

EXPLORING MYTHS IN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

*Italian and German Immigrant Women
in Vancouver, 1947-1961**

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ONE OF THE MAIN objectives of this paper is to challenge the existing dichotomy in historical writing between objective and subjective experiences. By subjectivity we mean people's dreams, fantasies, desires, hopes, expectations, fears, anxieties, and emotions. Until recently, historians have concerned themselves with amassing facts about past realities. The underlying claim has been that historians can reconstruct the past in an objective, and therefore true, way. Such an approach obscures the fact that people's perceptions of reality are in fact all we can recover of the past. For this reason, Elizabeth Tonkin refers to history as the "representations of pastness."¹ In order to examine these perceptions, we must pay attention to the ways in which they are articulated. By analysing how historical actors make sense of the events they experienced, we can gain a fuller portrait of how history is shaped both by events and emotions.

Historians' quest for Truth has led them to argue that myths are false and, therefore, negligible representations of the past. But myths, both in content and form, shape people's perceptions of reality. Myths, then, are just as real and true as are ostensibly objective accounts of the past. By looking at the form and content of myths, we can uncover people's subjectivity and the roles that subjectivity has played in history. In order to re-introduce subjectivity as a significant force, historians must collapse the distinction between history and myth, and treat myth as an integral part of history.

* This study is based on the research done for our M.A. theses. Laura Quilici, "I Was A Strong Lady: Italian Housewives with Borders in Vancouver, 1947-61," M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995 and Alexander Freund, "Identity in Immigration: Self-Conceptualization and Myth in the Narratives of German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, B.C., 1950-1960," M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1994.

¹ 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.

This paper is based on interviews we conducted with ten German and eight Italian women who immigrated to Vancouver between 1947 and 1957. When we listened to the tapes and re-read the transcripts of the interviews, we paid close attention to how the women shaped their stories. This alerted us to how they saw themselves in relation to the world around them. People recount their life stories using familiar narrative forms such as anecdotes, jokes, gossip, and myths. These ways of retelling are clues to the meanings narrators ascribe to their life experiences. For example, if the teller sees herself as overcoming great obstacles to achieve her current class status, she may portray herself as the heroic figure in an epic life. The metaphorical monster could be a cruel or demanding boss. Focusing on the relationship among the myths that the teller uses to frame her own life does not negate her struggle or take away from the veracity of her story. Rather, it shows how people use myths as strategies to cope with their everyday struggles.

Myths are stories that gain veracity through their continual retelling and not through factual evidence. For example, countless stories of successful immigrants constructed a myth of America as the land of golden opportunity. But living and working conditions for most new settlers actually deteriorated before they improved. Thus, the myth was based on stories that were to a large degree exaggerated or fictitious. These stories of successful immigrants were re-told in so many versions that people did not question the stories' authenticity. The truth of these stories seemed to be self-evident. According to Luisa Passerini, historians can use myths if we understand them as "expressions of alienation." At the same time, myths allow people to persist in alienation, even knowingly. They allow people to make exploitation and oppression into a tale rather than criticizing them.²

The tools offered by literary criticism, psychology, and psychoanalysis can help to identify the narrative forms such as myths in the construction of identity. As historians, however, we must place this identity construction into its larger historical context. What power structures are forged, reinforced, or contested through individual identity? When a woman, for example, uses the myth of "the martyr" to explain her consent to an exploitative job, she masks the unequal relationship between herself and her employer. This tacit consent is one of the options open to her. Conversely, a woman might draw upon the myth of "the hero" to legitimate her participation in a strike and thus resist her exploitation.

² Luisa Passerini, "Mythbiography in Oral History," in Samuel and Thompson, *Myths We Live By*, 50.

This paper will present two case studies which centre around the working lives of German immigrant domestic servants and Italian immigrant housewives with boarders in post-World War II Vancouver. In the past decade, immigration historians have increasingly investigated the roles and experiences of immigrant women. Studies by Varpu Lindström-Best, Franca Iacovetta, Ruth Frager, and Frances Swyripa³ among others have revised an older picture of women as passive participants in migration and settlement. These studies support our own findings that immigrant women played active roles in the migration process. The focus of our study, however, is not on these roles; instead it explores how women made sense of their immigration experiences.

One of the best ways to understand the subjective experiences of German and Italian immigrant women is through their oral testimonies. Oral narratives are one of the few sources which give us information not only *about* the informants but *by* them. In order to allow the women to shape their own stories, our interview questions were loosely structured and open-ended. This technique enabled the women to weave their narratives around their own experiences. In this way, we could investigate the ways in which feelings and emotions, desires and dreams, fears and anxieties shape and make history. Let us now turn to the case studies themselves.

CASE STUDY ONE

IMMIGRANTS OR MAIDS? (RE-)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES AND NEGOTIATING POWER IN CANADIAN HOUSEHOLDS

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During the 1950s, every fifth German immigrant woman to Canada came with the intention of working as a live-in maid in a Canadian

³ Varpu Lindström-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); Ruth A. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Frances Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Unlike ours, none of these studies focuses on postwar migration to British Columbia.

household.⁴ In 1993, I interviewed ten of these German women.⁵ All of them had immigrated as single women and often by themselves (a few had come with a girlfriend or a relative). They were between twenty and thirty years old upon arrival in Vancouver, where they worked in domestic service as their first job.

