clothes saw themselves as conforming more fully to their image of femininity than women who did not perform these other services.

¹⁶¹ M. Peluso.

¹⁶² S. Torturo.

By defining themselves as “strong ladies,” was it possible for the women in this study to ease the alienation caused by the transition from Italian peasant women to Italian immigrant housewives with boarders? Women who maintained boarders in Vancouver had had no similar experience in Italy on which to draw. In order to know how to become housewives with boarders in Vancouver, these women relied upon definitions of womanhood in Italy. Housewives with boarders, however, needed a different set of characteristics than did peasant women. Codes of “womanliness” to which northern Italian women adhered were not a good match for the circumstances that met women when they arrived in Vancouver and began taking in boarders.

In addition to being expressions of alienation, myths also aid in “persisting in alienation, even knowingly, but making it into a tale rather than criticizing it.”¹⁶³ By persisting in the myth of the “strong lady,” the women in this study could diffuse the discomfort and alienation they felt in their new society. Part of this alienation stemmed from a reversal in the nature of women’s work. Whereas much of women’s work in Italy had been performed in the company of other women in public space, housewives with boarders worked in confinement within their own homes. By defining herself as a “strong lady,” a housewife with boarders internalised the isolation she felt from other women who performed similar work. Because she had very little choice in her employment possibilities, and because to criticise her situation would entail a rejection of her “womanliness,” a woman had to turn an otherwise lonely and negative experience into one she could accept. The myth of the “strong lady” served to turn a negative situation into one which empowered women.

Enough women used the phrase “strong lady” that it can perhaps be termed a stereotype in addition to a myth. Stereotypes are metaphors which convey a

¹⁶³ Luisa Passerini, “Mythbiography in Oral History,” 50.

public image or persona. The contrast between the rebellion inferred from the phrase “strong lady” and the submissive quality of the housewife with boarders (with regard to her husband) may alert us to narrative stereotypes which don’t mirror actual behaviour but “project affirmation of identity on the symbolic plane.”¹⁶⁴ Perhaps the women had to create a public persona of being “strong” in order to compensate for the fact that they didn’t actually feel strong in their new society. Not only did the women in this study express feelings of alienation from a wider Canadian society, but they felt uncomfortable with so many men in their homes and they felt isolated from women who performed similar work. In order to “rebalance” their identities, that is, to compensate for a lack of power, women used the “strong lady” myth to affirm their positions.

The second function of the myth of the “strong lady” was to ease the tension created when the reality that met housewives with boarders did not correspond to the ideal womanly behaviour expected of them. Although the women I interviewed admitted that the work they performed as boarder-keepers was grueling, they identified themselves as “strong ladies” who were able to overcome difficult circumstances. In a way, they needed to believe in the myth of the “strong lady” in order to perform the work and become successful immigrants. Although most women’s workload eventually became unbearable and often threatened their health, they generally painted their experiences as *padrone* in a positive light. Mrs. Astorin confessed that the amount of work expected of her affected her health negatively. She stated:

Well, I was strong. Gee whiz. After, though, for a long time, after I got this nervous breakdown ... I had a hard time. I come home from the hospital, really, and I [was] not supposed to have boarders. My husband thought it would keep my mind working to have boarders, but I was weak. And I start with the boarders again...it was too much

¹⁶⁴ Passerini, “Women’s Personal Narratives,” 190.

work for me. And there I fall down again -- anemic -- I coming down lots every month...And then I go back in the hospital. I have a tough life.¹⁶⁵

Later in the interview, however, she said, “So, I was a very strong lady -- work, work, work, you know. *I never was tired really*...those days we have no radio, no television, nothing. Was just work. But we was happy. I don’t know” (italics mine). As with the self-descriptions of most of the women I interviewed, Mrs. Astorin’s testimony revealed a contradiction. She admitted that the work of maintaining boarders was physically demanding to the point of extreme exhaustion. Yet, she maintained that she was a “strong lady” and she generally painted her years as a boarder-keeper in a positive light. How do we resolve this tension?

