HOW THE OTHER HALF SAW THEMSELVES:

PHOTOGRAPHS AND FICTIONS ON MANHATTAN'S LOWER EAST SIDE

by

Kelli J. Lucas

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Degree in Early American Culture.

Spring 2004

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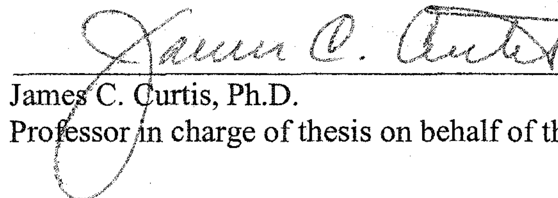
Approved: 
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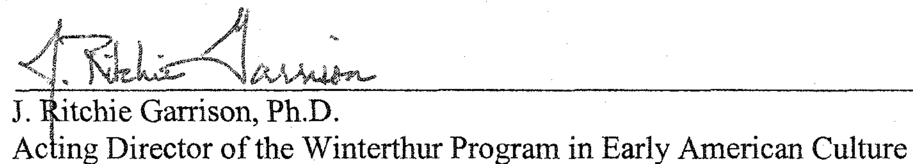
Approved: 
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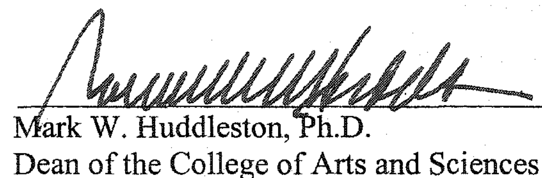
Approved: 
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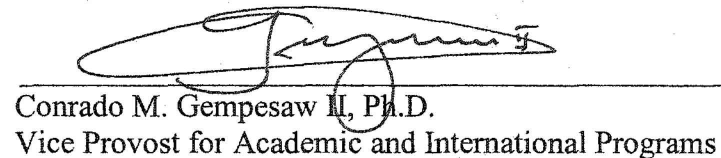
Approved: 
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enormous enthusiasm for this project was infectious; throughout the writing process, his confidence kept the inevitable self-doubt at bay.

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ABSTRACT

Since its invention, photography has been touted for its truth-telling capabilities; yet photographs document far greater fictions than historians commonly realize or acknowledge. Though audiences usually view the work of documentary photographers as unmitigated slices of real life, each is a carefully arranged visual description of connections between the photograph's subject, initiator, dispenser, and viewer. On Manhattan's Lower East Side, two sets of images dramatically illustrate the fictive potential of the camera: outsider photographs taken by Jacob Riis and his aesthetic descendants and family pictures taken by Lower East Side residents themselves.

Careful examination of one set of photographs held at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum reveals a rich, largely untapped source for understanding the life and culture of urban immigrants. Rosaria Baldizzi, a Sicilian immigrant woman living on Orchard Street in the 1920s and 1930s, assembled a collection of photographs of her relatives, her children, her neighbors, and even herself. In producing, distributing, and preserving her pictures, Rosaria articulated changing ideas about her own identity as an Italian-American mother, devout Catholic, neighborly friend, and hard worker. In this thesis, I discuss the connections between producer, possessor, and photograph in order to understand better the cultural identity of immigrants in transition.

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INTRODUCTION

In a small, softly tinted black and white photograph, young John Baldizzi smiles broadly (figure 1). Dressed in a white suit with short pants and knee socks with a dark bow for an armband, he holds the symbols of his confirmation, a prayer book and a rosary. He stands next to his godfather, Raymond Raspizzio. Raymond's hand rests on John's shoulder; he addresses the camera directly. With his white fedora slightly cocked, his dark, pin-stripe windowpane three-piece suit is complete with a celebratory boutonniere. Knife-pleated trousers end in cuffs at the toes of highly-polished black shoes. John and his sponsor are obviously in a photographer's studio: a painted backdrop suggests, in *trompe l'oeil* fashion, that they are standing in front of an elaborately draped window in a country manor.

This is the same backdrop that appears in John's sister's confirmation portrait, taken about two years earlier (figure 2). In that image, Josephine is attended by her godmother, Rose Bonofiglio. Like John, Josephine wears white from head to toe: her veil, dress, stockings, and shoes appear luminous under the photographer's flash. Seated on a small bench, she cradles a giant bouquet of flowers in her arms and holds out an open prayer book and rosary, not unlike her brother's. Mrs. Bonofiglio stands behind her, stylishly attired in a dark-colored, flowered dress with a wide ribbon sash, complemented by a dark, leather handbag draped over her forearm. With a matching hat fashionably tilted to one side, earrings, painted fingernails, and a large corsage complement her outfit.

Throughout the early twentieth century, images like these swirled around the Lower East Side. They presented a stark contrast to the better-known images of nineteenth century immigrants, many of which came from the camera of Jacob Riis. Through his books, articles, and lantern-slide lectures, the muckraker journalist turned social reformer exposed the poverty of Manhattan's Lower East Side to the middle and

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upper classes. Riis's integration of photographs and reform rhetoric inspired the new genre of documentary photography – cameras as evidence-gathering tools in a larger social struggle.[1] Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans are just a few of the photographers who followed the tradition Riis established.

Almost without exception, the photographs that Riis and other outsider documentary photographers took of immigrants are dismal, as though to prove that the Statue of Liberty's directive – "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses…" – was being properly fulfilled. Images highlighted cramped quarters and worn clothing, casting immigrants in dark tones (metaphorically and physically) and calling attention to their difficult position as newcomers. At some level, most Americans understood what they saw in these photographs, connecting the immigrants' circumstances favorably or unfavorably to their own ancestral migration narratives. To see these outsider photographs was to be reminded of a difficult past and, more importantly, of a triumphant present. Though these images did inspire social reform, perhaps the stronger emotion was subconsciously evoked: a self-congratulatory satisfaction that, for the viewer, such circumstances lay far behind.

This skill of looking at photographs of exotic, foreign subjects was ingrained in Americans in the late nineteenth century. In addition to portraits of their own family and friends, middle-class Americans looked at stereographs, cards viewed with a stereoscope to produce three-dimensional images. Usually these views depicted *tableaux vivantes*, exotic landscapes, or foreign peoples and allowed viewers to vacation vicariously in their own parlors.[2] When Riis published his books and gave his lantern-

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[1] Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 163-164.

[2] Donna R. Borden, "'The Family that Plays Together Stays Together': Family Pastimes and Indoor Amusements, 1890-1930." *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social*

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slide lectures, the words and images he presented were added to this genre of exotic story-telling. Though ostensibly intended to motivate reform activism, the words and pictures that Riis produced attracted attention because they identified for the middle class a definite "other": a faithless, friendless, and hopeless group of people whose situation was, in every way, different from their own.

Through time, the photographs from Riis and other documentary photographers have survived in museum collections, modern catalogs, and historical reprints. Now, as then, they are trusted as realistic portrayals of immigrant life in early twentieth century American cities. But the biases of the photographers have not faded. Time (and a nearly blind faith in the technological veracity of the camera) has buried them even deeper within the image, where they remain hidden to all but the most critical of viewers.

Since its invention, photography has been touted for its truth-telling capabilities; yet, as any comparison of insider and outsider images will suggest, photographs document far greater fictions than historians commonly realize or acknowledge. Though audiences usually view these images as unmitigated slices of actual life, each is a carefully arranged visual description of connections between the photograph's subject, initiator, dispenser, and viewer. In the end, the possessor gives each image the cast of autobiographical fiction: a story he or she tells about identity and the world that creates it. The startling discrepancies that these photograph-fictions reveal necessitate a closer examination of the images as they exist today and the motives that drove their production and possession.

History of Spaces and Services, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 154.

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The Baldizzi confirmation portraits introduced above are part of a collection of family photographs at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the institution that now occupies and interprets the building where the Baldizzi family lived from 1928 to 1935. Interpretation of the family's apartment focuses on their ability to live through hard times, making a home out of scant wages and relief supplies. The apartment and the family's use of its spaces illustrate a narrative of adaptation, a core theme of any immigrant experience. The housing choices, family structure, even church involvement of immigrant populations are neither wholly American nor wholly of the native culture, but a mix that scholars are still puzzling out. This process of assimilation or acculturation has occupied anthropologists, historians, and geographers as well as scholars of material culture.

