

**SILVIA AGNONA.** Born 1978.

**TRANSCRIPT of OH 2003V**

This interview was recorded on October 16, 2014, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Maria Semprum. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Maria Semprum. The interview was transcribed by Susan Becker.

**ABSTRACT:** Silvia Agnona immigrated to the United States nine years ago from Italy (by way of Norway and Denmark, where she lived before coming to the United States). She describes the great variety of landscapes and the beauty of Italy, as well as the strength of the family and some of the regional variety of food in Italian culture. Although she misses seeing her parents and Italian friends more often, she has come to see Boulder as her home—a place where her lifestyle is a good fit and a place where she has made good friendships. Nonetheless, she discusses adjustments that she has made to assimilate into American culture and talks about the ways in which she hopes that Boulder will do more to help other immigrants who may not be as lucky as she was but who add much to our collective culture.

**NOTE:** This interview is part of a series in which immigrant members of the Boulder Public Library's English conversation class interviewed each other about their home countries and their experiences since arriving in Boulder. The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[A].

00:00

MS: Hi. My name is Maria Eugenia Semprum, and I am going to interview Silvia Agnona. Silvia is from Italy. Hi, Silvia. How are you?

SA: I'm good, thanks. And yourself?

MS: Silvia, where were you born?

SA: I was born in the city of Turino, in the northwest of Italy.

MS: Okay. And how long have you been living here in the United States? And in Boulder?

SA: I have been in the United States for almost nine years—it will be nine years in December, and I have spent all those nine years in Boulder.

MS: Okay. You came directly from Turino to Boulder.

SA: No. I took a little side trip first. [chuckles] I moved from Italy to Norway; and then to Denmark when I was studying and then when I started working for a company in Copenhagen.

And I spent about six years—two years in Norway and four years in Denmark—and then I came to the United States from Denmark.

01:12

MS: Okay. Can you tell me about your country of origin? How is Italy? Where is it? And what is Italy [like]—can you describe the climate, the landscape? Talk about Italy, please.

SA: Okay. Talk about all things about Italy. So Italy is a country that's in southern Europe. It is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, for the most part. And the northern part has borders with France, Switzerland, Austria, and Slovenia. So it is a quite long country. And so you will find many different landscapes and different climates. In general, the northern part has a colder climate than the south, so our winters are quite similar to Boulder winters. It doesn't get too cold, but it's often pretty foggy, so we can have fog in the plains for at times two to three weeks in a row, and it's not a time that people like very much. But it is very common for the whole northern plains, and the reason is that the biggest river in Italy, the Po River, flows through this valley that extends from the northwest, from the Alps, and it ends in the Adriatic Sea. So it's about 650 kilometers long, which is a long river for Italy. So from all that moisture, fog is generated during the winter. So that's a very typical feature. Our summers are quite hot and humid. This is very true for most of the northern plains.

The mountains have their own climate. The winters, obviously, are colder and there is a lot of snow. And the summers are cooler. Many people from the cities like to go on vacation in the mountains to escape the heat, because until not so many years ago, most houses and buildings did not have air conditioning. So going to the mountains was the traditional way of people to deal with the summer heat.

And then we have the central and the southern part of Italy that tend to have a warmer climate, and the reason is that they are close to the Mediterranean Sea, so winters will be mild—sometimes—rarely going below 50s, most likely in the 60s or so. And then the summers are very dry and very hot. And that's another favorite thing for people to do in the summer is to go to the beach and spend the whole month of August at the beach.

MS: To the Mediterranean?

SA: On the Mediterranean, yes.

04:13

MS: For you, which is the most beautiful place, in your opinion, in Italy?

SA: Oh! Well, I would say I have many favorite places. I think my hometown of Turino is a very interesting city to visit. I have been discovering it more now that I don't live there anymore, so when I go back to visit my parents, sometimes I like to take my children to museums and places that before I would just kind of take for granted. So we've been enjoying rediscovering our own town.

Other places I like very much are Rome—it's probably my favorite of the big, historical cities, because you can see heritage and buildings from probably every possible time since 3,000 B.C. So it is a very interesting thing to see all those different layers of human history next to each other in the same place. You can walk from the Coliseum to Baroque architecture in just a few minutes. It's very interesting. And of course I like going to the beach. There are many places along the coast that are beautiful. I like the Mediterranean Sea. It is a very calm and safe sea to be swimming in. Probably some of the best beaches are in Sardinia. Some of my personal favorites are along the coast of Tuscany, because that's where I used to go with my parents when I was little.

MS: Tuscany is in the Mediterranean Sea?

SA: Yes, Tuscany is the region that has Florence as its capital city. So they have a long coastline and there are a lot of very well-known towns by the sea where people go in the summer for their vacations.

06:18

MS: Okay. About the customs. What do you think is the most representative custom of your culture of Italy?