For the last 300 years, domestic service has been the major way to gain entry into Canada for young, single women without children.⁶ The history of immigrant domestic servants in Canada is well researched for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ For the post-World War II period, Franca Iacovetta has documented the Canadian government's attempt to contract Italian women as maids, while Milda Danys has examined the experiences of Lithuanian displaced persons working as domestic servants in Canada.⁸

As in most immigration historiography, this study is based on oral history. It proved to be the main method to obtain information about German immigrant women. The women's narratives, however, tell us not only about events in the women's lives and their actions and

⁴ Between 1951 and 1961, some 250,000 German women and men (in equal numbers) immigrated to Canada; 25,000 of the German women stated domestic service as their intended occupation. They made up almost one-third of all (80,000) immigrant domestics to Canada in the 1950s (the next largest group were the 18,000 women who came from Italy). While approximately 10 per cent of all German immigrants to Canada came directly to British Columbia (the majority of them going into the cities), only 6.5 per cent of all domestics came to B.C. There are no numbers of German domestic servants coming to British Columbia, but a likely estimate would range from 6.5 to 10 per cent of all German domestics (about 1,600 to 2,500). Factors influencing this estimate are immigration policies and practices (at times, the Dept. of Immigration and the Dept. of Labour tried to keep the majority of domestic workers in Ontario and Quebec) as well as sponsorship activity of the ethnic group (there are no statistics on how many of all immigrants to Canada were sponsored by relatives residing in Canada). Canada, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, *Immigration Statistics 1951-1961*; "Immigrants to Canada by ethnic origin and intended occupation" (Ottawa: Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, Statistics Section, 1951-1961).

⁵ I contacted the women through short notices in British Columbia newspapers and by visiting services of two German-Canadian churches in Vancouver.

⁶ Marilyn Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, Canada's Ethnic Groups (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991), 3.

⁷ For a brief overview, see Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants*. For the history of British immigrant domestic servants, see Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestics for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," in Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977); for an insightful study of domestic servants from Finland, see Lindström-Best, *Defiant Sisters*; for a Marxist analysis, see Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in Janice Acton et al., eds., *Women at Work, Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974).

⁸ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 20-51 and 77-102; while looking at the few hundred women who came via the (unsuccessful) contract route, Iacovetta does not account for the 18,000 Italian women who came to Canada stating domestic service as their intended occupation; see also Milda Danys, *DP: Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986).

behaviour as such but, more importantly, about the meanings the women ascribed to them. In giving meanings to their experiences, the women constructed and negotiated their identities as much as the relationships of power in which they were positioned. As mentioned in the introduction, examining the *forms* by which the women ascribed specific meanings to domestic service illuminates how they perceived themselves in relation to the world around them. In other words, it seems important to contextualize narratives and not take them at face value.

Myth and Identity

I started each interview with the same open-ended question: "Please, tell me about your life from your decision to leave Germany until your marriage in Canada." Some women answered briefly, while others began to weave narratives up to three hours long. It was in the women's descriptions of their ideas about immigration and of their experiences as maids that I began to notice a break in the structures of their narratives: the women had associated adventure, freedom, travel, and independence with immigration; this image of immigration, however, clashed with the reality of life and work as a maid in a Canadian household.

The women had left Germany for many reasons. Some had been displaced from their homes in the former Eastern German Territories and had come to feel "homeless" (*heimatlos*) in the western part of Germany; others had lost or had trouble with their families; some emigrated in the hope of advancing economically and/or of finding a husband. It was, however, the search for adventure and freedom that the German women mentioned most often when explaining why they emigrated. The women were inspired and motivated by the success stories of other immigrants, which they heard at their workplaces or in their families, or which they read in newspapers or adventure stories. While this search for adventure and freedom might also be seen as a reaction to the restoration of traditional values and confinement of women to the home in postwar Germany, they had come to associate emigration with adventure, freedom, travel, and independence. This motivated the women to make a decision that involved many risks: they left behind family and friends, quit jobs and apartments, and abandoned a familiar culture and society. The women were willing to take these risks in order to fulfil their dreams.⁹ Heidi Schute was

⁹ A comparison of the reasons for e/immigration among Italian, Lithuanian, and German women is problematic. Iacovetta focused on married women, but has shown that the decision

twenty-nine years old when she left her German hometown. She recounted:

I was always fascinated by travel and wanting to go to foreign countries. I had made an attempt once to emigrate to the States and there were too many restrictions and it was too difficult; and once in my really younger years, under Hitler, I wanted to go to Africa, to the colonies, the German colonies they had at the time. But then I wasn't old enough and you had to go to a very strict school. . . .