Oral histories and period observers have informed studies by historians like Robert Orsi and Elizabeth Ewen, who focused on ethnic communities in Italian Harlem and Manhattan's Lower East Side, respectively. Their books examine the intricate intersection between native and host cultures and how these intersections influence immigrant decisions about religious life, social circles, and economic consumption. Also a scholar of the urban working class, Lizabeth A. Cohen focuses on their domestic interiors at the turn of the twentieth century. In her article, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working Class Homes, 1885-1915," Cohen utilizes an impressive range of sources, including housekeeping manuals, immigrant literature, architecture journals, social workers' observations, and documentary photographs. She draws attention to the working class "struggle to satisfy both traditional and new expectations with products available on the mass market."[3] This struggle,

[3] Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working Class Homes, 1885-1915," in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999), 302.

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Cohen contends, resulted in a certain integrity for the working-class: their taste in domestic interiors was more than thwarted mimicry of middle-class style. As immigrants adapted old traditions to new lifestyles, a process of "material acculturation" took place.[4]

Within the study of this material acculturation, photographs occupy a particular niche. Unlike factory-made bedsteads or vivid chromolithographs that immigrants purchased for the first time in the United States, photographs were familiar objects to immigrant families. According to sources ranging from folk songs to immigrant memoirs, the production, possession, and exchange of photographs was common among European working-class families. In a life of extraordinary material change, they were a persistent presence in immigrant households, a regular and familiar purchase that immigrants could use to express their acceptance, rejection, or adaptation of American culture. In the images they produced, we find articulate visual statements of how this other half saw themselves.

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[4] Cohen, 305.

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FAMILY BACKGROUND

Although they had been married in Sicily, Adolfo and Rosaria Baldizzi migrated separately to the United States in the early 1920s. They settled first on Elizabeth Street in Manhattan's Little Italy. Their neighborhood there was dominated by their countrymen, a group with whom they would have shared many traditions and cultural ideals. Historian Robert Orsi's study of Italian Harlem offers helpful insights into the nature of Italian American communities in New York. In it, he identifies the central social structure of such neighborhoods. The "domus," a term Orsi borrows from historian Emmanuel LeRoy Laudrie's studies of French peasantry, was the unit from which all social and religious interactions stemmed. Though it was centered on immediate and extended family (blood relatives), it could be expanded to include godparents and other *comari* and *compari* (women and men friends) and neighbors.[5] Its members felt a fierce and abiding loyalty to its integrity and placed great value on remaining close, both physically and emotionally. In Italian Harlem, most family members did remain nearby.

In other neighborhoods, however, this loyalty could take second place to other aspirations. According to historian Donna Gabaccia, the Sicilians of Elizabeth Street sometimes sacrificed the integrity of the domus to achieve higher housing standards. As she studied Sicilian folk proverbs and compared her findings with settlement patterns in the neighborhood, she found that relationships with neighbors, highly valued in Sicilian villages, became somewhat devalued by the increasingly ephemeral nature of non-kin relationships. Residential persistence rates were low and depended largely on satisfaction with the condition of the housing itself rather than the

---

[5] Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xx.

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proximity of social connections. Given the chance to live in better housing, Sicilian immigrants would exit neighbor networks, relying instead on the more permanent relationships with kin for needed economic and social cooperation.[6] Though Gabaccia found that slum renewal projects forced some family groups to leave Elizabeth Street, other households chose to move in order to find housing with baths, central heating, and easily supervised play areas for their children.[7]

Neither of these motives provides a satisfactory explanation, however, for the Baldizzis' move to Orchard Street. If Sicilian immigrants did, indeed, hold certain housing and social ideals that were fulfilled by safe playgrounds and domus or kinship groups, the circumstances driving the Baldizzis away from Elizabeth Street must have been dire, indeed. One year after the birth of their second child, Adolfo and Rosaria Baldizzi moved from Elizabeth Street to Orchard Street, where they rented an apartment on the third floor of number 97. Though their new home was only a ten-minute walk from Elizabeth Street, their world was dramatically different. They had chosen to live in a neighborhood perhaps even poorer than Little Italy. According to a study conducted by the League of Mothers' Clubs of the United Neighborhood Houses of New York,[8]

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[6] Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 103-104.

[7] Gabaccia, 107-108.

[8]In 1928 and 1932, the League of Mothers' Clubs of the United Neighborhood Houses of New York conducted a study of 1104 families residing in tenements in the city. Focusing on the Lower East Side, the Middle East Side, the West Side, the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn, the LMC compiled data to illustrate shifts in rent, income, and housing conditions of New York's urban poor. Almost all families interviewed contained members of the Mothers' Clubs in their neighborhood settlement houses. Though the group interviewed in 1932 was not completely identical to the group surveyed in 1928, efforts were made to choose families from the same social and economic groups in order to obtain comparable data.

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conditions on the Lower East Side were slightly worse than the city-wide statistics (which were already low at the early-Depression survey date of 1932). Nearly half the families surveyed in the neighborhood were unemployed – a strong indication that this was not an upward move for the Baldizzi family. Though both Rosaria and Adolfo were employed for at least a portion of their residency on Orchard Street, their housing circumstances still fell at or below the average for their relatively poor neighborhood.

Though they could not have predicted the events of 1929, the League of Mothers' Clubs chose fortuitously to situate their survey years on either side of a major shift in the economic climate of the city. From $1570/year in 1928, the median annual salary of those families surveyed dropped 30% to $1049 by the end of 1932. Per week, the average family of those surveyed took home $30/week in 1928, a figure that dropped to $20 by 1932. According to the LMC, this median figure was below the subsistence level of $1150/year for a family of four, putting more than half the reporting families below the poverty line.

As dire as these calculations were, they failed to include those families in the most difficult of circumstances: those without any employment at all, totally dependent on some form of charity. By 1932, 40% of those employed in 1928 (which was nearly 100%) were "without employment of any sort." Though income and employment levels dropped seemingly without limit, rent remained almost static. In 1928, the median rent was $316 and consumed 19.23% of the median income. In 1932, that figure only increased by three dollars but consumed a startling 45% of the median family wages.

For this large portion of their income, half of the families surveyed in 1932 lived in railroad flats, defined for the purpose of this study as those "containing one or more rooms whose only windows open into other rooms." While the vast majority had gas for cooking (98%) and electricity for lighting (92%), only 55% had hot water in their apartments. Approximately half of the families surveyed had no private baths, and nearly 40% were without even a private toilet. Difficult conditions inside were compounded by the widespread lack of courtyard and play space (over 80% were without either).

League of Mothers Clubs of the United Neighborhood Houses, Inc., New York. *Tenements and Tenants: a study of 1104 temement families, members of the League of Mothers' Clubs, showing income, rent, and housing condition* (unpublished). Collated by Sidney Axelrad for the League of Mothers' Clubs, 70 5th Avenue, New York.

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Not only did the apartment on Orchard Street fail to meet Sicilian-American housing ideals, the surrounding neighborhood afforded limited opportunities for the Baldizzis to form an ideal domus of neighbors and kin. Located across the Bowery from Little Italy, it was long known as "Kleindeutschland," so dubbed for a population that was as much as 45% German in the mid-nineteenth century. As this first generation of German immigrants gave way to the next, they vacated tenements like 97 Orchard Street, leaving them to the new waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who dominated the neighborhood by the 1880s.[9] In fact, when the Federal Writers' Project produced its guidebook to New York City, they labeled that area as "The Jewish Quarter," noting that it was pre-dominantly inhabited by European Jews.[10] Though the Baldizzis shared 97 with Italian families like the Bonofiglios and the Raspizzios, the majority of their neighbors were people like the Rosenthals, a Jewish family from Russia who lived across the air shaft from Adolfo and Rosaria.

Far from fulfilling either their housing or social ideals, Adolfo and Rosaria Baldizzi struggled at this point to make ends meet. Though both worked when they could, Rosaria had to quit her job to ensure that the family would continue to receive much-needed public relief funds and supplies.[11] Like many immigrants, their lives did

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[9] Daniel Soyer, "Notes on the Historical Context of the Lives of Julius and Nathalie Gumpertz." December 1993. (unpublished, held in Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archives, New York: RG 3.5.2, Folder 3).

[10] Federal Writers Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City.* 1939. (New York: The New Press, 1995), 116.

