

## **Maltese-American Oral History Program**

Transcription of Interview with:

Rose (Muliatt) Mifsud

Date: June 1, 2016

Location: Farmington Hills, Michigan

I interviewed Rose Mifsud at her home in Farmington Hills, Michigan on June 1, 2016. Rose is the daughter of Maltese immigrants who came to Detroit in the 1920s. She was born in Detroit along with several of her siblings, although her eldest brother was born in Malta in 1921. In full disclosure, Rose is my maternal grandmother.

Marc: If you could start with your name and birthdate.

Rose: My name is Rose Mifsud, nee Muliatt. I was born 12-25-32 (December 12, 1932) raised in Detroit. I came from a family of four brothers, and of course my mom and dad, and one uncle. And that is all the family we had here.

M: You were the only girl correct?

R: I was the only girl. And no, I was not spoiled. [laughter]

M: Did you still have relatives back in Malta?

R: Yes, yea. I had my grandparents both sides. Aunt, another uncle from my dad's side. From my mothers side, one uncle and one aunt. But my uncle died, Uncle Vincent, Vincenzu. He died, he was in World War II. They claim from shell-shock.

M: In World War I?

R: World War I.

M: My aunt moved to, well probably got deported, back to Italy and raised her two kids. She was a school teacher. Her name was Lilly, and she raised John and Mariu Giumarra. I think they were in a boarding school, because they always had a uniform on. We had pictures of them. That was on my mother's side. ON my dad's side we had another uncle, well Francis, Ziju Franz. My grandmothers name was Manuni and his sisters name, my dad's sisters name was Carmena. And she was, I don't know, crippled in some way and she had to live in with the nuns as they got older. They say she lived with the nuns. Probably equivalent to our convalesce homes. My Uncle Vincent who lived here supported here, sent money all the time to take care of her. My dad never went back to Malta.

M: Never once?

R: No. Never went back, just worked his life away for the family.

M: Did he ever suggest that he wanted to?

R: My dad was a very selfless man, very selfless.

Madalyn Beteag (Rose's daughter): Much like you.

R: My mom and my Uncle Vincent, my oldest brother Lorry, my brother Junior and myself, we went to Malta. When I was about four or five.

M: Do you remember anything from Malta?

R: Well, I was pretty sick in Malta. I couldn't take the climate. But I do remember there was a picture in the park, with palm trees, with my uncle, my brother junior and myself. I remember my grandfather was quite tall. Believe it or not. He was the band maestro, Giovanni Giumarra. And my grandmother, on my mother's side, was Rose – Rosa, and she was tiny. What a contrast! But I remember him standing on the balcony in his white uniform, I do vividly remember that. A very good looking man. Very good looking. We couldn't stay long because of my illness. The doctor was straight forward, they thought I had leprosy. The doctor was very straightforward with my mother. He said "I guarantee you, get on the next ship and by the time you leave port she will start healing." That is what happened. That had to be, maybe June or July. I'm not sure on the dates. And I think my grandfather, my mother's father, died that December.

M: Do you remember what part of Malta you visited?

R: I think they said they came from Birgu...Valletta! They came from Valletta.

M: So you probably visited them there?

R: Yea.

M: Do you remember the ships and the journey across?

R: No but there is a pictures somewhere. Oh, my...uncle Lorry [I believe she meant her brother – my great uncle] was like 17 at the time and they did have a movie showing and you could see us all sitting on chairs on the ship watching a movie. But as far as remembering, no I don't remember much about the ship.

M: Still very young?

R: Yea I was.

M: When did your dad come to the United States?

R: My dad came to the United States...well Lorry was born in 1919. Somewhere after his birth between '19 and '20 he came. Because my brother turned seven on Ellis Island. That is how long it took for them to be able to come here.

M: And your father, what was his job in Malta?

R: He worked in the dockyard as an electrical engineer. That is how he got to come to America. Because he was guaranteed a job.

M: Working with?

R: Well at the time Fords.

M: And then Chrysler?

R: Yes, then Chrysler.

M: So then he obviously sent for your mom and Lorry. I know this, but your mom is not Maltese.

R: No she is Italian.

M: Right and when I was talking with Gerry DeMarco he was mentioning that she actually came to Malta because of an eruption in Sicily on Mt. Etna.

R: Oh see that I do not know.

M: Yea, he told me that they were refugees to Malta because their homes were destroyed by the volcano.

R: Ah, I see. You know what I'm learning here too Marc! My mom and dad were very quiet, they didn't speak much about their life. Not too much, we don't really know. Maybe it was too painful, I don't know.