I wanted to go and see the world, and that was my first step to do that. I was going to work till I had enough money to buy a car and then pack things up and go and travel to South America, to — I wanted to see the whole world and that was just it. And Canada opened the door for me as a good starting point.¹⁰

Other women imagined their immigration as the start of a glamorous career as a designer, as the beginning of their own successful pottery shop, or as the continuation of a successful career as a technician. Leaving Germany, they hoped, would mean to be free to do whatever they wanted to do: free from the depressing ruins of postwar Germany; free from the stresses and pressures of conflict-ridden families; free from the memories of war and Nazism, spatial and emotional displacement, and loss of loved ones; and free from a society that continued to prescribe home and marriage as the only places of fulfilment for women.

Of the women interviewed for this study, about half chose Vancouver as their final destination in Canada because it seemed to be the place where they could best fulfil their dreams. For some, Vancouver promised the attractions of North American urban life. Often, women chose to come to British Columbia because it seemed farthest away from Germany. Other women had relatives in Vancouver who sponsored their immigration.

The hopes, ambitions, and expectations that German women brought to Canada might be called "daydreams," "fantasies," or "utopian plans," and might sound foolish to the detached, rational

to immigrate was not solely made by the men. Italian women came to Canada with their own dreams of "America" and a better life. Many Lithuanian displaced persons came to Canada with the dream of returning to Lithuania one day. But not unlike the many German refugees, Lithuanians left a country (Germany) that was very hostile towards them.

¹⁰ Heidi Schute. Interview with author. 30 November and 6 December 1993. Surrey, B.C. Audio tape. The names of all the narrators are pseudonyms. All recordings are in the possession of the author.

observer or to the historian who is interested only in the hard facts (often expressed in numbers). But they are important clues to people's ways of perceiving and dealing with reality, that is, with the socio-economic options and constraints in their lives. These "fantasies" might have pushed the women more than any other reason to take the risks involved in their endeavour.

However, these German women arrived in Vancouver not only as immigrants, but also as domestic servants. They had to start working as maids right away. Most had come on government contracts¹¹ that obliged them to work in a household for one year. Expectations, images, hopes, and wishes now hit reality. Brigitte Rabe, who had wanted to travel and meet people, was disappointed when she had to go into a household. She remembered,

I had thought about it being different in Canada. I never thought I would have to go in a household. And as I said before, my mom kind of implanted in me that being in a household is degrading and is not good. I wanted to be a dressmaker, I wanted to be [a] designer, I wanted to have a career and that. And you know when you're twenty you have really high hopes for your future and you see yourself already in neon-letters somewhere — and then you go in a household and you work for a pittance.¹²

Doris Schulz came to Canada with the hope of establishing her own pottery shop. She was twenty-five years old when she started her job as a maid in a household in the upper-class Vancouver neighbourhood of Shaughnessy:

That [job] was a shocker . . . I came into a very manual household. It was all done by hand: scrubbing the floors and waxing the floors and polishing the floors, all by hand . . . My first day on the job was the second of January and my first job was to clean out two fire places, with the ashes and all those things. I was given a uniform to wear. Little black thing and little white thing and thank God they didn't

¹¹ In February 1951, Canada adopted the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme "for the purpose of assisting immigrants from Europe whose services were urgently required here in Canada and who were unable to finance their transportation costs." Single women who were between eighteen and forty-five years old and had no children could apply for this loan but had in turn to sign a contract that required them to work in domestic service for one year. *Canada Year Book* 1952-53, 164.

¹² Brigitte Rabe. Interview with author. 14 September 1993. Burnaby, B.C. Audio tape.

have a crown for me . . . Anyway, that was a shock for me . . . It was from the very first day heavy physical work.

Other women felt humiliated when their employers completely ignored them or called them with a bell. Mirroring the experiences of Italian and Lithuanian women, the German immigrant women were disappointed with their lives in Canada. They now found themselves in a conflicting, often frustrating situation.

One way in which the women could have negotiated this conflict could have been by arguing that they had no choice in their decision to work as maids. To perceive oneself as having no choice, however, would be to cast oneself as victim. Such a view contradicted the women's idea of being an immigrant. After all, *they* had decided to leave Germany, to leave their home, family, friends, and often a decent job behind. As emigrants, they were agents with a choice; as immigrants they were suddenly victims without a choice. Being locked in a house and doing denigrated labour contradicted the women's dreams and expectations. They wanted to be adventurous, free, world-travelling immigrants, and yet they were maids, expected to serve twenty-four hours a day, confined to a house most of the time. How did they make sense of this experience? How did they reconcile this contradiction between dream and reality?

They did so by constructing domestic service as a sensible, efficient, and even necessary experience if one wanted to become a successful immigrant. Waltraud Schmidt recounted: "Well, anyway, I had decided that I would go and work [for] a family for a short while to learn the life in Canada, how they cook, how they do things."¹³ Susanne Unterleitner felt similarly. She explained: "It was a really really good way to get into the Canadian way of life. [The employers] were very kind, they taught you a lot. There are a lot of things which are very different from what we're used to. So it was really really good."¹⁴ Heidi Schute even felt that domestic service was necessary before trying anything else:

It was the best way, I don't know what I would have done. If I would have qualified to be a nurse right away, I wouldn't have felt good about it, because there was too many other things to learn. And I go into the Y[WCA] and getting adjusted to that different life style: that was the best setting for me and possibly for most of the other girls too.

