

Maltese-American Oral History Program

Transcription of Interview with:

Grace Muscat-Harris

Date: September 9, 2012

Location: Detroit, Michigan

This interview was conducted by Marc Sanko as part of his M.A. Thesis on the Maltese community and the importance of the church to the community. Hence the focus on the Catholic Church questions. Grace Muscat-Harris is a second generation Maltese-American living in the Metro-Detroit area and is active in the community as of the 2000s-2010s.

Marc: It is kind of appropriate today because it was the big feast and church ceremony and everything [Festa Il-Vitorrija], but basically my thesis is looking at how the church impacts the community of the Maltese and what the Church has been historically, which obviously we won't get into. But what does the Church mean to you now?

Grace: "I just think its just if your Maltese you're Catholic. It's the way I was raised, I was baptized at the church they tore down here, St. Boniface which is a parking lot now. Cause I was raised here on Leverette. It was just always been a part of my up bringing and I've taken my three kids to church every Sunday. I have a kid your age, and he does the sign of the cross before every meal so obviously something stuck and that's a good thing."

M: So what does it mean?

G: "For me, its almost like therapy. Its something where I can sit back and relax and take it all in. I have my kids with me, its family time, raising my kids the right way. My husband name is Timothy and my middle name is Paula, and you know the significance of St. Paul, and every time there is a letter from Paul to Timothy I say 'Hey kids look, at that I'm writing your dad.'" They think it's kind of cute, oh yea yea yea mom!

M: So you mention that and then I'll jump around to a bunch of different questions. There is a Maltese-Australian, he is a doctor in Australia, he runs the Canterbury Historical Museum or something. He believes that the Catholic Church and the Maltese community there is used sort of as a cultural practice, more so than it is a religion. And he would do like what you said, he would take his kids to Church and hope they get the religious part out of it, but what he really hopes more than anything was that they get the cultural aspect out of it.

G: "We have the clubs to do that, so I take the kids to the club in Dearborn more than I do here...no offense Mark [Trzeciak]...I do, I always do, and then I do this. I always take them to the club and we have been to Malta before. I did say that being Maltese is like being Catholic, it's kinda separate but then again it's kinda the same."

M: Yea, I totally agree with that. You already answered "Do you think it's permanently linked our culture with religion," and I think the answer is probably yes.

G: Yea, about 95% yes.

M: The follow up to that really is, you look at Greek population, you look at Jewish population, no matter where they go they are always Orthodox or Jewish (obviously). I feel like Maltese are linked the same way. Do you feel that is a negative or a positive thing in your mind?

G: “Uhhh....I guess...I guess it would be a positive thing. I don’t know how to explain it. I know people who are Maltese that aren’t Catholic, and I wonder. But you know, people have their own minds so that’s ok too.”

M: So I guess that brings up the point of, if you are not Catholic but you celebrate these festivals today at Catholic mass, but you celebrate it as a Maltese and not a Catholic. You see it sort of as a cultural Catholicism.

G: “Yea, yea that’s true. It’s a good point, the festas are a big part of Maltese upbringing. When I went to Malta that’s when we went. For Garr? They had their feast and it was the end of August, so I was raised that way too. You know the church was right there and then the big party at the bar was across the street and that is how I was raised too.

M: Do you believe then that the Catholic Church is influential in our community here in Detroit? Do you think it play’s any role at all?

G: “I don’t think so, not as much as it does there (in Malta). I can remember...I mean this was twenty years ago, when we were there you had to go to church. But even in my family, you had to go to church. Now, I don’t know maybe because my husband is not Catholic, it’s a little harder to get them to go as much. So, I mean, when I was younger we went every Sunday. In Malta, we went every Sunday. I don’t know if it’s because like I said, him not being Catholic. But he encourages them to go. He says, “Go to church, go to church. I mean it’s one hour of week big deal.” That’s what I tell them, it’s one hour a week, so what!

M: So then would you say in your mind we use the church sort of to carry on traditions, like we use the church to...

G: “I think so; I use it as an excuse. I’ll tell them (her kids) that you’re Maltese, you have to go to Church. You have to go when I hear ‘em complaining. It is another way to get them to go, a bribe, maybe a guilt trip. I don’t know if it’s right but you know what, you are living under house so you’re gonna go. So sorry, might sound old-fashioned.

M: No it makes a lot of sense and everything you said is pretty much in line with everything I’ve been figuring.

G: Yea, once they are done and I think, like my son is having a baby and she is Catholic....