[11] Faced with an overwhelming public need for home relief, the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York state produced a guide for local relief agencies, instructing them to use a family budget to calculate proper home relief allowances. Though it listed no actual dollar amounts, it offers advice for determining most basic needs and the proportion of income and relief that should be devoted to meeting them. Among those items provided by relief agencies were shelter, food, clothing, light, fuel for

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not measure up to their earliest hopes, and sacrifices were made. Priorities were reassessed, and resources allocated accordingly. Josephine remembered her mother economizing household expenses wherever possible, even reusing teabags and coffee grounds.[12]

If even food staples were so scarce, a family photograph must have been dear, indeed. Novelist Thomas Bell illustrated this economic reality in his novel *Out of This Furnace.* Published in 1941, the thinly-veiled autobiographical story recounts three generations of the Kracha family, Slovakian immigrants living in Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century. Historian Shirley Teresa Wajda uses Bell's narrative to open her article on portrait photographs in the American home between 1890 and 1930. In the excerpt chosen by Wajda, Kracha daughter Mary and her husband, Mike Dobrejcak must make a series of decisions about the $18.90 left in Mike's pay envelope: which creditor can they afford to pay this time? How much coal will need to be enough for the coming weeks? In the midst of this discussion, Mary brings up another expense to which Wajda calls the reader's attention:

> 'Two-fifty for coal. How much does that leave us?' [Mike] figured, moving his lips. 'Fifteen-forty. And fifteen-fifty from eighteen-ninety – three-forty.'

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heating and cooking, household necessities, medicine, and medical supplies and care. In special instances, other inclusions could be insulin, ice, carfare, or lunch money. Of these, food was judged to be of primary importance, as the effects of poor diet were observed to cause long-lasting and even permanent health problems. Relief money was tight, but those who accepted it did so only because their budgets were even tighter.

State of New York, Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, *Budget Manual: The Family Budget as a Basis For Home Relief* (Albany: Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, November 1, 1935), 7, 10.

[12] Josephine Baldizzi Esposito, Oral History Interview (4 August 1989; Transcription held in archives, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York), 81.

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> Mary looked down at her hands. 'Mihal, I want to have our picture taken. All together, the whole family. You said yourself it would be nice. We wouldn't have to get many right away – just so it was taken. Please, Mihal.'
>
> 'Marcha, be reasonable. Here's your answer.' He moved his hand at the books and the money on the table.
>
> 'You could go to the bank.' She continued hurriedly, 'We wouldn't have to get so many right away. Just three. That would cost only two-fifty and we could have more later; he would keep the plate if we asked him.'
>
> 'If I keep going to the bank pretty soon there won't be anything there to go for.'
>
> 'But it would be so nice to have a picture of all of us, while the children are small.' [13]

Earlier in the dialogue, Mike identifies $2.50 (the cost of Mary's photographs) as the price of a load of coal. Given the high opportunity cost[14] of such an object, researchers might expect surviving examples to be few and far between, and yet, no other working class possessions survive with such persistence across time. Families like the Dobrecjaks made decisions about how to spend their money, and repeatedly, they found ways to buy photographs, in spite of other pressing needs. As Wajda points out, this choice is telling: by purchasing the photographs, working-class families "recast a perceived luxury as a necessity."[15] No longer a discretionary expense, a photographic purchase was weighed against objects of necessity: food, heat, shelter. Given the photograph's elevated status

[13] Shirley Teresa Wajda, "The Artistic Portrait Photograph," in *The Arts and the American Home*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 165-166.

[14] Opportunity cost is a term commonly used by economists. It not only implies the monetary cost of an item, but also the purchase opportunities that the consumer forgoes by spending that money on that item. The opportunity cost of the photograph, in this case, is a load of coal – the warmth of the household for a length of time.

[15] Wajda, 166.

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within the household, it is not surprising that it appeared everywhere – in pockets, on mantels, in albums, in the mail – even on the Lower East Side.

At the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, in the same archival box as the Baldizzi images, family photographs abound, representing over twenty families who once lived in 97 Orchard Street. Depicting schoolchildren and newlyweds, families and bachelors, the images are plentiful and revealing. A few photographs even offer a studio signature, pinpointing photographers working in the neighborhood. One studio-issued folder that holds a confirmation portrait in the Baldizzi collection displays the insignia of M. Ficalora Art Studio, 230 Bowery (col. Prince Street) (figure 3). Located near the intersection of Prince Street and the Bowery, it stood within sight of the Bowery Mission and Salvation Army Hotel. Clearly, M. Ficalora Art Studio did not occupy the space for its prestige. A professional photographer had set up business in this poverty-stricken area because even the poorest consumer was still a consumer of photographs.

Because photography came at such a cost for families like the Baldizzis, the choices surrounding its production, exchange, and display must have been made with special care – and are therefore worthy of researchers' special attention. As household manager and mother, Rosaria Baldizzi became the primary initiator and keeper of the family photographs. In choosing the subjects of each image and preserving them in her family's collection, she both documented and perpetuated important, community-defining relationships. Spanning studios in Palermo, rooftops on Orchard Street, and a factory in the Garment District, this photographic collection became a tool for Rosaria Baldizzi: a woman making sense of herself, her family, and her world in the midst of cultural change, familial separation, and economic depression.

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PORTRAITS OF CONFIRMATION

Though she appears in neither of her children's confirmation portraits, it is obvious that Rosaria orchestrated them. One look at John's and Josephine's clothing reveals a mother who cared very deeply about the appearance of her children on important occasions. Though both were doubtless well-attired for the actual confirmation service at the church, the important occasions for which they are dressed in the photographs is, in fact, the making of the photographs themselves. Both children appear fresh, unwrinkled, and un-mussed. Boutonnieres and corsages are unwilted, suggesting that perhaps the visit to the photographer preceded even the walk to church. Rosaria's presence in the studio itself is strongly suggested by John's neatly pulled-up knee socks. What ten-year-old boy (or his thirty-something godfather) would remember to correct slouched socks before the camera's condemning flash documented his mussed appearance? But what mother of a ten-year-old boy would not straighten her son's jacket, bow-tied armband, and footwear before the picture was taken? Such attentions, clearly evident in this photograph, strongly indicate Rosaria's presence in the studio.[16]

As she pressed her children's white clothing and spoke to their godparents about the photography session, Rosaria prepared to add images to her "portrait-

---

[16] Recalling his first communion, Anthony Gisoffi, another immigrant son, described his mother's efforts to make him presentable:

> My mother had attired me in a new blue suit with belted jacket and short trousers as became my age, soft white silk bow-tie, and white silk arm-band (as prescribed for the occasion), new low brown shoes, and new brown hose that reached just below the knee…."

Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Italian American Family Album* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 83.

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chronicle." In the language of photography critic Susan Sontag, this sort of "portable kit of images... bears witness to [the family's] connectedness."[17] The visible connections in the confirmation portraits, though strong, only shadow the most important relationship of the photograph: that of Rosaria to the Catholic church. As author Annette Kuhn suggests, the act of dressing for and photographing events like confirmation articulated such a connection:

> Ceremonial dress signifies that the occasion it celebrates subsumes the individualities of those taking part to larger communities; to attachments that go beyond, even overshadow, the personal lives of those pictured. Even if destined to have no currency beyond family album or mantelpiece, the ceremonial image may nonetheless voice a profound desire not merely to be witness to, but actively to participate in, rituals through which a recognition of some collective destiny, a social sense of belonging, is sustained.[18]

John and Josephine participated in the ritual of confirmation; through that ceremony, their attachments to the church were formalized. Though less visible, Rosaria's direction of the "ceremonial image" production was a ritual equally potent in its religious significance.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the mainstream American Catholic church had become increasingly characterized by material manifestations of faith – objects bought, sold, and used outside the walls of the church. A devout Catholic could prove his devotion through the purchase and display of rosaries, medals, scapulars, holy

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[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977), 9.

[18] Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), 62.

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cards, and crucifixes.[19] This trend signified the growth of devotional Catholicism, which emphasized demonstrations of individual faith through festivals and observances.

The Italian Catholics arriving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were "especially noted for this," according to church historian Jay Dolan. He points out the feast days observed by Italian parishes which could last as long as a week, like Harlem's celebration of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.[20] In a study of that *festa*, historian Robert Orsi notes that such material manifestations of faith were, for Italian immigrants, a major means by which "the people revealed themselves to themselves."[21] Orsi defines religion not only as the "sacred rituals, practices, symbols, prayers, and faith of the people," but, more importantly, as "the totality of their ultimate values, their most deeply held ethical convictions, their efforts to order their reality, their cosmology."[22] For immigrants, religion and its everyday manifestations became a major source of continuity between the Italian homeland and New York. Related objects represented far more than attendance at a weekly observance. The images and figures chosen to signify faith held meaning that was central to the very being of Italian-Americans.