First, we must acknowledge that women’s perspectives often combine two separate consciousnesses: one emerges out of their practical activities in the world and the other is rooted in an assumption of women’s roles in society. In other words, one is based on the “real” and the other on the “ideal.” Women, like men, are expected to conform to a gender norm. But part of what it means to be “womanly” is to submit to a social system which often does not uphold women’s interests. In order to resolve this contradiction and adapt to the society in which they live, women learn at an early age how both to conform to and oppose the conditions that limit their freedom.¹⁶⁶ Women’s oral history narratives, therefore, are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions such as those of Mrs. Astorin above. When the choices women make, that is, their experience, do not correspond with the ideal of womanhood which is expected of them, they must find some way to make sense of this tension. Women may mute their own

¹⁶⁵ A. Astorin.

¹⁶⁶ Anderson, et. al., “Beginning Where We Are,” 107.

thoughts and feelings by describing their lives in ways that outwardly conform to acceptable behaviour.¹⁶⁷ They may draw upon myths shared by others in their social group to carve out an individual identity of empowerment. Because language is limited in its ability to represent accurately women's experience, oral historians cannot be content simply to accept these contradictions. We must probe the narratives presented us to understand the tensions in women's oral testimony.

Defining oneself as a "strong lady" was clearly important for Italian housewives with boarders in Vancouver. Drawing upon this myth, women were able to reconcile their need for individual empowerment to the discomfort they felt surrounded by many male strangers in their homes. It was necessary for women to define the relationship between themselves and their boarders as a familial one to ensure their own inviolability. Women with boarders saw themselves as mothers to their boarders. In Italian peasant society, the role of "mother" was intertwined with the notion of "strength." Mothers were identified not only by their ability to nurture and care for children, but also by their ability to perform other work associated with the family's maintenance. Italian peasant women often worked alongside their husbands on the family's rented plot of land. Women in Italy were viewed as important working members of the family. Peasant women took pride in their hard work and when they immigrated to Canada, this ethic accompanied them. In the absence of peasant work in Canada, Italian women could no longer work with their husbands. Women, therefore, drew upon their strength and resourcefulness to perform other work in Canada. For some women, this work involved keeping boarders.

By recognising their own strength, housewives created a sense of "womanliness" by which they could abide. Unlike their husbands, these women

¹⁶⁷ Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen," 11.

were not able to assert their identities in the wider Canadian community. This was largely because they felt they could not speak English well enough to find work outside the home. Rather than accept their seeming inferiority, they highlighted the myth of the “strong lady” in their lives. This helped them to reconcile their weak class and gender positions within a larger community with their refusal to see themselves as victims. Using the myth of the “strong lady” helped them to rebalance their identities in new and changing circumstances. It also highlighted a positive image of the work they performed despite their discomfort with it. The myth of the “strong lady” served to empower housewives with boarders; it gave them a sense of autonomy in a situation that might have proved victimising.

The word, “myth,” usually is understood to mean a distortion of truth or, at worst, an outright lie. According to Joseph Campbell, however, myths, “are not to be judged as true or false but as effective or ineffective, maturative or pathogenic.”¹⁶⁸ My contention that the Italian women I interviewed for this study used the myth of the “strong lady” as a compensation for their lack of real strength or power in a new society does not take away from the real strength that these women possessed. Indeed, the women I interviewed *were* strong, both physically and emotionally. They would not have been able to perform the work they did had they not been so. My point, however, is that the women have clung to a collective myth of the “strong lady” to legitimise their work and to distinguish their individual identities from that of a larger group.

All this is not to deny or negate the difficulties that Italian immigrant women encountered when they came to Canada. Rather, I have attempted to use the myths in the narratives of women who kept boarders to understand how these women came to terms with their sense of alienation when their expectations of

¹⁶⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimensions of Fairy Tales, Legends, and Symbols*. (1969; reprint, New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 6.

life in Canada clashed with the realities that met them. These Italian women had lofty expectations before they immigrated. They envisioned “America” as the land of opportunity where they and their husbands could escape the struggle that characterised people’s lives in post-war Italy. The reality of immigrant women’s lives upon their arrival in Canada often clashed with their previous expectations. Women found the migration experience isolating and lonely. Many of their previous links to family and community had been severed when they came to Canada. As a result, women forged new relationships and established new identities for themselves as strong matriarchs of households of young men. Perhaps the women did not choose this role deliberately but their life story narratives demonstrate the way they shape their experiences now. Their retelling of the boarding-house experience shows us their *perceptions* of the past. It also shows a strategy they employed to make sense of the contrast between the “ideal” and the “real.”