¹³ Waltraud Schmidt. Interview with author. 28 September 1993. Vancouver, B.C. Audio tape.

¹⁴ Susanne Unterleitner. Interview with author. 3 December 1993. Delta, B.C.

Most of the German immigrant women therefore decided to understand their time in domestic service not primarily as work or a job. Rather, they considered it an "experience," a "first stepping stone," or "as a start" in their lives as immigrants. By ascribing these meanings to domestic service, the women constructed the occupation as an integral part of successful immigration. This description of domestic service, however, was idealized; the women omitted many of the occupation's negative and frustrating aspects.

When the women mentioned the downsides of domestic service, they always tried to explain them in relation to personal faults, either in themselves or their employers. There was, however, hardly any critique of domestic service as an exploitative and stigmatizing occupation. Moreover, the isolation of live-in domestic service had prevented the women from investigating other labour markets and had insulated them from the new society and culture to which they wanted to acculturate. The German women did not explore or criticize the ways in which domestic service hindered them from fulfilling their ideas of immigration.

The women could have perceived and critiqued domestic service as, for example, exploitative of immigrants, working people, women, or humans. They could have argued that they should have been paid more for their long working hours, or that they ought to have had contracts that bound the employers to certain standards. They could have also asked why domestic service was practically the only immigration route for single women without relatives in Canada. That they did not do so makes it harder for the historian to detect (or easier to ignore) the women's potential contestation of or consent to their situation, that is, to the social constraints they were encountering. But as historians, we would forgo an illuminating avenue into historical processes if we defined the women's behaviour as false consciousness or as unimportant. Rather, we should try to understand how the women came to think, feel, and act in the ways they did. To return to the German immigrant maids, we might ask how they came to perceive domestic service in such a positive way.

In order to answer this question we have to take subjectivity seriously. In other words, we cannot dismiss the German immigrant women's mythicized description of domestic service as nostalgic and therefore unimportant. At the same time, we cannot take this description at face value; if we did, we would merely reconstruct the nostalgia of the past and not critique it. The tool that carries an interpretation of this idealized job-description the farthest is the concept of myth.

Thus, the women's perception of domestic service as a "necessary stepping stone" in the process of successful immigration can be interpreted as a myth.

People create and use myths as a means to contextualize past events. This contextualization is achieved by displacing, omitting, and re-interpreting past incidents.¹⁵ Earlier, we defined myths as "expressions of alienation." The German women were in a sense alienated. Domestic service, which involved working and living in the home of people who were separated from the immigrant by class and ethnicity and who spoke an unfamiliar language, became the primary site where the immigrant women had to renegotiate their identities. The house and the family confronted the women with new notions of what it meant to be a woman, a German, an immigrant, and a worker. These ideas were often very different from and conflicted with those they had brought from Germany. Their identity had been shaken when their dreams about immigration began to dissolve. Their disillusioning experiences in the exploitative, isolating, and stigmatizing occupation of domestic service had torn at their sense of self. In order to re-balance and re-stabilize their identity, the German women crafted a myth around domestic service as a "stepping stone."

This myth helped them to integrate domestic service into their image of immigration and thus reconcile ideal and real, dreams and lived experience. The myth was a "fantasy" that allowed the women to withdraw from and not criticize their "real" situation, that of being the exploited, "incarcerated" maid from which they had become alienated. The myth helped them to identify as immigrants those who worked in a useful occupation, rather than as those exploited and victimized workers at the bottom of a labour market that was segregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status. In this view, domestic service became a strategy to achieve the goal of being a successful immigrant. It was almost the first logical step, and the fact that they had little or no choice was, to a large degree, excised from this view.

At the same time, the women used this myth as a way to deal with the daily stress and frustration that accompanied domestic service. Their *idea/belief/opinion* that being a maid would pay off in the end helped them to deny the occupation's exploitative and degrading character. Their perception of domestic service aided the women in masking the hierarchical relationship between them and their employers. Thus, each task that was added to their work routines was not seen as a form of exploitation. Rather, they described their work

¹⁵ Samuel and Thompson, "Introduction," *Myths We Live By*, 5.

routines as "a good way to get to know the Canadian way of life." This went so far that some women voluntarily worked more than was expected of them, and they did not protest against not being paid extra for doing extra work.

Excursus: Memory

Before we look at a few more details of the myths the women wove around their work, let me unsettle my account a bit by introducing another bias that we should be aware of when dealing with both oral and written sources (the latter often being based on the former¹⁶). Memory is a very unstable factor in the construction of narratives. People tend to forget things they have seen, heard, smelled, or felt. Thus, memory can provide the narrator only with fragments of her or his past perceptions. Even more problematic, however, is that memory can be *changed* by what we come to know later; it can be altered by intervening events, observations, social discourses, and changed attitudes.¹⁷ In other words, people sometimes do not remember when they came to acquire a certain perception. For example, when the German women told me about domestic service and how they (had) thought and felt about it, I could not know *when* they actually had come to see this occupation in that particular way. Was it at the time of working in domestic service, or later, at the time of the interview? Asking the women specifically to tell about their immigrant experiences might have predisposed the women to think of themselves as immigrants more strongly than they usually did or than they had forty years ago. In short, memory is not only fragmentary, it can also change.