For the Baldizzi family, this day-to-day devotion was displayed in multiple material ways. Holy pictures hung on the wall in the kitchen and front room; rosaries draped the front room's bureau and mirror. Rosaria made sure that her children wore their scapulars each day, and Josephine collected and saved holy cards from the nearby

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[19] Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 213.

[20] Dolan, 217.

[21] Orsi, xxii-xxiii.

[22] Orsi, xvii.

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shrine to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In a very concrete way, Rosaria demonstrated her devotion to the church and its place in her life. As a mother, she relied upon these material evidences of spirituality as she nurtured and protected her children. In her book, *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell discusses the impulse to articulate intangible, spiritual experiences with tangible, common objects, explaining that "material Christianity is a means by which both elite and non-elite Christians express their relationship to God and the supernatural…."[23] According to McDannell, religious objects owned and used by the lay faithful negotiate a crucial gap between the sacred and profane. [24] Ushering the spiritual into the tenement, common religious objects like confirmation portraits helped Rosaria maintain ties between her household and their heavenly home. The confirmation portraits for which her children posed were both a vehicle for and evidence of her desire for their involvement in the church – and a symbol her own standing as a good Catholic mother.

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[23] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 13.

[24] McDannell, 38.

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FIRST COMMUNION PORTRAIT

Across the hall from the Baldizzi apartment was another good Catholic mother, Rose Bonofiglio.[25] When her son Vincent received his first holy communion, Rose took him promptly to the photographer's studio to document the occasion. In his first communion portrait, Vincent kneels in profile to the photographer, dressed in a black suit with frilly white collar (figure 4). As he turns slightly to address the camera, holding an open prayer book and rosary, an angel painted on the backdrop curtain bends to offer him the communion wafer and wine. Few photographer's props speak so loudly of the construction and deconstruction of reality that took place daily within the photographer's studio. In the words of photography critic Julia Hirsch, that studio was like "a chamber of fictions, offering clients spatial illusions where they could escape from the evidence of their material successes or failures…."[26] In this portrait, a cooperative effort between a professional photographer, a Catholic mother, and a compliant son produced a story of pious, innocent membership in the holy church.

Given the existence of the Baldizzi portraits, it is not hard to imagine the motives and emotions behind the production of Vincent's photograph. For our purposes, the more interesting phase of the Bonofiglio communion portrait's existence came after production, when a copy crossed the hall to the Baldizzi apartment. There the image was permanently incorporated into the family collection, descending to Josephine (Baldizzi) Esposito and arriving at the Tenement Museum's archives with the other Baldizzi family

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[25] This is the same woman who served as Josephine Baldizzi's godmother and who was photographed with Josephine in her confirmation portrait.

[26] Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 70.

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photographs. Julia Hirsch hints at this second life-stage of the photograph, pointing out that there are three major players in the photographic process:

> The person taking the photograph defined its subject; those photographed took a chance on their own visual immortality; those who look at the picture answer to their own longings and curiosities.[27]

To Hirsch's astute observation, I would add that the first player she identifies need not *take* the photograph – only *initiate* its production. In Vincent Bonofiglio's first communion portrait, his mother chose the subject. She arranged the visit to the studio where the painted angel pantomimed the administration of the sacrament; she selected the clothing her son wears. Vincent, in this case, probably had little choice in the matter of his "own visual immortality," but even a young child understands that a photograph supernaturally preserves a passing expression or posture.[28]

After the photograph is taken, the image's initiator becomes its dispenser. Whether it is stored in an album, tucked in a mirror frame, mailed to relatives, or given to neighbors, the image bears mute testimony to the will of its producer. Like all the other choices involved in the photographic process, the decision of where to place the finished image – or to whom it will be distributed – reveals family priorities.[29] Though it is impossible to know how many copies of Vincent's portrait were made, the fact that one was given to the Baldizzi family strongly indicates the value the Bonofiglios placed on

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[27] Julia Hirsch, 9.

[28] Julia Hirsch, 9.

[29] McDannell begins her book by pointing out that a complete understanding of the meaning behind religious objects must include the system of exchange that draws them out of the "sacred" and into the "profane." Individuals infuse possession with meaning, and McDannell asserts that it is primarily this meaning that makes any object (particularly religious objects) worth close study (McDannell, 3).

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their friendship.[30] That Rosaria and then Josephine kept the image in their collection of family photographs confirms the ongoing attachment.

The Baldizzis are, in fact, the chief viewers – members of the third category identified by Marianne Hirsch in her discussion of players in the photographic process. Of this group, she writes that they must "answer to their own longings and curiosities," engaging the photograph and fitting it into their mental catalog of images. Viewing a photograph involves the audience's preconceptions about the subject matter, and they accept or reject its message accordingly. If the viewer's perspective allows him to accept that message as true, he perpetuates that truth in a way that the photograph initiator could never do alone. In Hirsch's words,

> Between the viewer and the recorded object, the viewer encounters, and/or projects, a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shape the representation. Eye and screen are the very elements of ideology: our expectations circumscribe and determine what we show and what we see.[31]

As a viewer of Vincent's portrait, Rosaria partnered with Rose in the latter's quest to create and record a family ideology of religious devotion and purity. It is as though the two women shared a secret: both knew that the virtue and innocence documented in this photograph would fade from brilliance when life continued outside the photographer's studio. They realized that this image, which presents Vincent in such purity, "[could not] so much fix that moment of innocence as testify to the inevitability of its slipping away, a

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[30] Recall the story of the Dobrecjaks' family photograph: when photography came at such a high opportunity cost, the price of each copy was dear. The gift of such an image, then, was a significant gesture and worthy of scholars' attention.

[31] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photograph Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

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slippage of grace."[32] From the prayer book and rosary to the painted angel, each object in the portrait implies this state of grace; even the white ribbon around Vincent's upper arm signified the purity of a newly confessed soul.[33] Through the photographer's suggestive props and a frozen, virtuous moment, this image not only expresses a family's spirituality but also portends future slippage, legitimating each on the screen shared by photograph initiator (Rose Bonofiglio) and photograph viewer (Rosaria Baldizzi).

Any souvenir of childhood, perhaps most poignantly a photograph, will evoke "not a childhood as lived, [but]...a childhood as voluntarily remembered." As Susan Stewart points out in her consideration of the nature of the souvenir, the childhood remembered through a photograph is "a childhood manufactured from its material survivals."[34] For mothers Rose and Rosaria, Vincent's first communion portrait is an expression of the childhood they both desire for their children, the one they choose voluntarily to remember. Such images articulate the desire for the state of purity that disappears almost immediately after the moment of exposure: the suit is first rumpled, then removed, and the prayer book may or may not see devoted, pious use. Sharing the knowledge of this gap between reality and desire, the women use the exchange of this and other photographs both to articulate and to perpetuate neighborly friendship. In making and dispensing the photograph, Rose Bonofiglio identified herself as a Roman Catholic mother and Rosaria Baldizzi as a friend. By viewing and keeping the image, Rosaria concurred.

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[32] Kuhn 42.

[33] Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 171.

[34] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 145.

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Their arrangement of such a photographic exchange speaks loudly of the role of mothers in the domus and its Orchard Street permutations. In Orsi's Italian Harlem, married women with children were the acknowledged moral and social authorities of the neighborhood. They enjoyed positions of great respect within the community. Their opinions were central to family decision-making, and their authority was trusted on issues of morality and etiquette. In many families, the matriarch held together otherwise centrifugal family members; she was their glue. As Orsi points out,

> it was in a woman's power to define who belonged to the domus and who did not, who was to be excluded. They identified the comari and 'cousins' to be respected by their husbands and children.[35]

Could photographs have been one tool used to circumscribe the domus?

For Rosaria Baldizzi and Rose Bonofiglio, participation in and exchange of their children's confirmation portraits seem to have served that purpose. Just as Rose posed with Josephine at the young girl's confirmation, Rosaria posed with Rose's sister-in-law, Rita, who requested Mrs. Baldizzi as her godmother (figure 3). Accordingly, Rosaria appears in a confirmation portrait with John Bonofiglio's sister Rita, and the portrait itself appears in Rosaria's collection. Not unlike the Baldizzi confirmation pictures, the photography features Rita, wearing a white dress with white veil, stockings, and mary jane shoes stands with a large bouquet of flowers. With a hand on the girl's shoulder, Rosaria stands to her right, dressed in a nice dress and hat with a fur-trimmed coat draped over her right arm.

