

HARD TIMES DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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(1) Since I was a child I can remember my father saying, "You should have starved like I did when I was a kid," whenever I took for granted the luxuries of being in a well-off American family. His words, repeated often, remained virtually meaningless to me until recently when we discussed his childhood. He remembers the hard times his family experienced during the Great Depression, being Italian and living in Chicago, even though he was a young child at the time.

(2) My father, born in the United States in 1923, was six years old when the depression began. His father was a successful sculptor who had come to Chicago from Italy in 1920 with his wife and daughter. My father also had older and younger brothers, both born in the United States. The family planned to go back to Italy as soon as my grandfather finished his latest sculpting job in the Chicago Theater. From his previous job in the well-known Paradise Theater, he had quite a bit of money in the bank.

(3) During November and December of 1929, (after reading in the Italian newspaper about the United States' bad economy) my grandmother kept urging my grandfather to withdraw his savings of \$180,000 from the bank. However, my grandfather resisted, believing that if the businessmen were not worrying, he should not worry. In late December, having finished his work, my grandfather went to the bank to withdraw his savings. When the bank clerk saw the withdrawal slip, he immediately brought it to the bank president. The president took my grandfather to lunch and deceitfully persuaded him that the banks were very stable and that he should not withdraw the money just then. The next day the banks closed.

(4) My grandfather's money was invested in second mortgages, leaving him property that he could claim. For his \$180,000, he had the choice of receiving from the government a nice piece of property with a home and a small store or the sum of \$7,000. Because he had no money to support the property, he was forced to take the small sum of money from the government.

(5) Things went from bad to worse for my father's family. In February, 1930, they were forced to move from their nice home to a cheaper apartment in a lower-class neighborhood. In 1932 my grandmother passed away, leaving my grandfather to care for the four children. Worse yet, my grandfather had not worked since January of

1930, since he refused to take any other job than sculpting. He often sat alone in his room, very unhappy, smoking a cigar, and sculpting small pieces of art.

(6) My father's family was forced to eat sparingly because their money was very limited. My father said, "Boy, I knew exactly what it meant to starve." He described meals consisting of watery soup, stale bread, and a little milk. Sometimes the family went for nine or ten months without any meat. At one point during the interview, my father stared, absorbed in a memory, and said, "I was so hungry sometimes . . ." He went on to tell of working in a cafeteria when he was a teenager and of being so hungry that he ate leftover scraps off the plates.

(7) Their money supply dwindled again, and in 1934 my father's family was forced to move to an even cheaper residence, this time to a one-room attic with barely enough room for five people. And again, in 1937, they moved to a cheaper room in a dumpy Italian community. My father experienced a lot of conflict with Italian gangs in the neighborhood who started fights with him because he was one of the only Italian boys in the neighborhood attending school. He claimed, "I had to fight those bums to stay alive--four, maybe five times in one week."

(8) My father began working when he was thirteen years old. His clothing was old and torn, and his father could not afford to buy him new things, so he worked for his own money. Every day before school he woke at 5:00 A.M. to start his newspaper route and worked until school began. When he was laid off, he luckily found another job with the milkman. For this job he started working at 2:00 A.M. and was paid \$.50 a day for sometimes up to twelve hours of work. He went to school then, after working all night long.

(9) My dad thought that, in general, immigrants were treated badly. He mentioned that the blacks were treated worst of all, getting no respect from the majority of the people. Because he was Italian, my dad too was often forced to deal with disrespect and prejudice. He said that getting a job was sometimes difficult: "If you were Italian, you were no good. They [employers] would look at you and say 'dumb Dago'."

(10) I asked my dad about the small odd jobs that people did, such as selling apples. He smiled and replied, "Things were so bad that people would do anything for a buck." Some women on his block sold baked goods or did laundry for people who could afford to pay them. My dad used to melt lead that he found in the garbage, put it into a mold of a toy soldier, paint it, and sell it on the street.

(11) For those who were really having a difficult time surviving during the Depression, the government offered aid through Relief programs. My father said that quite a few families in his neighborhood received the benefits of Relief. He often saw the Relief truck stop by certain houses and deliver food and goods, but his father had too much pride to request government aid, even though the family needed it.

(12) To my grandfather, keeping his pride through the hard times was very important, much like the migrants in The Grapes of Wrath. For example, in one part of the novel, a migrant woman in one of the government camps refused to let her children take food from the Joad family, just as my grandfather would not take any government aid. In both cases, they managed with what little they had, even if it meant their families had to suffer. The pride of the tenant farmer in his land was like my grandfather's pride in his art work. Their work was their pride; and when it was gone, part of their lives was gone.

(13) My father was very positive about Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. He felt that Roosevelt really had compassion for the poor and that, at the time, he was exactly what the country needed. Roosevelt set up the New Deal program to help get back some of the pride that the Depression had taken away from so many people. My dad claimed, "It wasn't how much money they [the people] made, but the fact of having a job that gave a man his pride back. The Roosevelt Administration gave pride, not money."

(14) The full impact of the Depression did not really affect me until I heard my father's story and pieced it together with what I have learned in our Freshman Seminar. Reading documents and selected novels has given me facts and stories to build a basic understanding of life during the Depression. But the interview with my father showed me real picture of starvation, hard work, racial discrimination, and despair of the oppressed lifestyle during the Depression.