SA: Hmm. I think there is a very strong sense of family in Italy. So it is very typical that people grow up in the same place where they were born, and their whole family lives there, and they've been there for generations, and they don't move around the country or to other places as much as people do here in the United States. So it is very common that, for example, when people have children, the children get to spend a lot of time with the grandparents, with their extended family, and usually they live in the same city. So they like to have big meals together on Sundays or on holidays or spend their vacations together. So I think maybe the sense of family is the most representative aspect of Italian culture, and I'm sure that many people around the world know about that.

MS: And about the food! Everybody loves Italian food!

SA: Well, I will say that I enjoy good food from many places, but I always have a little preference for Italian food. It is very different depending on what region you are in. For example, the region I come from traditionally eats more rice than pasta. Pasta, of course, is very common today. But, for example, in my grandmother's generation people would rarely eat pasta, and they would eat rice more often. The reason is that rice is actually grown in the region, around the towns of Vercelli and Novara. There are rice fields where some of the famous risotto rice is produced—like risotto carnaroli, for instance. And risotto arborio. It's a very short-grain type of rice that is used for risotto. That's very typical food from northern Italy, and particularly from my region.

Then we have some food from the mountains, like polenta, which is made from corn meal and served with different sauces. It's a very good food for cold weather.

The south, in the center regions, have more Mediterranean food, so there's more fish and a lot of fresh vegetables—so the diet is a part of every day's diet—fresh fruit, fresh salad. And typically we like to eat big meals. So we have a first course, a second course with a side, and then we have fruit, and then we have dessert. So it can take quite a while to eat a full Italian meal. [laughs]

09:35

MS: And about your work? Did you work in Italy? Yes?

SA: Well, I did have some jobs in Italy where I was a student, but to be honest, I did not really work a lot of time there, because I moved to Norway when I was about to finish my master's. And so my first job was in Copenhagen. Yes. I worked for a little bit at the library at my university, and other small, part-time jobs like that. But most of my work experience is in other places than Italy.

MS: When and why did you decide to come to the United States?

SA: Well, it's funny, because I had never really thought about moving to the United States when I was little. I was always interested in traveling and discovering new cultures, so I studied foreign languages, also for that reason—to be able to travel and see other places. But for some reason, the United States had never been on my radar screen, really.

And then, when I was living in Denmark, suddenly, this opportunity came up for my at-the-time boyfriend to get a job here at NCAR (National Center for Atmospheric Research). He was doing a PhD in atmospheric science at the University of Copenhagen, and he visited NCAR during his PhD, and then he was offered a three-year contract. So we decided that, oh, we can spend two years in Boulder—it's a cool place—yes, let's do it. Then we'd go back to Europe. And after nine years, well—I'm still here! [chuckles]

11:30

MS: And this is the reason that you choose Boulder?

SA: Yes. Well, it was because of a job offer, but a big part of the reason was the fact that it was in Boulder. I had been here just to visit when my boyfriend was here doing his PhD, just for a couple of weeks, and I thought it was a fantastic place to live and so—. I love the mountains, because the place where I grew up in Italy is very similar to Colorado. You are close to the mountains. I grew up skiing and hiking and all those things. Denmark is a completely flat country, and there is not a lot of sun in the winter. So Boulder seemed very attractive for the kind of lifestyle that I was envisioning.

MS: What were your first impressions of Boulder—your first day in Boulder?

SA: Great! [laughs] Sunny. It was—it was probably around New Years Eve when we arrived here, late in December. So it was winter, but a winter day in Boulder looked amazing. I

remember there were days—I was very impressed that one day it would be snowing and the next day you could be walking outside in your t-shirt and it was warm and nice.

12:52

MS: And how do you think about Boulder now? Do you feel the same? Or what do you feel now?

SA: I guess that after you spend a few years in any place, you learn to see both the good sides and the not so good sides. So probably my vision of Boulder today is a little less idealistic than it was back then, but I still think that the good sides largely exceed the not so good sides. So I still like living here very, very much.

MS: And what are your favorite things to do in Boulder?

SA: Well, I like everything outdoors. I love hiking. So I'm always happy to go out on our local city trails after work or maybe on a weekend. And I can walk or bike there directly from my house. I don't have to drive for a couple of hours to get to the mountains. It's a very unique thing to have this amazing nature in your backyard. I also enjoy the fact that there are a lot of people from many different places, so you can meet a lot of different cultures here. I like that there is a very lively cultural and musical scene, so I like to go out and listen to good music and dance—particularly to Latin and Brazilian music.

14:25

MS: And about your friends here in Boulder. Can you tell me a little bit about your friends that you have in Boulder right now? Or during your—

SA: I think that in general people in Boulder are very friendly. So even when you meet a stranger on the trails or out on the street when you are walking, a lot of people will be saying hello and being very friendly to you and be available for a conversation. However, I thought that being friends with people here can be a little challenging too, because everybody is very busy and they are kind of hyper-scheduled. So I had the experience at times—I'd invite friends for dinner, but they can only stay for an hour and then they have to go somewhere else. So, there were some small adjustments coming from a different culture where friends—you can spend just unlimited time with them, and you don't really need to plan to meet with them very much. You just go by and knock on their door and just stop by for a cup of coffee or something.