This chapter has explored the contingent nature of womanhood by examining how female gender norms were altered by the process of immigration. I have argued that the post-war boarding arrangement among Italian immigrants in Vancouver is a window through which to view the modification of female gender definitions. Once Italian women migrated to Vancouver and began taking boarders into their homes, they had to forge new identities for themselves as “strong ladies.” The codes of womanhood which they brought with them from northern Italy were not adequate to guide them through the circumstances that greeted them in Vancouver.

In Vancouver, the nature of women’s work differed markedly from what it had been in northern Italian peasant communities. The communal space of the Italian *cortile* where women gathered to perform their daily tasks did not exist in Vancouver. Rather, some Italian women in Vancouver chose to maintain

boarders in their homes. This work confined women largely to their own homes and isolated them from other women who performed similar work. Competition among women who maintained boarders in Vancouver was not uncommon even if the women considered themselves friends. The source of this rivalry was not wholly a competition for profits. Women who maintained boarders felt threatened by other women who performed this work because their sense of “womanliness” could be challenged. In my group of informants, each woman argued that she did more work for her boarders, kept their shirts cleaner, or cooked more delicious meals than did other *padrone*. This competitive attitude likely stemmed from an internalisation of the isolation housewives with boarders felt. Because they could not criticise their new job without rejecting their own femininity, women had to draw upon a myth to help empower them in a situation in which they might otherwise have felt helpless.

IV CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the lives of eight Italian housewives with boarders in Vancouver from 1947 to 1961. I initially posed two general questions: First, why did the women choose to maintain boarders in their homes rather than enter the labour force? Second, how did ideals of Italian womanhood change for women with boarders once they arrived in Canada? In addition to these two major questions, a number of more general methodological concerns were raised. For example, how can a subjective analysis be used to reconstruct aspects of the past? How do such subjective factors as dreams, fantasies, and specifically, myths figure in our reconstructions of the past? Finally, does subjective experience have explanatory power in its own right or can it be used in historical studies only to provide corroboration to otherwise provable data?

Chapter One laid out the methodology used for this thesis, namely, oral history. I argued that perception and subjectivity are legitimate tools for the historian because the meanings people attach to events in their lives are as important as the events themselves. Historians can gain a better understanding of historical events such as immigration by looking at the subjective interpretations individuals give to them. But subjectivity, I suggest, can also be examined in its own right. Not only can personal testimony be used as corroborative evidence in otherwise “objective” historical accounts, but the study of subjectivity also allows historians to examine the connections between people’s interpretations of events and their actions. People constantly renegotiate their interpretations and act in

ways which are contingent on historical circumstances. These processes are not simply interesting for the historian but crucial to the study of history.

The first chapter also discussed Italian immigration historiography in Canada and the United States, arguing that much of the work on Italians has focused on questions of assimilation, national identity and acculturation. Most studies on Italians in North America examine only the “first wave” immigration period between approximately 1880 and 1930. This has been the case even though, in Canada at least, most Italians arrived after the second world war. In addition, Canadian studies on Italians focus mainly on Southern Italian immigrants to Central Canada despite the fact that a large percentage of northern Italians joined the post-war transatlantic migration and that British Columbia received the third highest number of Italian immigrants in Canada between 1947 and 1961.¹⁶⁹ Finally, few Italian immigration studies use gender as a category of analysis. By examining northern Italian immigrant women in post-World War Two Vancouver, the present work hopes to add a much needed dimension to Italian-Canadian immigration history.

Chapter Two of this thesis examined the factors that led some Italian women in Vancouver to take boarders into their homes rather than enter the labour force. In particular, the chapter tried to determine why women chose this type of work when the institution of boarding did not exist in Italy. I argued that four main beliefs existed in the Italian-Canadian community which made it difficult for women to work outside the home. These beliefs were that it was natural for mothers to stay home so that they could care for their children, that women should remain in the private sphere so that their “honour” could be protected, that the difficulties of learning English made it impossible for Italian

¹⁶⁹ *1961 Census of Canada: General Review*, Series 7.1, vol. VII, part 1, (Ottawa: DBS, 1961), Table IV, 7-32-3.

women to find jobs, and that Italian male newcomers to the city needed the domestic services of married Italian women.

