

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 13

Maria Teresa Gonzalez de Torres  
Interview  
By  
Brea Tinsley  
On  
October 5, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Maria Teresa Gonzalez de Torres

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

DATE: October 5, 2019

SUBJECT: Life as a Latin American Immigrant in Youngstown, OH

BT: This is an interview with Maria Teresa Gonzalez de Torres for the project “Latino Voices of the Valley” for Youngstown State University. The interview is on October 5, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Mrs. Torres, how are you?

TG: Good, thank you.

BT: Where were you born?

TG: I was born in Peru, the department of Piura, in the city of Sullana.

BT: Ok. And how old were you when you came to the United States?

TG: Well, definitively, around the year 2000. And I was a resident already. Before, I would come and visit my daughter, who had two young children.

BT: Ok. Why did you decide to come to the US?

TG: Because of my daughter, and also my grandchildren, and I really like the United States.

BT: And when you first came to the United States, did you experience culture shock?

TG: Well, there are always cultural differences between countries, right? But I felt fine because there wasn't, umm—it was calm, because everyday in our country, for example, there was lots of theft; but here, on the other hand, it's calmer because that doesn't happen.

BT: Ok. I understand. When you came to the United States, did you ever feel excluded or as if you were not a part of the community?

TG: Well, yes, because there were always acquaintances here and I felt very good.

BT: Ok. Have you visited Peru since you've been in the United States?

TG: Yes.

BT: Yeah? Do you visit often?

TG: Well, almost every year, I go for a month, because I have my two oldest children there. I have my grandchildren, so I always want to see them, and my family on my sisters' and brother's sides. I also have nieces and nephews. A lot of people.

BT: What do you like most about Peru?

TG: Well, knowing that... everyone likes where they were born, right? And always memories of my childhood, of growing up with my parents, and the life I lived with them.

BT: Ok, let's see. Do you identify more with Peruvian or American culture?

TG: I've really adjusted to American culture.

BT: Ok. Are there situations when you feel more Peruvian than American?

TG: No, because I understand that Peru—well, I always remember that it is my country of origin. And the US is my county which—I acquired because of my children, because I also have another son here in the US, not only my daughter, and my grandchildren that I have here, too.

BT: In which language is it easier to express yourself?

TG: Well, for me, Spanish.

BT: Do you know how to speak English?

TG: A little bit, I understand a little, but over the years, I had forgotten a little.

BT: Ok. Would you like to learn more English?

TG: Well, yes, a little.

BT: Ok.

TG: I try to practice it with my son-in-law. He is American. And that way, it's easier for us to communicate.

BT: Ok? What Peruvian traditions or celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

TG: What do I practice here?

BT: Mhm.

TG: Celebrations, for example, it's that there in Peru, we [celebrate] Christmas on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>. And here, it is celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup>, right?

BT: [*Nods in agreement*]

TG: Peruvians also celebrate the Independence Day of Peru on July 28.

BT: And do you still celebrate it here?

TG: Yes, we Peruvians celebrate it.

BT: Are there any other celebrations that you practice here?

TG: Special ones? No.

BT: Ok, could you describe to me some of the traditions that you practiced in your country that you do not practice here anymore?

TG: Here?

BT: Mhm.

TG: For example, it was when we had a mass—it was called “Misa de Gallo” [Mass of the Rooster] at midnight. Afterward, we would celebrate—well now, it’s almost not celebrated in Peru because it was an old tradition... afterward, sometimes there were processions of the virgin or a saint. Now, “Señor de los Milagros” [Lord of Miracles] is celebrated sometimes. Many people in Peru still celebrate it, and some Peruvians here, living in Miami, celebrate it; here [in Youngstown], no, but there, yes. And that is the lord to whom they attribute miracles.

BT: And how is “Señor de Milagros” celebrated?

TG: They have processions, bringing out the image of the Lord of Miracles.

BT: Ok. What traditions did your parents practice that you don’t practice anymore?

TG: My parents, or my parents and I, when I was younger. Traditions—like I told you, going to mass and all of that.

BT: Ok. Is that all?

TG: [*Nods*]

BT: What traditions do you practice that your children do not—or your daughter that lives here doesn’t?

TG: Those traditions that I mentioned, we can’t practice them here now.

BT: Ok.

TG: Well, we practice them, it’s just that we always celebrate Christmas on [December] 24<sup>th</sup>.

BT: So, there are no traditions that you practice that your daughter does not?

TG: No, yes, we celebrate it.

BT: Ok. Do your children practice any traditions or celebrations from this country that you really like?

TG: Here?

BT: Mhm.

TG: My children—the traditions that I’ve told you about, Christmas and New Year’s, because it’s almost the same no matter where you go.

BT: Ok.

TG: And what else did I tell you? Christmas and—

BT: And yeah, and—oh, I don’t remember [*laughter*]

TG: And July 28, it’s—

BT: Independence Day.

TG: Independence Day of Peru.

BT: Ok, do you still eat Peruvian food?

TG: Of course! Yes, we have Ceviche (the fish version), and Ají de Gallina [chicken stew]—we make “arroz con pollo” [rice with chicken].

BT: And do you know how to cook Peruvian food?

TG: Yes, of course.

BT: And do your children?

TG: Yes, the two that are here, yes. My daughter, and my son that’s in Miami, both know how to cook it.