So it took me a little while to figure how things work here, but I've had many good friends here. Some of them I met through work, and others were neighbors, and others were people I met from being a parent and my kids having their friends and so kind of connecting with other parents here. And also, many of my friends are connected to the Brazilian music community. I started playing in a group about five years ago. And this group expanded—the community, Brazilian music scene in town—also grew over the years. So probably most of my good friends today are from that environment.

MS: And when you are out of Boulder, do you miss Boulder?

SA: Um—I do in many ways. I always look forward to traveling. I visit my parents for about three weeks every year in Italy, and I'm always happy to go to Italy. But I am never really sad to leave, because I know I'm coming back to Boulder, and it's not a bad place to come to after your vacation! [chuckles]

17:05

MS: And do you miss something from Italy?

SA: Well, I guess yes. First of all, I miss my family. I'm an only child and my parents are both only children, so it is a very small family. And sometimes it's hard, especially now that the kids are here, it's hard to not be able to spend more time with them, because it's a long trip and it's expensive and it can be difficult to take time off from work for enough time to make the trip worth it. So I think that's really—the distance from my family is probably what I miss the most. And of course, my old friends that are still living in my hometown and pretty much going out as we used to. Yeah. I wish I could just see them more often.

But then I miss, sometimes, some special foods that are not easy to find outside of Italy.

MS: Like what?

SA: Well, it can be something as simple as pizza. It is, for me, very difficult to find good pizza in this town. It's one of my favorite foods and—yeah. Luckily, now I have found a couple of places that are okay.

MS: Then you tell me!

SA: [laughs] And I think I miss the ocean too. You know, in Italy, it never really takes very long to drive to either the mountains or the ocean, so I used to spend part of my summers at the seaside with my family, and we would just be in the water swimming all day, and so I really miss the Mediterranean Sea, because it is very easy and safe and warm sea to be in. I always look forward to going back and spend time there.

19:07

MS: How did you know about the library and what does it mean for you?

SA: I'm sorry?

MS: The library.

SA: Oh, the library! Well, I've always had a kind of a soft spot for libraries since I was growing up. I've always enjoyed going to the library and just explore, randomly, the books that they had. And many times I made discoveries about books that I never heard of that I read and I loved. So

the library is probably one of the first places here in the community that I explored when I arrived.

Also now, with my kids—we live close to the south Boulder branch, and so it's a very nice thing to be able to go there and they can borrow books that they might be reading for a few days, and then they want some other books so it is very convenient. And we also went to some storytelling events during the summers when they were off school. And reading programs. So I think it is a great resource to have in town.

20:23

MS: And now do you feel that Boulder is a home to you?

SA: Yes. It took me some time. The first two years we were here, I went back and forth a lot, trying to figure out—am I just visiting or were we going to go back to Europe? And if we were going back to Europe, where in Europe? Because it is not very easy to get good jobs in Italy these days for younger people. So I had been thinking about this for probably a couple of years: where do I belong and where do I want to be for the next many years. Of course, one consideration was, I want to be closer to my family. But eventually I realized that my lifestyle—the things I like and the friends I have—and Boulder actually is a better fit. So, yes, after probably three or four years I realized that this is my home. When I drive around town, I know all the shortcuts, I know my way, I don't need to look at a map, I know where stores are, and I just realized that this is really a long-term place for me to be.

21:49

MS: Okay, Silvia. Is there anything else that you like to talk about?

SA: [pause] Well, one thing that I think Boulder needs to work a little more on is that there is quite a bit of inequality between people. I feel privileged, because I came here as an immigrant with—you know, I had an education from back home, I had work experience. I had, at the time, a husband with a well-paying job. And so we had a company that helped us go through all the immigration procedures.

So probably my moving to the U.S. has been a lot easier than for a lot of other people. And so, I feel that my path has been really easy, but I realize that there are a lot of people in this town that came to this country for probably the same reason I came for—they were looking for a different life or in many cases they were looking for a better life—that are struggling with becoming integrated in the community, and they are limited to get jobs that don't pay a living wage. Their children don't get as many resources in school.

So I look forward to more initiatives in that respect, to try and bridge the gap, and bring people more together and not create a class of "lucky immigrants" versus a larger group of "not so lucky immigrants." I feel very strongly about this, because I don't think I did anything other than being born in the right country at the right time and with the right parents that made things easy for me. I think we need more compassion, more understanding, for the situations of these other people

with very difficult life experiences. And try to view them as a resource and people that actually add to the community. They don't come here just to take jobs or other stuff that we hear in the news all the time that tries to discredit who these people are and what they do for a community.

So, I am very grateful that there are players in the city, like Intercambio de Comunidades, that does a lot of work to help every immigrant, regardless of how well educated or how rich or not rich you are, to feel more at home in Boulder. I think it's a great place to be. And I think that other people also deserve to be sharing in this luck that we have.

MS: Well, thank you very much, Silvia. We're finished.

SA: My pleasure.

25:11

[End of interview]