As an adult invited to become closely entwined with children's spiritual upbringing, the godparent was an honorary inclusion in the domus.[36] He or she was

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35 Orsi, 131.

36 Orsi, 90.

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respected by the child's relatives; the godparent and his immediate family was taken into the same circle as aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins. As godmother, Rosaria took on special responsibility toward Rita. Moral guidance and social support were key roles played by godparents, who were usually chosen from among close friends of the child's mother and father.[37] Their appointments "extended the family resources of early immigrants," according to anthropologist Colleen Leahy Johnson. In her study of first- and second-generation Italian immigrant families, she found that "the *compariggio,* or the godparent system … performed a useful function of creating quasi-kin relationships out of friendships."[38] Rituals like first communion and confirmation, according to Johnson, afforded unique opportunities for family members to reconnect with each other and with their Southern Italian heritage. "In this capacity," she writes, "[rituals] symbolize a link to one's past and a recognition of one's present affiliation as a member of an Italian-American family [domus]."[39] In crafting (and later, giving) this photograph of her daughter at confirmation, Marietta Bonofiglio (mother of John and Rita and matriarch of the family) commemorated Rosaria's participation in that ritual, identifying her as a member of the Bonofiglio domus in America. Through Rosaria's participation in the photographic production and display, she accepted that position, claiming a place for herself – and her family – in the domus.

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[37] Colleen Leahy Johnson, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Italian-American Families* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 96.

[38] *Ibid.*, 30-31.

[39] *Ibid.*, 104.

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FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS FROM SICILY

Beyond membership in the Catholic church and the domus of 97 Orchard Street, Rosaria Baldizzi kept a set of photographs that signified her status in another group: her family in Sicily. Though Josephine (Baldizzi) Esposito's oral history mentions cousins living on the west side of Manhattan, most relatives remained in Palermo.[40] She speaks of one of her father's brothers, still alive at the time of the interview: "he's about ninety-three, but I've never seen him. Just a picture, you know."[41] In that comment, Rosaria's daughter cuts to the heart of her mother's photographic collection. Though Josephine never met her paternal uncle, she knew of him through a photograph. Through that image, she included him in her mental picture of the domus.

That particular photograph is not included in the Baldizzi collection at the Tenement Museum, but several other pictures depict generations of Sicilian relatives, mostly from Rosaria's family (figures 5, 6, 7).[42] Mainly studio photographs, the images group siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews in various configurations and in various formats. With these photographs included in her portrait-chronicle, Rosaria reconstructed ties severely disrupted by her trans-Atlantic migration.

Dread of this disruption plagued immigrants leaving Italy, as well as those who remained. The structure of the domus, that complex yet intense network of kin, neighbors, and friends, was stretched across an ocean and stressed nearly to its limits.

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[40] Esposito, 23.

[41] *Ibid.*, 10.

[42] According to Orsi's findings, this is not surprising: after marriage, a couple tended to remain closer, emotionally and physically, to the wife's family than to the husband's. Orsi, 131.

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Yet ties with family still in Europe were central to immigrants' memories of their homeland. Rather than speak of the terrain, the climate, or the built environment, Italian Americans spoke of their native towns in terms of the relatives who still lived there.[43] Expressing these relation-centered memories was central to the well-being of immigrants and of the domus itself.[44] The narrative act provided a continuity that allowed individuals to locate their identities in the community.[45]

But, as Orsi notes, this continuity cannot be separated from the migration-induced pain of disruption. Italian immigrant and author Leonard Covello experienced this dichotomy on a visit to Italy in 1921. The night before Covello was to return to New York, his uncle bid him good night saying, "'Separation is terrible. Heaven is the reunion of loved ones.'" The next morning, as Covello waited for the train, his uncle attempted to mediate the impending separation with a gift: along with one of Covello's childhood schoolbooks, he gave his nephew a photograph of Covello's late mother (sister to the uncle).[46] In the face of painful separation, the man who stayed offered to the one who left an artifact of connection. The image had linked the older man to his sister; he now used it to cement a tie with his prodigal nephew, reminding the younger man of the past that they shared.

The photograph as connector appears repeatedly in narratives of immigrant life. For their *Italian American Family Album,* authors Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler collected letters, oral histories, and, of course, photographs in their assemblage of

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43 Ibid., 19.

44 Ibid., 153.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 23.

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immigrant memories. The images they found include pre-migration photographs, and the captions attached are telling. Below a studio portrait of an elderly gentleman, the text explains that "Anton Fenoglio, who moved to Texas in the 19th century, kept this picture of his father in Ivrea, Italy."[47] Another image, taken outdoors in a studio mock-up, is labeled, "Charles Ferarra treasured this photo of his parents and three sisters, who remained in Sicily when he left for America in the early 20th century."[48] Though the contemporary captions may embellish the images, they nonetheless point out that photographs made in Italy were carried to America by relatives of the photograph's subjects.

The strength of the image-connection was dramatically portrayed in an Italian folk song, sung by a headstrong young woman and her unfaithful, America-bound boyfriend:

He: I'm leaving for America/ Leaving on the boat,
I'm leaving and I'm happy/ Never to see you again.

She: When you're gone/ You'll be sorry.
You'll be sorry/ You let me go.

He: When I'm in America/ I'll marry an American.
And then I'll abandon/ The beautiful Italian….

She: Give me my letters/ Give me my picture.
Traitor, I will never/ love you again [italics mine].

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[47] Hoobler, 12.

[48] *Ibid.,* 15.

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To this young couple, the photograph was portable evidence of mutual feeling. Where the person could not be, the photograph could be carried. Like a special ring or love letters, it was a token of affection over which the subject retained power. If an image given was love articulated, then one given to be taken across the ocean represented a strong bond, indeed.

Looking at the photographs in the Baldizzi collection with this in mind, it is not difficult to see the affection between Rosaria and the members of her domus in Palermo. Many of the pictures depict family members of a previous generation: women with the high-necked dresses and pompadours of 1900 stand next to men with stiff collars and carefully parted hair. At a very basic level, these images reveal the appearance of certain relatives at a certain time. But their presence in Rosaria's portrait-chronicle implies far more. Though "family photographs may affect to show us the past," Marianne Hirsch notes, "what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday."[49] Though photographs act as souvenirs of the past, the past they evoke is a "conservative idealization," arranged and explained "for the purposes of a present ideology."[50] Rosaria's collection of family images from the past mediated the present separation by bequeathing her memories to all who viewed the photographs.

Each photograph thus became a narrative prompt. Indeed, the photograph's *raison d'etre* is to stimulate, through its silence, the telling of a story. This story, in turn, becomes an object of desire, a nostalgic ritual that is repeated with two results. As with Susan Stewart's souvenirs, the photograph's function "is to authenticate a past or

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[49] Marianne Hirsch, 16.

[50] Stewart, 150.

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otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present." For a narrator dealing with the turmoil of migration and separation,

> the present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir [in this case, the photograph] has as its referent.[51]

The dichotomy was preserved: in the face of immigration's disruption, the photograph was a means of connection. As she narrated for her children the family of images, Rosaria re-located herself in that community and integrated the next generation into the trans-Atlantic domus.[52]

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[51] Stewart, 138-139.

[52] Visual culture scholar David Morgan asserts that "making [the world of the children] and maintaining [the world of the elders] are a single enterprise." In his discussion of world-making and the everyday, he argues that an individual's construction of reality cannot occur without the simultaneous function of both making and maintaining. Applied to Rosaria's use of the family photographs, then, I would suggest that the acts of remembering and bequeathing memory were essential to her formation of her post-migration identity. David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 12.

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SNAPSHOTS ON THE ROOF

If the photographs brought over began the integration of Rosaria's children into the domus, photographs sent back completed the process. Josephine later recalled her mother frequently taking pictures to send to family, which doubtless served for them the same purpose that the photograph of Adolfo's brother had served for Josephine. Though Rosaria later traveled back to Sicily and many relatives eventually migrated to New York, those who remained in Palermo would only know Josephine and John, born after their parents' arrival in New York, through photographs.[53]

But even these images served more than one familial function. Beyond the obvious preservation of family ties was the implicit protection of cultural heritage. One of these photographs, taken when Josephine was probably about seven years old, is a studio-like picture of the two Baldizzi children (figure 8). Smartly outfitted in a sailor suit, John stands beside Josephine, one hand resting on her shoulder. His other arm hangs at his side, painfully outreaching the too-small sleeve. Josephine wears a ribbon in her hair and a white, ruffle-collared dress. Hands folded demurely in her lap, she sits next to John. Though the photograph fades near the bottom, obscuring the children's feet, the scenery in the background indicates that they are standing on a rooftop. Over Josephine's left shoulder, the upper floors of an adjacent building are visible. Over John's head, a chimney pipe pokes over a brick wall; at the base of the wall, pitch has been liberally applied to keep water from seeping to the floors below.