Both housewives with boarders and their patrons knew that the boarding arrangement would be temporary. The women maintained lodgers only until their families were financially secure, their children were older, or they saw that the boarders were more settled in Canada. The boarders, on the other hand, remained in the boarding home until they married and thus no longer needed the services of the *padrona*. The temporary nature of the household with boarders made the arrangement more tolerable for the women. Because they, along with their husbands, knew the arrangement would not last forever, housewives with boarders were able to perform the work.

Chapter Two also presented a detailed examination of the institution of boarding in Vancouver from 1947 to 1961. I argued that although boarding arrangements varied from household to household, many of the rules governing boarder conduct were similar. In particular, strict rules regulated sexual behaviour within the home. Boarders were not permitted to bring their girlfriends into their bedrooms, for instance, in order to ensure that the boarding home remained a de-sexualised space. This was necessary to protect the young daughters of the boarding home. Whereas a housewife with boarders could ensure her sexual inviolability through her role as “mother” to her boarders, the woman’s daughter did not have a clearly delineated role which ensured her protection. Young girls were particularly vulnerable in the boarding home because their role in the arrangement was ambiguous. Spatial divisions within the home were therefore necessary to protect the sexuality of daughters in the home.

Finally, in the second chapter I contended that the boarding arrangement was regarded by *padrone* more as a social obligation than a profit-making

scheme. By taking in boarders, Italian women could resolve the dilemma arising from the need to contribute to the family income while remaining within the domestic sphere. Simultaneously, women could play out their prescribed identities as nurturers by meeting the needs of the male boarders who needed someone to care for them during their transition from the homes of their mothers to those of their wives.

Chapter Three of this thesis examined the ways in which ideals of “womanhood” changed for northern Italian women immigrating to Canada and becoming housewives with boarders. I suggested that definitions of “woman” are malleable. When women emigrated from northern Italy, the prescribed roles to which they had been bound were no longer completely useful in Vancouver. Female identity models had to be redefined once in Canada because social and economic conditions were different than they had been in rural northern Italy.

In northern Italy, dominant models of womanhood existed which circumscribed women’s choices. Institutions such as the Catholic Church, schools, and the family served to disseminate these notions of ideal womanhood. An ideal woman was defined in terms of her relationships with men. She was expected to subsume her own needs to those of the male head of the household. Adult women were expected to marry and bear children but also to possess physical and moral strength and to be willing to sacrifice their desires so that family goals could be achieved. Another important aspect of woman’s role was as nurturer to others besides her own family. Although alternatives to marriage and motherhood did exist, they were not often practised because the lives of women who did not marry were viewed as peripheral.

Once women immigrated to Vancouver and began to take in boarders, their identities had to be redefined to meet new circumstances. Italian women had to graft new definitions of womanhood to a mold they brought with them

from northern Italy. The women did this by expanding their notion of “motherhood” to include their boarders. Housewives with boarders exercised their maternal role in a variety of ways and this helped to ensure their sexual inviolability in a home filled with young men. In addition, “strength” assumed different meanings in Vancouver than it had assumed in Italy. Housewives with boarders had to perform onerous duties in order to fulfill their new roles. Although strength and the ability to work hard were important parts of a woman’s identity in Italy, these two features became paramount once she immigrated to Vancouver and became a boarding-house keeper.

I argued in Chapter Three that in order for women to re-balance their identities in shifting circumstances, they constructed a myth of the “strong lady.” Being a “strong lady” meant not only that a woman could work exceedingly hard but also that she worked harder than other women who took in boarders. Women constructed this image of themselves to ease their alienation from their new society, the members of their own households, and other women who performed similar work. Because housewives with boarders could not criticise their job without rejecting their own femininity, they drew upon the myth of the “strong lady” to help empower them.

Subjective analysis can be a powerful tool for historians. It becomes particularly effective when using the oral testimony of female informants. Not only can subjective analysis provide new insights about women’s experiences of themselves in their worlds, but it can reveal the constraints women face in societies where meaning and language are constructed using a male bias. This more radical function of subjective analysis allows us to understand the two levels on which women often function in the world. The first is “framed in concepts and values that reflect men’s dominant position in the culture, and [the other is] informed by the more immediate realities of a woman’s personal

experience.”¹⁷⁰ When women’s experiences do not match dominant meanings, alternative concepts to frame those experiences may not be available. Women, thus, unconsciously may mute their own feelings when discussing their lives. One of the main functions of subjective analysis for oral historians is to tap into the subjective part of women’s narratives by learning to listen to both the dominant and muted voices and also to attempt to understand the relationship between them.