BT: Ok. Could you talk about typical dishes in Peru and also explain to me what each dish consists of?

TG: What I’ve told you about is Ceviche. You cut fish, measure the lemon juice, and pepper, and onion. When it is thoroughly cooked, it can be eaten with sweet potato or corn.

BT: Ok. Would you like to talk about any more dishes?

TG: You mean Peruvian dishes?

BT: Yes.

TG: Honestly, no.

BT: Ok, why—

TG: I also think there’s also—it can be called Carapulca—

BT: What is that?

TG: That’s what we call it.

TG: [Carapulca] is dried potatoes that are seasoned and you add pork and everything, and mix it all together.

BT: Oh ok. What’s your favorite Peruvian dish?

TG: Mine?

BT: Mhm.

TG: Ají de gallina [chicken stew].

BT: Ok. Could you tell me about your childhood?

TG: Well, honestly, my childhood was very nice. My parents owned a huge farm, where they grew everything: cotton, they had cattle, a very big house—and we would go there on the weekends. We used to go with my parents and all, and when there was a vacation, we would go any chance we could get, [like when we had] three months of vacation. We would go swim in a canal there. It made us so happy.

BT: That’s nice. Do you believe you’ve lost part of your Peruvian identity living in the United States?

TG: Well, I always remember my Peruvian identity. Now, I identify myself with the US. But I always remember where I was born and all my family, all of that. It's always present.

BT: Ok. What do you miss most about Peru?

TG: Well, I always try to see my children and my family.

BT: What was your first job in the US?

TG: Well, since I came here when I was older, I didn't have to work here.

BT: Ok. I've heard that you used to manage the factory where your husband worked. Could you tell me about that experience?

TG: Sure. It was a very nice experience. Since my husband was an engineer, I did other tasks. So, I was in charge of everything. I did the accounting, and I was in charge of making sure that the workers did their jobs well. This factory had a lot of floors, and tiles with different drawings and things. And after that, doing things for construction, tubes, televisions. There was a lot to do, honestly.

BT: What challenges did you face in this job?

TG: Well, having to learn what was in the factory, managing the workers, so that they would always do well, and trying to keep track of the finances and everything. [Also], paying the workers every week and monitoring their work. And they were paid accordingly. And it was a good job.

BT: So you liked having all that responsibility?

TG: Well, yes. Well, I was still young, and I could do that.

BT: And what was your favorite part of the job?

TG: My favorite part? It was being able to help my husband and family.

BT: Ok. You came here a while ago. When did you decide that you wanted to be a US citizen?

TG: Well, I came here many years ago. And well, I was still young and for my daughter [and] my grandchildren, I wanted to be a citizen.

BT: Ok. In order to be a citizen, did you have to take a test?

TG: Yes.

BT: And how did you prepare for the test?

TG: Well, my daughter got the questions for me, like a hundred questions, and any of them could appear on the test. And my grandchildren, who were still young, in high school and all, helped me. They quizzed me to see what I had learned.

BT: Ok. What types of questions are there?

TG: I don't remember.

BT: Ok. That's fine. Did you participate in a citizenship ceremony?

TG: Yes, of course. First, when I went [to take] the test, everything was in Cleveland. And the [Naturalization] Oath [Ceremony] was here in Youngstown, in the municipality. So there was a pretty small group. It was nice because they called each of us, one at a time, and they gave us our citizenship papers. Afterward, they sang and everything. It was nice.

BT: How did you feel during the ceremony?

TG: Well, a little nervous, but happy that everything turned out well.

BT: Why nervous?

TG: [*laughter*] because [I had] to answer all the questions.

BT: So you had to answer questions during the ceremony?

TG: Ah no, in the ceremony, no.

BT: Ah ok. So, how did you feel during the ceremony?

TG: Happy to finally receive my citizenship and my diploma, that thing that they give you that says you are a citizen and all.

BT: Ok. Did you feel any different after the ceremony?

TG: No, I felt [the same since] I was already living here. I felt happy to be fine and to form part of the US citizenry.

BT: Could you describe the school system in Peru when you lived there?

TG: Well, the school system is a little different. Well, I went to school with the Ursuline nuns, who were German and had arrived from Germany. I had a great education. Nowadays, there have been some changes in every country. There is an elementary school, and [then], it isn't called high school, but rather "secundaria" [secondary school], and everyone studies everything in the same classes, everything. Not like here, where everyone [studies] separately in their final years, right?

BT: Ok, yes

TG: In high school, you decide what you want and all...

BT: So, it's the same class [group of students] every year?

TG: Yes. It's the same class. Now, I think it has changed a little.

BT: Ok. What are some other differences between the school system here and there?

TG: The truth is that in all places, students have to study hard to get good grades, right?

BT: Right.

TG: Here or in Peru, right?

BT: What are you the most proud of?

TG: Well, [I feel proud] of my children, who are successful professionals, [and] of my grandchildren too, who are also professionals, except that I have a little granddaughter who is still only five years old [*laughter*]. And, what else makes me proud?

BT: Mhm

TG: Always being American, and being able to be close to my daughter and my son that lives in Miami.

BT: Ok, well thank you for your time—

TG: Oh no, thank you.

BT:...and for telling me about your interesting experience.

TG: Thank you as well.

BT: [*Nods*]

TG: And I'm glad you know how to speak Spanish well and that you know English, because it's good.

BT: That's all.