As with the studio portraits, the neat appearance of these two children indicates the involvement of a mother, demonstrating her care for their family and devotion to the domus through the making of a photograph. Just as Rosaria Baldizzi

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[53] Esposito, 59.

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chose whom to include as subject and recipient of her photographs, she made deliberate decisions about where to make those photographs. In this image, the setting is an urban rooftop – not the street, not the park, but the roof, presumably the roof of 97 Orchard Street. Though most amateur cameras required strong, outdoor light for proper exposure, there were other options besides the rooftop – like the street, which also afforded the needed light. But the Baldizzis chose to make their family snapshots on the roof (see figures 8, 9, 10).[54] In order to understand the choice of this setting, we must first examine the problems attending street photography.

Famous for its pushcart market, Orchard Street was a crowded clatter of people, goods, and transportation. In 1935, the WPA Guide to New York City described the range of wares available to shoppers:

> In the famous Orchard Street Pushcart Market, which stretches for several blocks above and below Delancey Street, fruits, vegetables, bread, hot *knishes* (boiled buckwheat groats or mashed potatoes, wrapped in a skin of dough and baked), *bagel* (doughnut-shaped rolls), and hot *arbes* (boiled chick-peas) are offered for sale; also tools, hardware, work clothes, and many odd types of merchandise.[55]

As young children, Josephine and John Baldizzi watched from their apartment window as the peddlers loaded and unloaded their carts. Years later, Josephine described the experience in an oral history interview, recalling how she and her brother

> were amazed at how he [one of the peddlers] knew just where to put everything, and everything was packed, pots and pans, and he had this ritual of singing what he had on the cart, and prices… People going up and

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[54] The Baldizzis were not alone in this decision. A large portion of the non-studio photographs in the Tenement Museum's Family Photograph Archive were taken on the rooftop. For examples from the Bonofiglio collection, see figures 10 and 11.

[55] Federal Writers Project, 117.

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> down, walking through the streets shopping. This is what I think of when I think of Orchard Street.[56]

Though Josephine's recollections focus on the positive hubbub of the streetscape, not all immigrants viewed it with such favor. One Italian Harlem resident sadly compared Manhattan to his village in Italy:

> The sunlight and fresh air of our mountain home ... were replaced by four walls and people over and under and on all sides of us. Silence and sunshine, things of the past, now replaced by a new urban montage. The cobbled streets, the endless monotonous rows of tenement buildings that shut out the sky. The traffic of wagons and carts and carriages, and the clopping of horses' hooves which struck sparks at night... The clanging of bells and the screeching of sirens as a fire broke out somewhere in the neighborhood....[57]

In Italy, space out-of-doors was for working and socializing. Women often combined the two, sharing household tasks like cooking and cleaning in sun-filled, open rural landscapes. In New York, outdoors meant streets, channels cut between buildings for the flow of traffic and money. Household activities were turned outside in, and housewives followed.[58]

From their positions inside the homes, Italian Harlem mothers targeted the pushcarts that had so entertained the Baldizzi children as sources of filth and stench.[59] They knew the traffic that accompanied such markets could be dangerous for their children, as John discovered when crossing the street with a penny to spend in the corner

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56 Josephine Baldizzi Esposito, Oral History Interview, April 1994. (Unpublished: Transcription held in archives, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York), 3.

57 Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 61.

58 Ewen, 62.

59 Orsi, 42.

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drug store on his birthday. As he dashed across the street, he was hit by a car and suffered a broken leg.

Moreover, streets with no space for women to work and no safety for children to play were dominated by men in Orsi's Italian Harlem. Though women and children did use the streets for activities ranging from the leisurely to the disciplinary, "the streets were predominantly a male place." As Orsi suggests, "men used the streets to display their power and authority."[60] As a physical danger zone and a male power arena, the streetscape was hardly an appropriate backdrop for the domus-defining, female-directed practice of photography.

By posing family photographs on the rooftop, then, Rosaria was perhaps claiming that space as an anti-street – territory on which she could care properly for her domus. Removed from the path of dangerous cars and the filth of pushcart garbage, her children were safe from physical danger. According to Josephine, the family took advantage of the space: it became an extended social area for everything from meals to photographs.[61]

But there was also a sense of moral protection implied in the rooftop. Josephine recalled how her mother's protectiveness flared when she and John tried to join an out-of-school club, as their teachers encouraged. "My mother wasn't into that," Josephine explained. "You know, she wanted her kids protected. We had to stay under her and nowhere else."[62] Such organizations fostered freer social patterns in young

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[60] Orsi, 35

[61] Esposito, (4 August 1989), 59. Quoted, the passage reads as follows: "And like I said, we used to go on the roof, and we used to eat up on the roof, and all that. Take pictures all the time. My mother would take pictures to send them to our family."

[62] Esposito, (4 August 1989), 47.

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people than many parents preferred. Encouraging casual evenings away from home, these clubs precipitated inter-gender mingling, interactions ordinarily prohibited as morally dangerous by cautious immigrant parents.[63] But club membership was not the only factor of difference between generations. Arguments over clothes, language, and dating habits were linked directly to the culture children inevitably encountered, quite literally, on the streets. Describing the cultural gap between himself and his Sicilian mother and father, historian Jerre Mangione recalled that growing up with immigrant parents "'meant living a double life – being Sicilian at home and American elsewhere….'"[64] Recalling the "'two worlds'" in which he lived, Italian-American poet John Ciardi wrote that he "'had to use a double standard: one thing out-of-doors and another thing indoors.'"[65] Repeatedly, the physical world outside the door to the home – the street – is identified with the metaphysical world of non-Italian culture. In the words of one second-generation Italian-American, the threshold of the apartment building was literally the dividing line: "'beyond that," he recalled years later, "the older folks went their way and we went ours.'"[66]

This situation was characteristic of many immigrant families, where parents feared that their children were absorbing too many American ways – that they were assimilating at the expense of their moral and cultural heritage. According to historian Milton M. Gordon, assimilation was a gradual, stepped process involving shifts in both cultural and structural affiliations. Though complete assimilation involved such

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63 Ewen, 211.

64 Hoobler, 78.

65 *Ibid.*

66 Ewen, 203.

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integrated behaviors as intermarriage with other nationalities, it started with smaller changes, including involvement in the social organizations of American culture. In his classic text on the topic, Gordon calls this stage "structural assimilation" and identifies it as a sort of keystone in the acculturation process. He claims that families that chose to join lodges, clubs, and other societies with mixed memberships were much more likely to complete the transition from their native culture to that of the United States.[67]

When Italian-American children began this transition without their parents, though, the effects were quite dire. Italian-American minister Enrico C. Sartorio wrote in 1918 about the change, observing that though immigrant youth clubs organized by social workers did "a great work in training the second generation to love and respect justice and honor," they were also helping "to deepen the gulf between parents and children." Sartorio explained further:

> Unintentionally those clubs tend to train the young Italian boys and girls to stay out of the home almost every evening and to mix freely together. This may be very proper for other races, but I have had the opinion of many priests and ministers as to the results of this system among Italians and it was not very encouraging. The club-trained Italian boys and girls are easily recognized by the ease with which they get married and divorced, by their unwillingness to stay and take care of their home after they are married, and by their almost insane desire to be incessantly out for 'a good time.'[68]

For the Baldizzi children to speak of involvement in a club outside the home, then, was to speak not only of adopting American culture, but of rejecting their Sicilian heritage and indeed, Rosaria and Adolfo themselves.

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[67] Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 69-70, 81.

[68] Enrico C. Sartorio, *Social and Religious Life of Italians in America.* 1918. (Clifton: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974), 72-73.

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Given this distinction, a family portrait on the sidewalk outside the building would have been something of a contradiction. For if, indeed, a thing photographed takes on an air of truth and reality, no mother would want to record forever her child's co-existence with the commercial, social, and moral climate of the streets – the world outside the home. The streets were populated with people from every possible social and cultural background, but rooftops were more exclusively occupied by friends, family, and neighbors. As historian Elizabeth Ewen explains, European cultures revolved around family-oriented activities, not free social mingling.[69] Though they could have used the street for family photography, the rooftop provided a layer of privacy, a boundary around this self-selected group of people with common cultural, social, and moral values.