Subjective analysis also has wider uses for historians in general, not only for those that study women’s experiences. Historical sources are imbued with the personal perspectives of the individuals that left them behind. In addition, historians themselves cannot shed their values and biases when they write about the past. For these reasons, all we can hope to understand about the past are the ways in which it has been represented. These “representations of pastness” are interpretive and therefore inherently subjective. History can never be “true” or “objective” because it is at best a series of representations of historic events. Therefore, rather than attempt in vain to step outside of the bounds of subjectivity, it is more useful to legitimise subjectivity as an illuminating aspect of history. History is made up of more than seemingly objective facts about events. The ways in which these events have been shaped by individual interpretation will ultimately give us a fuller picture of the past.

¹⁷⁰ Anderson and Jack, “Learning to Listen,” 11.

APPENDIX A
SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF INTERVIEWEES

A. AMALFI

Born in 1930 in the region of Lombardy, Mrs. Amalfi arrived in Vancouver in 1957 with her husband and two daughters. She began to take in boarders one year after her arrival in Vancouver and cared for up to four men in her home. She stopped maintaining boarders in 1959 when her family moved into a smaller home in a suburb of Vancouver.

A. ASTORIN

Born in 1909 in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Mrs. Astorin immigrated to Vancouver in 1947 with her husband. The Astorins opened a bakery in Vancouver's East End in the early 1950s. Mrs. Astorin and her husband had two children before Mr. Astorin was estranged from the family for several years. Because she could not run the bakery on her own, Mrs. Astorin began in 1953 to take in Italian and Yugoslavian boarders. She maintained a maximum of three boarders at one time.

V. CASOLIN

Born in 1920 in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Mrs. Casolin and her husband lived for five years in Fernie, B.C. where Mr. Casolin worked as a miner. In 1955, the family moved to Vancouver where Mrs. Casolin began to take up to nine Italian men into her rented home as boarders because Mr. Casolin could not find stable employment. Mrs. Casolin continued to take in boarders until 1969. The couple had four daughters.

L. LAROSA

Born in 1923 in the region of Trentino-Alto Adige, Mrs. Larosa immigrated to Canada in 1953 with her brother. She left Italy because she could not find employment in the city and felt tied to her family's agricultural land. She married a man from northern Italy whom she met in Vancouver. She began taking in boarders in 1955 soon after she married. She maintained up to nine boarders at one time. The couple had two children, a daughter and a son.

M. PELUSO

Born in 1918 in the province of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Mrs. Peluso immigrated to Canada in 1950 with her husband. Mrs. Peluso's father had been a migrant worker in the United States and encouraged his daughter to emigrate from Italy. Mrs. Peluso maintained a maximum of seven boarders for seven years from 1952 to 1959. The couple had a daughter and a son.

I. PADOVAN

Born in 1915 in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Mrs. Padovan immigrated to Canada in 1949 to join her fiance whom she had met when he had returned briefly to Italy to find a wife. Mrs. Padovan had been married previously but her first husband was killed during the second world war and her only child died one week after birth. Upon arriving in Vancouver, Mrs. Padovan was urged by Father Della Torre to take in boarders. She maintained up to eight men from 1952 to 1956. She did not have any children by her second husband.

A. TONETTI

Born in 1933 in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Mrs. Tonetti came to Canada in 1956 with her sister, mother and father. In Vancouver, she met and married a man from her home region in Italy. She began to take in boarders in 1957 and maintained up to six men at one time. She continued to take in boarders until 1961. She and her husband had two daughters.

S. TORTURO

Born in 1934 in the region of Trentino-Alto Adige, Mrs. Torturo immigrated to Canada in 1954. She came to Vancouver to join her older brother who had immigrated several years previous. In 1957, Mrs. Torturo married her brother's best friend and she began to take in boarders one year later. She maintained up to eight boarders until 1963. In addition, Mrs. Torturo had to care for her own six sons and one daughter.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DBS

Dominion Bureau of Statistics

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