M: Perhaps. Especially if, well your father never went back.

R: No he never went back, and I tell you something, it never dawned on me until I was in my thirties. We were living here and they used to come over every Sunday and *Going My Way* was on with Bing Crosby. I don't know if you are familiar with the movie. They bring his Irish mother over from Ireland and she is old. My dad cried like a baby. And it took that many years for me to realize, "My god, this man was in his early twenties, if, and never saw his parents again."

M: That's heartbreak.

R: Oh it is heartbreaking. And a lot of it wasn't easy to live in the land of plenty.

M: So being born in '32 you grew up in the Great Depression.

R: I did

M: What was that sort of like? Do you have any memories of victory gardens or...?

R: My dad always worked, because of his profession. He always worked, so we never really lacked. We never had a lot of everything but we weren't depressed. Matter of fact, my mom and dad would other people who didn't have jobs. The jobs were not there. My dad did work. I remember one time an Irish lady reprimanded my mother. It is kinda funny because you know they like to dress up their kids and she bought the boys a suit for Easter. And this Irish lady said, "How can you think of buying a suit when people are starving?" You know? Not knowing that they are helping people also, their friends that didn't have anything. But this poor lady was very, very poor. Very poor.

...We ourselves were not depressed. We didn't have to scrounge for food you know, and my mom and dad fed people. Every Sunday somebody else coming over or what you know. And maybe some of the bitterness comes from people that did have large families and possibly still gave to the Church fund when they needed it for their table. That was some of their mentality. And Maltese people, as I understand it, said so often, they willed stuff to the Churches in Malta, gold, before the family and so much goes to the Church. Maybe all of it.

M: A long tradition that they maybe bring over with them?

R: But that is simply fear Marc. That is fear. That I will not make it to Heaven without. And I do not believe God works that way. And there is only one God, he is with us all.

M: Alright, so we stopped for lunch and we were talking about the Great Depression and your family being fairly, well your dad still being able to keep a job. Did your mom take in any work? Laundry or sewing?

R: No. No.

M: And at home, did you guys speak in only Maltese to each other?

R: I think we spoke both languages [Maltese and English]. But we did speak Maltese, we all did. I guess we must of spoke English too. Well a child is like a sponge, you're going to pick it up you don't have to teach them. And then you go to school or you have friends that are not Maltese and you are learning at the same time.

M: And where did you live in Detroit?

R: We lived on Abbott St when I was born. I believe they might have lived on Labrosse when they first came here.

M: Do you remember the address of the street you grew up on?

R: Yes! 1658 August. Cherry 9270. That was our first phone number.

M: What is it?

R: Cherry 9270.

M: So what is the word in front?

R: Cherry. It was CH – 9270 until the area got bigger. We got a phone early because my brother was in the war. So we had one of those you pick up like this with the ear piece by your ear. Then people became more affluent after and everybody had a phone then. It became Woodward. The number was Woodward 3-9270.

M: So when you called the operator would you have to say Woodward?

R: No you dialed it.

M: So you would dial Woodward?

R: We had a dial, a circular dial. W-O-.

M: Wow, I didn't know that was how it worked! So then who were your sort of neighbors growing up?

R: Yea, there were the Zarb's, they were Maltese. The Felice's. And next door to us was the Cortis's. They had a very large family. Had this HUGE Victorian next door. A true Victorian with a wraparound porch. They had a lot of kids.

M: You all got along very well?

R: Oh yea. It was nice. It was nice.

M: Did your parents own that home in Corktown or were they renting it?

R: First they rented a smaller house on Abbott Street, they rented it. Then this house, because the family grew, was a two-story and I believe they paid \$2,000 for it.

M: Man that would be a great price for a house.

R: Then they added on a kitchen. We had, there was a kitchen but my mother turned it into a dining room. Then there was a huge, huge kitchen and my uncle and his friends actually dug out a basement under that kitchen. Maltese people work hard, but that kitchen was huge. Huge.

M: Did your mother love to cook?

R: Oh yea, she was a good cook yea.

M: So it was probably a dream kitchen for her.

R: The table was smack in the middle of the room. That is how big it was.

M: Well you mentioned the war, and I know the answer to this and we sort have talked about this in previous interviews, but you had several brothers that were part of the war right?

R: Yes, Uncle Lorry who volunteered, enlisted right after Pearl Harbor. My brother Paul did graduate from St. Vincent's and was enlisted in the Navy. Or did he join too? He must have joined because...well Uncle John was only 17 and he quit school in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and he joined up.