The problem of memory in historical sources, then, is most obvious in the use of oral sources; both the content and the form of oral narratives need to be contextualized (by examining our knowledge of memory and how it works). This contextualization needs to take place in different contexts of time: both the past and the present. The Canadian household in which the women reconstructed their identities and negotiated power was in fact two households: that in which they had served as maids some forty years ago; and their own household, in which the interview and the women's articulation for the historical record took place.

¹⁶ See Paul Thompson, "Evidence," *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2d ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101-149.

¹⁷ See Elizabeth F. Loftus, *EyeWitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Subjectivity, Gender, and Society

Memory is both an individual and collective process. What people remember and how they perceive the world is influenced by social practices and discourses. The meanings of being an immigrant and of working in domestic service were very much shaped and gendered by contemporary dominant discourses about women and men and their roles in society. For many German women, domestic service would be a "stepping stone," not into better occupations, but into the destination of women in the 1950s — marriage and family. When asked what they had learned, what they had gotten out of domestic service, what it had prepared them for, none of the women mentioned skills (except for having learned English) that they could later use in any job except that of unpaid homemaker.

The discourses on wifehood, motherhood, and domesticity that penetrated the 1950s provided few alternatives for women outside of marriage and family.¹⁸ This renewed focus on women's domesticity also shone through in the narratives of the German immigrant women, at a time when most of them had not even thought about marriage. Christel Meisinger explained what the time in domestic service had prepared her for:

Umm-mmm. Maybe for marriage, with all those kids. Having those kids around me. And I was pretty strict with them too. I did it my way, they left it all up to me. If they were bad _ _ _ mind you, to _ _ _ good, I let their parents sleep in on Sundays, when they were home, and I went in one bedroom to the one girl and had all kids and I walked them, and I sang German songs to them, and taught them German songs. No, maybe preparing me for the kids. Because I never was for little kids at that age.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review* 72, 4 (1991): 471-504; Yvonne Matthews-Klein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940's and 1950's," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal* 4, 2 (Spring 1979): 20-33; Gertrude Joch Robinson, "The Media and Social Change: Thirty Years of Magazine Coverage of Women and Work (1950-1977)," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal* 8, 2 (Spring 1983): 87-111; M. Susan Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker, and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in *Maclean's Magazine*, 1939-1950," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal* 8, 2 (Spring 1983); reprinted in Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, eds., *Canadian Working Class History. Selected Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1992), 595-622.

¹⁹ Christel Meisinger. Interview with author. 1 December 1993. Burnaby, B.C. Audio tape. Three or four dots signify an omission, while three underlines (_ _ _) signify a pause or hesitation in the narrative.

Margot Buchwald felt that being a maid had helped her in her domestic skills too:

From then on I kind of liked housework. They were not so fanatic than the Germans. The Germans, you had to bang the carpets around and you had to hang up those Persian carpets and beat them. They're easier here, you do your job and you don't have to drag all this stuff around and when you do your job right, they're happy and satisfied. They're most relaxed here when I came here. It's just a different of working conditions than in Germany.²⁰

Dominant discourses about women and domesticity shaped how the German women constructed the meanings of domestic service. Domestic service was perceived as a way to gain knowledge of the new society — that is, specifically “female” knowledge. In turn, the women's focus began to shift from adventure and independence to femininity and domesticity. During domestic service, then, the women's perceptions of themselves and the world around them became more “feminized.”

It is at this point that we can also expand our analysis. So far I have argued that the myth helped the women to cope with the alienating experience of domestic service and to sustain their choice to immigrate. But as historians, we must assess not only the individual advantages and disadvantages of myths but their social costs and benefits. What are the effects on society when people choose to live by myths instead of criticizing and protesting their alienation? In this case, the German women sustained and reinforced the hierarchical and exploitative relationship between worker and employer. Because they had constructed domestic service as a necessary step in the process of immigration, they could not critique it.

This is, of course, only one way myth can work. Myth can also help to defy norms and power structures. Employers and government officials expected women who worked in domestic service to be submissive and deferential. Historians have shown, however, that Finnish, British, Lithuanian, and Italian immigrant maids frequently demanded better employment situations, changed their employers, and left live-in domestic service quickly, often before fulfilling the one-year contract.²¹ While Finnish domestic workers tried to improve their working and living conditions by organizing, German women

²⁰ Margot Buchwald. Interview with author. 27 September 1993. Aldergrove, B.C. Audio tape.

²¹ See, for example, the titles, *Defiant Sisters* (Lindström-Best), “Defiant Domestic?” (in Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*).

(like Italians and Lithuanians) usually quit their jobs and live-in domestic service after a short time.