The layers of this boundary were complex. Maintaining a conceptual, intangible buffer around the domus required a strong spatial, tangible boundary. Writing about this duality, urban planners Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson link both ideas to the creation of private domestic space. Though spatial continuity is based on physical proximity and distance, transpatial relations are based on conceptual analogy and difference. It is transpatial continuity that makes global sense of local observations, connecting one unit with another that is physically far removed – linking Rosaria's New York family to her Sicilian relatives and their culture. Part of this identification with distant groups involved separation from local culture, a well-marked distinction between "us" and "them."[70]

Superimposed on the tenement building at 97 Orchard Street, this theory explains why the rooftop's physical (spatial) isolation appealed to Rosaria's sense of

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69 Ewen, 208.

70 Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 144-146.

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domus protection: that separation made the cultural (transpatial) distance possible. In order to go from street to roof, an outsider must first gain access to the building. Upon entrance, he would encounter five flights of stairs passing through the center of each floor. The arrangement of the staircase required him to walk past every apartment door on his climb, providing each of the twenty families ample opportunity to note his presence and evaluate its legitimacy. As he moved through this vertical space, he would become intensely aware of his own physical presence, as each step up stole another labored breath.[71] He might need to pause after the third flight, lingering in stasis in a motion-oriented space and becoming even more aware of his own intrusion. Though not originally designed to do so, the journey from street to roof would make the uninvited visitor intensely aware of his own movement through layers of privacy, creating a sort of processional landscape as a buffer around the rooftop itself. Because it was physically distant from the street, it was also culturally and morally removed from the street's influence. The existence of a tangible boundary thus precipitated the demarcation of intangible ones: after physically grouping her family on the rooftop, Rosaria photographed them in the filth-free, culturally safe space.[72]

Unlike any other medium, photography had the power to establish such a boundary as truth. By making a picture of her children together on the roof, Rosaria not only documented their cohesion but enabled its continuance. "Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real," Marianne Hirsch notes, "...it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in

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[71] Donlyn Lyndon and Charles W. Moore, *Chambers for a Memory Palace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 53

[72] Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City* (London: Routledge, 2003), 24.

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family history."[73] The camera's ability to record such *tableaux* has power to reinforce tenuous family values – in this case, to confirm (both to Rosaria and to Sicilian family members who received the photographs) Josephine's and John's membership in the Southern Italian culture of the Baldizzi domus. As Susan Sontag writes, such images are tools that can, indeed, "restate symbolically the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life."[74] Though the streets may have threatened the cohesion of the domus culture, Rosaria gathered her family high above the danger and photographed them there, preserving a record of who they were and how they should be remembered.

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[73] Marianne Hirsch, 7.

[74] Sontag, 9.

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WORKING PHOTOGRAPHS

Though the street became a metaphor for anti-family culture, this view was layered over another common immigrant perception of America. "Streets paved with gold" expressed the hopes that motivated many to emigrate; Rosaria and Adolfo were no different. Josephine remembered hearing her mother speak of the "land of opportunity," a place where she and Adolfo planned to "make it big."[75] Recalling his own misconceptions of America's riches, another immigrant recounted seeing a group of Italians digging in the road. To his hopeful eyes, they were digging up the fabled gold of America's streets, and he eagerly anticipated joining them.[76] "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold," another Italian immigrant is said to have remarked. "When I got here," he explained, "I found out three things: first, the streets weren't paved with gold; second, they weren't paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them."[77]

With this quip, he revealed the layers of meaning that covered the street. Originally a symbol of American promise, the streets of New York took on an ominous meaning, at least to some Italian-American families struggling to maintain family unity and Italian heritage. But these streets had to be paved: work had to be done, work that simultaneously demanded and rewarded immigrant hours. Though employment offered income and often English skills, interaction with non-Italian populations necessitated

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[75] Josephine Baldizzi Esposito, Oral History Interview, 2 August 1989. (Unpublished: Transcription held in archives, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York), 9-10.

[76] Hoobler, 40.

[77] *Ibid.*, 43.

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some measure of cultural adaptation, a challenge that families like the Baldizzis chose to accept in their struggle to get by.

This was the challenge that Rosaria took on when she came down from the rooftop and walked the streets to the garment factory. For a woman so committed to family and domus integrity, the decision to work outside the home must have been difficult. Yet in her photographic collection, Rosaria included an image of herself and her co-workers, who paused for a moment from their work to smile for the camera (figure 11). In the picture, their workroom is spare but neat and well-lit; productivity is apparent. In the immediate foreground is a pile of fabric, probably coats awaiting the linings that Rosaria and the others would attach. Apparently, this shop employed at least fourteen sewers, both men and women, who are seated at a long, narrow table of sewing machines. Women wear dresses or smocks; the men are neatly dressed in shirts, ties, and even vests. One vest-clad man stands away from the table, occupying the left middle-ground of the photograph alone. Probably a manager or shop owner, he has apparently chosen to record his staff and their work, even distributing the images to some of his workers.

More importantly, though, Rosaria made a choice about this photograph: she brought it home. Adding it to her image-kit, she confirmed to herself and every other viewer that she did, indeed, work outside the home, spending significant time with non-domus members. Though it does not blatantly celebrate Rosaria's employment, the photograph avoids concealing the fact; indeed, its addition to the family portrait-chronicle is hardly an attempt to omit this transgression from the family memory.

One possible and probable understanding of this photograph involves revisions of the presumed cultural norm. Rosaria was a woman who focused the energy of her photographic production on the preservation of virtue. Presumably, this virtue also included proper, church- and domus-sanctioned views of marriage and the wife's role

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therein. Remaining under male authority, women worked within the home, contributing to family welfare through housekeeping and child rearing. According to Robert Orsi's findings, "a good woman, in the understanding of the [Italian-American] community, had little or no life outside the domus.... A good woman felt uncomfortable outside the domus." Indeed, he continues, the Italian woman of good reputation "did not know how to leave the neighborhood and never learned anything about public transportation." Yet this devotion was double-edged, as Orsi reveals: this good woman, for utter loyalty to her husband and children, "would sacrifice 'everything' for them."[78] If their welfare was on the line, the same good woman would leave the domus to care for her family.

In the hard times of the Great Depression, an extra income would have offered welcome room in the Baldizzi budget. With Adolfo struggling to find steady work, Rosaria found employment in a Garment District shop, where she sewed linings into overcoats. For a woman who so closely guarded the morality and culture of her family, would this sort of journey cost far more than fare on the subway? What was the cost for her husband Adolfo, whose struggle to earn a living for his family meant that his wife had to spend significant time outside the home?

Traditional assumptions about Italian family structures suggest that this sort of arrangement was a last resort, a tragedy of desperate measures in hard times. But if Rosaria was willing to add the factory portrait to her collection, it did not represent to her a completely undesirable circumstance. Though life in Sicily would not accept her work at a garment factory, Rosaria's and Adolfo's Sicilian-American identity held heritage and home in a delicate balance. Out of necessity, the resultant culture adapted to new ideas of gender and work.

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[78] Orsi, 144-145.

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In counterpoint to the adaptation of Rosaria's factory portrait, another image in her collection reveals that new ideas of gender roles were, indeed, adaptations, not replacements, of traditional marriage roles. The Baldizzi portrait-chronicle includes a picture of Adolfo, posing with the product of his skill as a craftsman (figure 12). Taken some years after 1935 (when the family left Orchard Street for Eldridge Street and, eventually, Brooklyn) the photograph shows a small home bar, framed in sleek curly maple and decorated with an intricately designed marquetry silhouette of Manhattan's skyline. On the other side of hard times, Adolfo was once again working steadily in his original trade: cabinetmaking. A private party commissioned this piece of furniture, which probably showcased a great range of Adolfo's skills in construction and ornamentation. Adolfo himself takes a knee next to the bar, holding his cigarette between two fingers as he nearly smiles for the camera, which was possibly operated by Rosaria. In his white undershirt, he is most likely at home, posing with his handiwork before delivering it to a customer.

In this image, Adolfo is recast as skillful provider for his family. Through the anachronism of the photographic collection, his labor and Rosaria's are rendered simultaneous. Years after both images were produced, the primary narration for each is the work done, not the work done by one when the other was unable. The photograph of the home bar emphasizes Adolfo's productivity: his ability to earn commissions when consumers began to spend more freely after the Great Depression. Not included in the image are the days during the thirties when the skilled cabinetmaker had to wander the streets for odd jobs (and small wages) as a handyman.