M: So he didn't finish but the other two did.

R: He later finished and graduated college. But umm, he was only 17 years old. And I think he might, not quite turned 18 when he was on an amphibian ship going to the South Pacific. Actually landed on Leyte Island where Uncle Lorry was killed. He went to the grave site. The war ended while he was onboard ship. Thank god, because he was on amphibian and they push those things down [the doors] and you're out. They don't have much of a chance.

M: A friend of mine was saying the other day, they weren't designed very well.

R: They didn't have much a chance once you start jumping in that water. But thank God it worked out ok.

M: So on the Homefront...so you would have been about 10-early teens during the war. Did the community come together to donate clothes for the soldiers overseas or other things?

R: Yea 12, yea. There was a lot of morale in World War II. There was a lot of morale. And people, even when you saw a telegraph carrier coming you knew it was bad news. And everybody would come over. Everybody supported each other and send meals.

M: Do you remember any Maltese functions or Maltese club that might of...

R: You know that's a funny question Marc. You know Uncle John and Uncle Paul married two sisters, Rose and Evelyn Tuma. My mom and dad, never went to the club! My uncle used to go to get pastizzi, but my mom and dad never went to the club to the dances or anything. And then Stella and Tony they'd go and they'd go to the dances. And I was just talking about that to Auntie Rose how they used to go. We never went. We never went.

M: But you knew there was a club?

R: Oh yea, oh yea.

M: Do you remember them doing things like clothes drives for Malta during the war?

R: Yup. Oh yea.

M: Did they ask like the women to..?

R: Yup, and my uncle used to send a lot personally.

M: Back to the relatives back home?

R: Oh yea, and they were so proud. They would take pictures with the outfits on. You know, they had it rough in Malta. They had it pretty rough, they are pretty tough people. Having to go live underground like that. I can't imagine it.

M: Did your mom and dad, I think I know the answer to this, but I'll ask anyway. Did they ever apply for their American citizenship?

R: My dad was an American citizen. [Laughter] My mother, she didn't want to be. But one day she said ok, and this was after they left Detroit they were living in Redford because I remember Aunt Madalyn used to go and help her read the words. And she knew everything. Should I say it?? So they take her down there and they take her in and pretty soon she comes back out and she said "I'm not going to be a citizen." The first thing they asked her was, "Have you ever been a prostitute?" She probably said, "I'm out of here." She didn't go through with it. My dad used to have to put in an application every year for her as an alien. Oh yea. Can you imagine my poor dad at war time?

M: Oh gosh, with an Italian wife.

R: Right! By the grace of God the war didn't come to this land. But who knows my dad might have been worried about that. In retrospect now, I think about that stuff and its funny of course but I don't think it was funny to him. Every year, fill out a form, she would sign it and that was good enough.

M: And you said before that she really wanted you kids to learn Italian too.

R: Oh yea, she definitely did. She liked to read and she loved the opera. She wanted us to appreciate, become intelligent I guess. And she, poor thing, she would try to teach us and sit us down and try to teach us but if Uncle Paul started to laugh that's it we all laughed. She finally gave up. But Uncle Lorry would speak Italian, and Maltese. But then, he grew up with it, he was seven when he came here.

M: So he could speak three languages fairly well when he got here. I assume English being the third he could speak.

R: Yea. I asked my sister-in-law Rose a couple of months ago 'cause you know how things dawn on you. I said, "Did Lorry have an accent?" She said "A little bit, yea he did."

M: I suppose yea, if you were young you would have thought that was normal.

R: Yea, although I've been told that sometimes I have an accent.

M: So where did you end up going to school?

R: We went to Holy Trinity. From first to eighth grade. They used to have a high school years and years before but they condemned it. I guess it was third and fourth floor. There was a big theatre up there too. One time we snuck up and looked at it, it was huge! Anyways, then we went to St. Vincent's.

M: When did you graduate then?

R: 1950

M: Did you work after that?

R: Yes I worked at Hudson's.

M: What was your job there?

R: Secretarial.

M: How long were you there?

R: Umm, I got married in 1953, and Madalyn was born in '54. So, of course I quit before, about three and a half years.

M: Now you have told this story, and it's a good one, about your job in the Thanksgiving Day parade.

R: Oh yea, the penguin! [laughter] Yea, yea. I was talked into going because they paid you time and a half. Yes, I was a penguin in the Thanksgiving Day parade.

M: Do you remember what year?