Some German women left jobs they may have actually liked because they felt that live-in domestic service began to be an obstacle rather than a stepping stone to fulfil their goals. They quit once they felt they had learned enough to do something else. The decision to quit domestic service was therefore not always rooted in the real working conditions (e.g., low wages, long hours) but rather in the women's individual, subjective ideas about the function domestic service had in their immigration experience. In other words, the German women's motive to defy the dominant notion that single, young immigrant women were submissive and passive was fuelled by their belief in the myth that domestic service was *only* a stepping stone.

CASE STUDY TWO

THE "STRONG LADY" MYTH: A STRATEGY FOR EMPOWERMENT

LAURA QUILICI

In post-World War II Vancouver, many Italian women took young, single Italian men into their homes as boarders. According to the oral testimony of one woman interviewed for this study, "All the Italian ladies, they was full of boarders. [The women] come here and they don't know the language. And [the boys], they come here single with no house, no nothing — so somebody got the bedroom and . . . [could] cook for them. . . ."²² When the interviewees were asked why they decided to take in boarders, most responses echoed that of Mrs. Torturo, who explained, "Because there was no job, no job around so you have to work to make a little bit for a living You know, you look for a job and you can't find [one] because you don't speak English."²³ Language clearly was a barrier for these women's entry into the labour force. But other reasons for taking in boarders included their desire to stay at home with their children. Mrs. Larosa, for example, felt that her place was at home caring for her seven-year-old son. In addition, she needed to make money because her husband earned only 80 cents per hour in the construction trades and even then could obtain only seasonal work. Mrs. Larosa felt that taking in

²² A. Astorin. Interview with author. 26 July 1993. Vancouver, B.C. Audio tape. All interviewee names are pseudonyms. All tape recordings are in the possession of the author.

²³ S. Torturo. Interview with author. 23 September 1993. North Vancouver, B.C. Audio tape.

boarders would provide the financial security that her husband's job lacked.²⁴

Most Italian families who immigrated to Canada in the postwar years needed the income of both spouses to achieve their financial goals of security and eventual home ownership.²⁵ Economic constraints including the unstable and seasonal work of most primary breadwinners often meant that wives and children became secondary wage-earners. As Franca Iacovetta has documented, "women had been important contributors to the peasant family economy in the Mezzogiorno," so their entry into Toronto's postwar labour force reflected a pattern of continuity with Old World norms.²⁶ In contrast to Toronto, Vancouver was not an industrial centre in the postwar era. The two industries where Italian women workers were concentrated in Toronto — manufacturing and service — were underdeveloped in Vancouver. With the diminished availability of factory work, many Italian women in Vancouver took boarders into their homes as a way to supplement the family wage.

Taking boarders into the home was a uniquely New World phenomenon. Both Italian landlords and boarders had to invent new words or borrow existing English words to describe the new boarding arrangement. As Robert Harney noted, "among Italian lodgers, words like *bossa* for the keeper of the house, *bordo* for their arrangement, and *bordante* to describe themselves were borrowed."²⁷ Back in Italy, peasants did not usually live with extended family members. Rather, the nuclear family tended to maintain its own separate living space.²⁸ At most, aging or invalid parents of one spouse lived with the nuclear family. When Italians emigrated from Italy, then, they were not used to sharing living quarters with adult siblings or cousins let alone friends, co-villagers, or complete strangers. Because the Italian immigrant home with boarders was an institution born in the New World, women who maintained boarders in Vancouver had had no similar

²⁴ L. Larosa. Interview with author. 7 June 1993. Vancouver, B.C.

²⁵ Many Italian immigration studies discuss the importance of home ownership to Italian immigrants. See in particular Franc Sturino, *Forging the Chain: A Case Study of Italian Migration to North America, 1880-1930* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990), 26, 180-81; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (1971, reprint Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 171-75; John Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 29, ch. 3.

²⁶ Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People*, 101.

²⁷ Robert Harney, "Boarding and Belonging: Thoughts on Sojourner Institutions," *Urban History Review* 2 (1978): 22.

²⁸ See Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984).

experience in Italy on which to draw. In order to learn how to become housewives with boarders in Vancouver, Italian women relied upon definitions of womanhood they had learned in Italy. But housewives with boarders also differed markedly from Italian peasant women. The mythology surrounding the "strong lady" was one way to ease the transition from Italian peasant women to Italian immigrant housewives with boarders.

Italian immigrant women took boarders into their homes for two main reasons: to make money, and to help young, single men adjust to life in a foreign place where they had no women to care for them. A housewife with boarders fulfilled many functions for her lodgers. She was responsible for her boarders' meals (including bag lunches for the men who were employed), laundry, and housekeeping. In addition, the *padrona*²⁹ or owner mended her boarders' socks and shirts when they could not afford to buy new clothing. She also 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 guided by a set of characteristics including chastity, maternal duty, sacrifice, ability to work hard, and almost superhuman mental and physical strength. Although strength and the ability to work hard were integral parts of peasant life in Italy, these two features assumed prominence for these women when they moved to Canada and became housewives with boarders.