Whether or not Rosaria actually took Adolfo's photograph matters little; she is the one who kept it and included it in her ongoing collection. Though years separate this image from the factory portrait, the two are still linked by the bonds that joined their

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subjects. There is a partnership implied by the pair, a joint effort for family survival. Just as confirmation pictures and rooftop snapshots demonstrate Rosaria's ideas of Italian-American motherhood, the co-existence of the factory portrait and home bar picture suggest the transformation of her Italian marriage into an Italian-American union.

Though Italian-American women held an indisputable, domus-defining power, it remained "subterranean" according to Orsi, always subject in public to the visible authority of their husbands.[79] Cultural ideas about this institution become malleable, changing according to the reality of life in a new culture during an economic depression. Though not prescribed by traditional Sicilian gender roles, Rosaria's job outside the home helped the family get by. Clearly, her priority was her family's well-being; when her income threatened their eligibility for desperately needed home relief boxes, she quit. But this photograph remains, as evidence of her work. In that sense, the factory portrait is equal with the home bar picture, which is, at its core, evidence of Adolfo's work. Where images are equal, there is a suggestion of equality, however unarticulated, between subjects, as well. Certainly, Rosaria had begun to move away from the strictest cultural norm of Italian-American womanhood; her photograph of extra-domus activity can hardly be interpreted otherwise. However, by adding to her photographic collection a portrait of her husband and his work, she maintained a degree of public respect that defined the traditional male-female relations of her community.

If the analysis of this photograph were to end here, the most obvious feature of the image would be lost. Even a surface examination of the subject will note that the design of the bar features prominently an inlaid picture of the Manhattan skyline. This detail is the most intriguing element of any of the photographs held in the Tenement

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[79] Orsi, 133.

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Museum's collection. Here is an image embedded within an image: Manhattan has been folded into Rosaria's portrait of her husband's skill. Dividing the skyline into light and shadow, Adolfo reconstructed the heart of the city as he saw it from home in Brooklyn. Choosing and shaping wood of various species, he fashioned an artful interpretation of his adopted hometown. A photograph of the craftsman with his work permanently united the two, confirming Adolfo's mastery of the shape of New York. As the museum's latest photograph from Rosaria's collection, it offers a fitting summary to the portrait-chronicle of the Baldizzi family, a final narrative of their encounters with and adaptations of American culture.[80]

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[80] As I concluded the writing and re-writing process for this thesis, I had the opportunity to present a portion of my work at the Material Culture Symposium for Emerging Scholars at Winterthur, Delaware, on April 17, 2004. The comments and critiques offered to me there were extremely insightful and pointed to many areas where my argument could be strengthened and expanded. The question of display context was raised more than once: were these pictures in albums? In frames? On walls? While this question is difficult to answer solely from the Tenement Museum's collection (as most of their collection is either reproduced from the original or removed from original context), investigation in other holdings could prove fruitful, and I look forward to conducting research in other urban areas, such as Philadelphia and Boston. Other questions addressed the aesthetic lyricism of the image itself, as opposed to the narrativity of the photographic object. Further application of object and literary theory could be beneficial here as a new lens through which to view the portrait-chronicle. In terms of historical context, in-depth research on labor and union activity could enrich the reading of Rosaria's factory portrait, and further study on the Catholic church's activity on the Lower East Side could inform the sections dealing with the first communion and confirmation portraits. The scope of this paper is primarily methodological; that is, its purpose was to suggest, through a reading of one small collection, an alternate way to approach and read vernacular photographs and immigrant populations. Though it is not exhaustive in its treatment, I sincerely hope that it will become a springboard both for my own research and for that of others.

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CONCLUSION

Whatever type of image Rosaria arranged in her kit, each was overlaid with a series of common understandings. Just as the middle-class audiences understood what outsider photographers were seeing and saying to members of their own social group, so Rosaria and her domus shared a visual language. Their shared ideas of family and faith, along with their shared experiences as immigrants, gave photographs meaning for the Orchard Street domus. As they sorted out cultural change, the visual statements recorded by the camera gave expression to their desires, tensions, and compromises. Though these portrait-chronicles are hardly more objective than the better-known outsider photographs, the stories they tell are invaluable for helping historians to understand life on the Lower East Side, to see how "the other half" saw themselves.

In order to understand these images, modern viewers must recognize the necessity to restore ties between the photograph and its origin. This restoration, Susan Stewart points out, depends on the creation of a narrative that "cannot be generalized to encompass the experience of anyone; it pertains only to the possessor of the souvenir." She continues: "We cannot be proud of someone else's souvenir unless the narrative is extended to include our relationship with the object's owner...."[81] Only when the experience of the possessor has been examined can the souvenir of the photograph be given meaning. When these narrative connections between object, possessor, and origin are uncovered, though, this meaning promises a rich, untapped source for understanding immigrant populations.

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[81] Stewart, 136-137.

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Figure 1. John Baldizzi and Raymond Raspizzio, on the occasion of John's confirmation. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 2. Josephine Baldizzi and Rose Bonofiglio, on the occasion of Josephine's confirmation. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 3. Rosaria Baldizzi and Rita Bonofiglio, on the occasion of Rita's confirmation. Note particularly the studio signature on the folder/frame. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 4. Vincent Bonofiglio, on the occasion of his first communion. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 5. Unidentified cousin of Rosaria Baldizzi. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 6. Aunt and cousins of Rosaria Baldizzi. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 7. Ignazio, Rosaria (Baldizzi), Pietra, and Antonina Mutolo (Rosaria with her brother, mother, and sister). *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 8. Josephine and John Baldizzi. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 9. John and Josephine Baldizzi. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 10. Josephine Baldizzi, unidentified child, and John Baldizzi. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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Figure 11. Rosaria (second from front on right side of table) and coworkers in garment shop. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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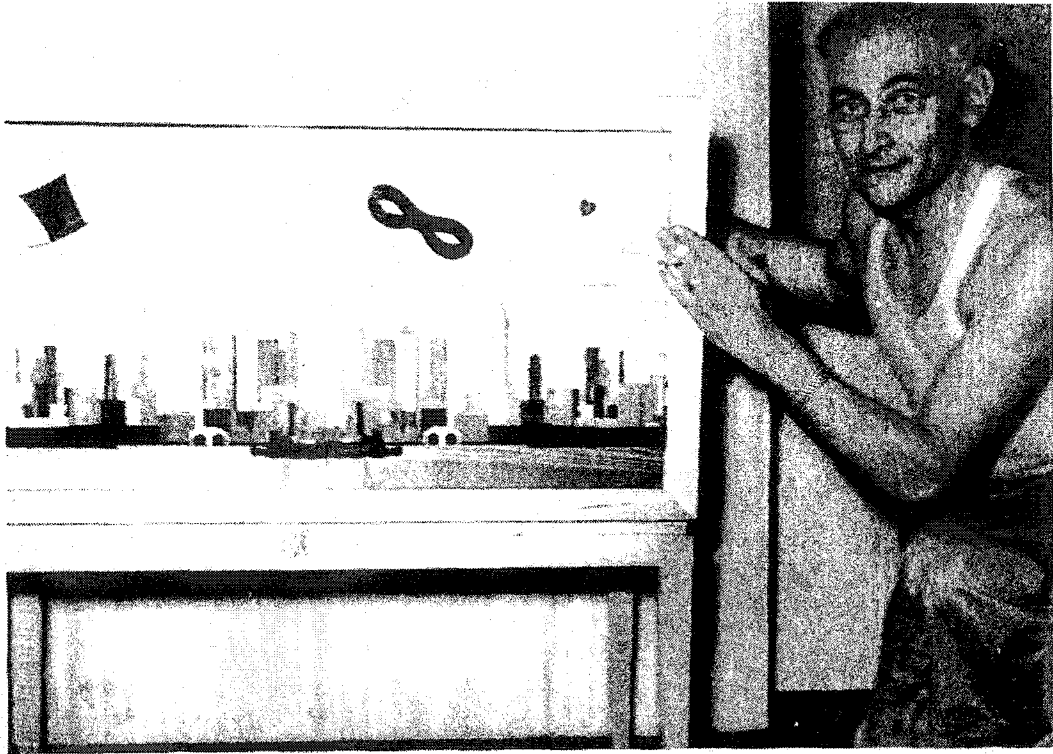

Figure 12. Adolfo Baldizzi with home bar. *Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.*

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