R: Oh yea, it would have been '53. No....yes, it had to be. Or maybe it was '52. No I think it was '53 because grandpa drove me down there. We used to have to go to the warehouse. Hudson's warehouse. I wouldn't even begin to know where it is and that is where you go to get all your clothes and all the floats. Of course, it wasn't as, it was big but it wasn't as big as it is today. And they were all employees of Hudson's.

M: And did your dad ever say anything about you working? Being his only daughter?

R: Oh yea, I could have had a job at Chryslers.

M: Oh so he wanted you to work?

R: Oh I could work, but he said stay home with your mother. I could have had a great job at Chryslers. I passed the test and everything but he said you're not going.

M: To also do secretary type work?



R: Yea, and you can make good money in the factories. Twice as much as at Hudson's. "No you're not going, got to walk through the factory to get to the office. Stay home with your mother." So I did for a couple of months, but I thought I got to do something. All my friends were working so I went to work at Hudson's and that he was ok with.

M: Do you think it was, he was at Chrysler at this time, do you think it was because he knew the type of men that work there?

R: Right, if you have to walk through the factory he didn't want his daughter subjected to it.

M: So Hudson's, retail. That's ok.

R: Yea, that's ok you don't have to walk through the factory.

M: And how would you get to Hudson's?

R: We would take a bus. We would walk down Abbott and there was Trumbull. We would pass 11<sup>th</sup> street and then the next was Trumbull and we could catch the bus there. [laughter] Most of the time I called a cab. [laughter] Because I was always late. They would say, "Here comes the banker." I wouldn't get there until 10.

M: What time were you supposed to start?

R: 9! That's funny, we were talking about that the other day and Madalyn said, "Did they ever say anything to you?" I said, no they didn't. I was a good worker. I guess so, they were nice bosses yes.

M: And Hudson's I hear was very beautiful.

R: Oh my god, it was the place to shop. And if Uncle Paul was here he would tell you that Hudson was the demise of Detroit. When they built Northland and then Westland and Southland and Eastland and people started moving to the suburbs.

M: Downtown was at one point gorgeous.

R: It was, everything you wanted! It was everything you would ever want on Woodward Avenue, from high price to low price to in-between. People in the Statler were there and the Book Cadillac on West Grand Boulevard and people would come in from the suburbs or say Flint or someplace where they would have to take a train or a long ride and they would stay at the Statler or the Book Cadillac and go shopping.

M: So hard to imagine that today.

R: Oh Marc, it was beautiful. It was just gorgeous. And you never got on a self-served elevator I tell you that much. Floor please. It was opulent, very opulent. Oh the train station, yea. Although I understand they are putting in new windows.

M: That is what I heard.

R: That train station, it was all marble. Oh man.

M: Do you remember picking people up from there?

R: Oh yea, that is where everybody well all the soldiers came from. We'd picked up Lorry there. And Jerry and Geraldine when they first got here, they came there. I remember I worked at Hudson's at the time and I had to take the morning off because my mom didn't drive and my dad went to work so I got a cab and went to pick them up. Geraldine was so young. She was, I think she was a year younger than I am. Jerry was like ten years older, maybe twelve. So she, poor thing it was hard on her.

M: They came and they immediately lived in the States right? Detroit right?

R: Oh yea.

M: I know he said he was in Windsor for a while.

R: He was in Windsor, then before that he was close to Toronto some place. Kitchener, Bromley? Brumley or something? I'm not sure. But then they went to Windsor. He was in Windsor for a long time. They would come over every Sunday for dinner. Him and his friends, men friends. And there was one time, it was so funny. When my mother cooked spaghetti she always broke them and he said "Oh! You just ruined the spaghetti! It's supposed to be long!" Oh, just funny things like that. Yea but they came over all the time.

M: A lot of them worked in the auto factories and stuff like that?

R: Yea.

M: And I guess about you. When did you met grandpa [John Mifsud]?

R: Well I think we always knew each other. I went to school with his brother Wally. And grandpa of course was a twin, he was four years older so I didn't really meet him in school. How did I met him? Probably at the lake. Everybody used to come to the lake and hang around Leverette and Church Street. Hmm...and how we started to go out? I don't even remember. He asked me out I guess. I was a friend of Auntie Marge's too. So we all hung out together you know.

M: This was your parent's cabin or lake house out near Walled Lake, Commerce?

R: Near Round Lake, it is in Commerce yea.

M: There is a picture I saw of grandpa when he was younger. I wonder if that was there.