Many women who maintained boarders did not like to do so. 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. Some women were encouraged by members of the Italian community to take boarders into their homes. Mrs. Padovan, for instance, was urged by the priest of Sacred Heart Church in Vancouver to take in single, young men who had recently arrived from Italy and needed a place to live. Sacred Heart was the first Italian Catholic parish in Vancouver and, as such, served as the centre for the postwar Italian community in the city. While Mrs. Padovan did not relish the idea of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of these young men, she recounts, "Father Della Torre, you know, he asked me. He phoned me and said, 'Mrs. Padovan, we got boarders for you.' . . . I say, 'O.K., we'll keep just a few . . . and after a few we

²⁹ *Padrona* is the feminine singular form of this word. *Padrone* is the feminine plural.

[ended up with] five all together."³⁰ Mrs. Torturo, by contrast, 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, like Mrs. Padovan, was not keen on the work. She remembered, "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."³¹ Whether or not a woman herself decided to maintain boarders, she was not usually comfortable with the job.

How did these women reconcile their discomfort with or lack of control over the decision to take boarders into their homes? Clues found in the women's use of myths in recounting their stories may point us to an answer. The oral history narratives collected for this study revealed the recurrence of a particular phrase. It is evident in Mrs. Astorin's testimony when she stated, "I was a very strong lady — work, work, work, you know, I never was tired really."³² Nearly all of the women interviewed described themselves with the phrase, "I was a strong lady." The recurrence of this phrase was surprising. What meanings did the term convey to these women? How did the notion of "strength" fit into the role of the *padrona*? What did "strength" mean for these women in the context of the work they performed in Vancouver?

For an Italian housewife with boarders, being "a strong lady" meant the ability to cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner for up to twenty-five boarders plus her own family; wash, iron, and mend their clothes; shop for groceries and organize 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 peculiar in saying, "I arose and went to bed with the moon."³³ Like women's work in general, that of Italian housewives with boarders seemed 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 five boys plus me and my husband — seven people — I had to be working all day long. Cleaning, shopping, preparing food, everything. I no got time for me!"³⁴ Reflecting upon their lives as housewives with boarders, many of the women marvelled at how hard they had worked and commented that their workload seemed more than they could bear.

³⁰ I. Padovan. Interview with author. 31 July 1993. Vancouver, B.C. Audio tape.

³¹ S. Torturo.

³² A. Astorin.

³³ L. Larosa.

³⁴ I. Padovan.

In addition to their capacity to work hard, "strong ladies" commanded respect from the men they took into their homes. A housewife with boarders established rules in her home which the men usually followed. Some of these rules could be quite flexible. For example, most women asked to be paid rent on the first day of the month. If a boarder could not pay his rent on time, however, the *padrona* either waited until he had money available or, often, waived the month's rent. However, in matters she deemed important, such as attending Sunday mass, the *padrona's* word was law.

An example of another such rule involved sexual liaisons within the boarding home. Many of the women interviewed did not allow the boarders to take their girlfriends into their bedrooms. Mrs. Padovan made this very clear to her boarders from the outset:

[when] somebody wanted to come here — the new boarders — I told them, "no women inside. No girls. Because you start, everybody start." And I don't want these things around here. No way. You keep this place, you got to do this, this and this. You agree, O.K., fine. You don't agree, we still friends . . . Girls is girls and boys is boys, I don't blame them. But I don't want these people in my house, no way. I want respect.³⁵

Sometimes the *padrona* permitted young women to stay for dinner or coffee, but only when they could be supervised adequately by the *padrona* herself. Because it was necessary for a *padrona* to establish her home as a de-sexualized space, boarders and their girlfriends were rarely allowed past the kitchen together. By insisting that the boarding home remained de-sexualized, a housewife regulated her lodgers' sexuality with regard to the relationship between the boys and their girlfriends and the relationship between the boys and herself. Boarders left the thought of sex — either with their girlfriends or the *padrona* — at the front door. One of the ways a housewife with boarders could ensure her own safety with so many men in the home was to invent a relationship between herself and her boarders that mirrored that of the nuclear family. A woman did this by assuming a maternal role to her boarders. She was viewed by the boys as a mother figure, and thus remained sexually inviolate. This is interesting because many housewives with boarders were barely five or six years older than the boarders themselves. Mrs. Brunetti was only eighteen years old when she began taking in boarders.³⁶ Although all the men

³⁵ I. Padovan.

³⁶ Mrs. E. Brunetti. Interview with author. 10 June 1993. Vancouver, B.C.

in her home were older than her, Mrs. Brunetti assumed her role as their mother.

In the now classic study, *Heroes of their Own Lives*, Linda Gordon argued that, "In Boston the boarding clientele was predominantly male, and many mothers in the [Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] cases did indeed appear to be having sexual relationships with boarders - such allegations were made against 41 percent of single mothers."³⁷ Although sexual relationships between lodgers and their female landlords are evident in the case records examined by Gordon, oral research does not confirm that these relationships were common among Italian immigrants in Vancouver. Two factors may account for this difference. First, Gordon's subjects were single mothers who took in boarders to survive. Because these women did not have husbands living in the house, they likely were deemed to be sexually available to their boarders. Secondly, female landlords in Boston did not appear to view themselves as mothers to their boarders. For single mothers in Boston, maintaining boarders was strictly a form of employment that allowed them to remain at home to care for their children. For Italian immigrants in Vancouver, maintaining boarders was done as much to help out the young men as to top up the family wage. Therefore, housewives with boarders in Vancouver constructed and genuinely felt a maternal responsibility to their boys. In some homes, lodgers referred to the *padrona* as "auntie." Harney noted, "Many of these terms were obviously used to impose vigorous sexual controls on the boarding house, but they also reflect the attempt to make the institution fit either household or family situations which could be understood from the old world experience."³⁸

Housewives with boarders exercised their maternal role in a variety of ways. Mrs. Casolin woke unemployed boarders up at 5 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 8 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

³⁷ Linda Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880-1960* (1988, reprint New York: Penguin, 1989), 97.

³⁸ Harney, "Boarding and Belonging," 22.

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.³⁹

Other women offered well-meaning words of advice to their boarders. When the boys went out for the night, the *padrona* 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."⁴⁰ In order to command respect from her boarders, a woman established clear guidelines for behaviour within her home.

Although the interviewees admitted that the work they performed as boarder-keepers was gruelling, 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 negatively affected her health. She mused:

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 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.⁴¹

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

³⁹ V. Casolin. Interview with author. 18 February 1992. Vancouver, B.C. Audio tape.

⁴⁰ S. Torturo.

⁴¹ A. Astorin.

happy. I don't know." Like the testimony of most of the women interviewed, that of Mrs. Astorin reveals 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 role 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 which is largely prescribed. 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.⁴² Women's oral history narratives, therefore, are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions such as those of Mrs. Astorin. 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 thoughts and feelings by describing their lives in ways that outwardly conform to acceptable behaviour.⁴³ They may draw upon myths which are shared by individuals of their social group in order to fit into that group. 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 testimonies.

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 the discomfort they felt about being 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

⁴² 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): 107.

⁴³ Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" Sherna Berger and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 11.

of "strength." Mothers were identified not only by their ability to nurture and care for children but also by their capacity 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, for example. 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 recognizing their own strength, housewives created a sense of "womanliness" by which they could abide. Unlike their husbands, these women 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 victimizing.

All this is not to deny or negate the difficulties encountered by Italian immigrant women when they came to Canada. I am not suggesting that these women were not strong or that they were disillusioned by their experiences. 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 life in Canada clashed with the realities that confronted them. Like German immigrant women, 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 characterized people's lives in postwar Italy. Upon their arrival, however, immigrants' hopes were soon dashed. The women in particular 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 a new identity for

themselves as the strong matriarch of a household 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."

Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson have noted that "memories of real lives tell us of countless women who struggle as actively as men. But the heroic myths are overwhelmingly male: partisans, soldiers and strikers carrying rifles."⁴⁴ Interestingly, the heroes of boarding-house stories are female. The women did not demean or diminish the amount of work they performed. Their lives were filled with struggle, they worked hard, and they were "strong ladies" who commanded respect.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to show that by blurring the distinction between objective and subjective experience, historians can gain a fuller picture of the past. Examining the narrative forms — including myths — that people draw upon to recount their lives may demonstrate how they see themselves in relation to the world. Myths as expressions of alienation alert us to the discrepancy in people's lives between the real and the ideal. In addition, myths give us clues to how they reconcile those tensions. This helps us to understand how people rebalance their identities.

In the case of immigrant women, this is particularly important because the values they brought over from their home countries were often contradicted by new realities of life in Canada. Thus, their sense of self was unsettled. They drew upon myths as strategies to adapt their old values to their new life conditions. Both German and Italian women came to Canada with high expectations that were quickly dispelled upon their arrival. To deal with these frustrating experiences, the women constructed positive myths about themselves and their work. These myths buffered the disruptive impact displacement had on their identities. At the same time, myths eased the adaptation to a foreign culture. By constructing idealized conceptions of their roles, immigrant women could cling to these images even when the migration process seemed to thwart them.

While it is important to examine how people negotiate their identities in changing circumstances, we must also place these individual

⁴⁴ Samuel and Thompson, *Myths We Live By*, 17.

negotiations into their larger socio-economic historical contexts. The question then becomes: what power structures are forged, reinforced, or contested through individual identity construction? The immigrant women's use of myths reinforced prevailing notions of "immigrant" and "woman." The construction of positive work myths did not allow for a critique of harsh working and living conditions. German women could not criticize domestic service, while Italian women could not condemn keeping boarders. To do so would have resulted in the subversion of their identities as immigrants, workers, and women. At the same time, the women drew upon myths to contest dominant ideals of immigrant women as passive and submissive. The German women ascribed to domestic service the particular purpose of a "stepping stone" in the immigration process. Italian women, on the other hand, defined themselves as "strong ladies" in the context of their work as boarder keepers. Myths were used to render precise the limits of the women's work. When these limits were transgressed, the women guarded them by quitting the job, in the case of German domestic servants, or evicting a boarder, in the case of Italian women. By ascribing to their work specific purposes and definitions, immigrant women gained partial control over it. Examining myths in the stories of immigrant women has helped us to understand how they viewed themselves in a changing world.