R: Maybe! What was he doing?

M: Just sitting on a log, next to a lake. He looked like he was maybe in his mid-twenties or so. I'll have to show it to you, I'm sure it's in the basement here. And then you guys got married in '53.

R: Yes, '53.

M: And he went to Korea right?

R: Yes, he went to Korea.

M: So you must have got married after he got back.

R: Yea, after he got back yea.

M: So did you all live in Detroit being married or did you immediately move to the suburbs?

R: No, no we lived in Detroit, we actually lived with his mom first until she sold the house and then we moved everything and went to live with my mom and dad. Until we moved to Westland, about a year. Well Uncle Marty was about a year old when we moved there. Because we had Marty when we lived on Abbott, Madalyn and Marty. They are both baptized at Holy Trinity. Your mom is baptized at St. Damion's.

M: So you would have moved to Westland in...?

R: '54. No, '56.

M: And what did grandpa do for work?

R: He was an electrician. Oh your grandpa! He was a clerk at umm...what is that place on Middlebelt? I'm losing my mind Marc! Getting old! I think it belonged to Chryslers.

M: So growing up, you obviously grew up with lots of kids of ethnic descent. Was there any hostility that you experienced being the daughter of immigrants?

R: No, no there was no hostility. I think when the old-timers first came there was prejudice but then there were to the Irish and everybody else. You know, we are not Anglo-Saxon's all of us.

M: I imagine especially after the war too. I assume you remember the riots in Detroit in the '60s.

R: Yes I do, but we were living in Westland at the time. Actually there used to be tanks going down Middlebelt Road. Just to keep us from going to Detroit I think, or to try and keep them out of the suburbs.

M: Did your parents still live downtown?

R: No I think at the time they lived in Redford.

M: And there were also apparently riots during the war.

R: You know, there probably was. We personally never were affected by it other than hearing about it and that is very sad to hear. We had black people in our neighborhood. They didn't bother us. They were nice people. Because we really didn't live that far from skid row, seriously. But everyone seemed to live in harmony nobody bothered anybody. Why the riots were, I don't know. I don't know. I guess there are hateful people all the time.

M: Someone always feels injustice somewhere.

R: Well it has to be fed. To be that bad, it has to be fed to you. You aren't born to hate.

M: Certainly not. Now did you guys, you and grandpa, try to teach your kids Maltese?

R: Oh yea, we would and they did catch on to some few things because my mom and dad were still alive and they would come over all the time. They lived just down the road. So they picked up a lot, especially Madalyn because I would talk to my parents in Maltese. They learned yea. And then they wanted to learn and they would write phonetically, you know not the proper way because I can't even do that. You know, "How do you say, plate or glass." And they would write it down phonetically, and they would learn that way. We did it with you guys too!

M: Really? Hmm maybe I do remember some of that. And you guys still hung out with Maltese couples?

R: Yea. We did. They had all Maltese friends. Some were not, some were Irish, Scottish and of course on Leverette it was different. There were a lot of Maltese but there also a lot of Irish and Scottish. They all lived in harmony. And then of course when you go to school you meet all kinds of nationalities.

M: When I was talking to the DeBrincat's, Chuck and Mary, they mentioned they used to take couple retreat vacations with you and grandpa would be part of that and live the kids at home.

R: Oh my God yes, we would go away and we had so much fun. So much fun! If you have to think back to some of the things we did, they would have to put us away. We did have a lot of fun. We had a nice group, a very nice group of friends. No hostilities, no jealousy's, everybody got along. Laughing all the time. Laughing all the time.

M: Where would you guys go?

R: We went several times. There's a place, there was a place in Ohio. Lorain, Ohio. It was like a resort. They had a small golf course, they had swimming pools inside and outside, dances every night. They had everything pool tables. Whatever you wanted they had there. I forget what it's called, Avon-on-the-Lake! I wonder if it's still there. And the dancefloor was wooden, the real wooden with the spring to it. So as soon as the drum started playing you felt it because it would vibrate off the floor. That is where we went the most, we went other places but never too far from home. Because everyone had to get home!

M: So my last question, did you and grandpa ever go to the Maltese club?

R: No we never did. We never did.

M: It is interesting to see that. There were some people that never did.

R: You know in our age group, I think they kind of got away from the Maltese club because everyone was moving away and going places. The only time we would get together like in big groups was like New Year's Eve and go downtown like Knights of Columbus. They had a big hall. Yea, we had a good life. I always say, as bad as it was I would do it all over again. Then I would know you still!