

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Italian Immigration

Personal Experience

O. H. 1170

PHILIPP CORACCIO

Interviewed

by

Frank Mancini

on

October 30, 1988

PHIL CORACCIO

Phil Coraccio was born and grew up in an Italian resort town called Monterno. Phil spent much of his childhood on the beach. Phil's father came to America in 1911 and worked in the steel mills in Youngstown. Phil's mother and sister remained in Italy until the early 1950's. His father returned periodically, every chance he could. His father sent money back to the family and had planned to bring them all over, but World War two postponed his plans. Phil's mother ran a farm in Italy until the war broke out. Phil's house was right on the front line of the battle between the German's and the Americans. The Italians were waiting for the Americans to liberate them. Phil's brother was in the American army and brought Phil, his mother and sister supplies and money. Phil said that the German's were "Dogs" during the war. The Germans shot many of the Italian citizens. Phil was shot at several times. He was able to escape by running away from them and hiding in holes in the ground. He mentioned that they were always hiding from the Germans because they constantly came looking for men to take to the front line to dig trenches. Phil's house was on the German side of the front and the German's would take anything they wanted from the house. They threw his family out of their house and used it as a German headquarters. Phil was thirteen years old at that time and went to live at his grandma's house. Later in the war, he went up into the mountains to hide from the German's until the war was over. Phil said that Europe looked "like a tornado hit the place." This was why he left Italy

to come to the United States.

When Phil came to Youngstown, his father was staying with an Italian immigrant family. The sons of the family helped Phil to adapt. He was seventeen years old and knew little English upon first arriving. Phil learned about America through his friends. He went to night school for one year, but never continued his education in America. He had planned to continue his schooling, but his father got him a job at Republic Steel. Phil said the people at Republic took him in like a son and he had little problems with prejudism or transition in America. Youngstown was booming when Phil came here and he enjoyed running around with his friends. Phil said the transition to America was smooth and he even enjoyed the snow in Ohio, which he had never seen in Italy.

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INTERVIEWEE: PHILIPP CORACCIO

INTERVIEWER: Frank Mancini

SUBJECT: immigration, World War II, Mt. Cassino

DATE: October 30, 1988

M: This is an interview with Philip Coraccio for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Italian Immigration, by Frank Mancini, in Niles, on October 30, 1988, at 7:00 p.m..

Where are you from in Italy?

C: Minturno.

M: Is that north or...

C: It is in the South.

M: Is there any water by any oceans?

C: Oh yes, the city is a resort town.

M: How old were you when you first came to America?

C: Seventeen.

M: What do you remember about your family in Italy, how did they make a living, what did your parents do?

C: Well, my father was over here and my mother, my sister and I were all over there.

M: What did your parents do for a living in Italy?

C: My father worked in a steel mill in Youngstown.

M: Did you go to school in Italy?

C: Yes.

M: What was that like?

C: I guess it was like any other school, but then the war came and I couldn't go to school anymore.

M: Did you run into any Americans during the war years, soldiers?

C: Yes. There were a lot of them over there.

M: Were there?

C: We were right on the Mt. Cassino line, right where the front line stopped.

M: How did they treat the Italians?

C: Okay. They were all right.

M: Do you remember anything about your childhood? The games that you played in Italy?

C: Yes, like here we played football, the other kids games mostly on the beach.

M: On the beach. Why did your father decide to come to America?

C: Why would everyone come to America, for work and a better life.

M: For work. When he came over did he have a job lined up?

C: No. He came on his own.

M: You came over when you were seventeen, did you have a job?

C: No. I didn't even know what a job was.

M: You didn't work in Italy at all?

C: I was going to school.

M: You came over when you were seventeen did you come to Youngstown did you come through an immigration center?

C: No.

M: You just came straight to Youngstown?

C: Yes.

M: Did you feel sorry about leaving Italy in any way?

C: Not at the time, because everything was destroyed from the war.

M: What kinds of things were destroyed?

C: Everything. Houses, trees were knocked down. It was bad over there right after the war.

M: Was your house damaged at all?

C: Yes. We were on the front line.

M: On the front line. What happened, do you remember any incidents?

C: Yes, we were right in it you know, the Germans on one side and the Americans on the other side. We were right behind the German lines waiting for the Americans to come through and liberate us.

M: Were the Italians anywhere around the Italian soldiers?

C: There were no Italians, just Germans?

M: Germans and Americans. Did the Americans win for the most part?

C: Yes. After a long wait they finally broke the line.

M: Did you talk to or encounter any of the American soldiers?

C: Yes.

M: Were they friendly?

C: Yes, they were real friendly. Better than the Germans.

M: Why is that?

C: They were strict, the German soldiers were very disciplined soldiers. They didn't mingle with civilians like the American soldiers.

M: Did they bring anything for you? Products maybe gifts at all, chewing gum, candy?

C: Yes.

M: So you came over and you didn't have to go through any immigration center?

C: No because I was all ready a citizen.

M: You were a citizen of the United States?

C: Yes, through my father.

M: So you became an automatic citizen.

C: Yes, I came right through.

M: Were you happy to leave Italy?

C: At the time yes, because everything was destroyed. It was like a tornado hit the place.

M: Yes.

C: You come to America and everybody is happy to come to America for a new life and better living.

M: Did you know a lot of people that came before you to America?

C: I was almost the first one after the war.

M: The first one after your father?

C: My brother came first.

M: Your brother was already over here?

C: Yes, he joined in the American army.

M: Oh he was in the American army. Did you meet him at all was he in Italy?

C: When he was over there he came to see us and he helped us getting in touch with my father.

M: Yes.

C: Food and clothes, he helped us pretty good.

M: So in your immediate family who was left in Italy, who were the last ones?

C: My sister, my mother, and me.

M: You all came over together?

C: No. I came over by myself, and then later my mother

and sister.

M: What year was that that you came over?

C: 1947.

M: 1947. Then when did your sister and mother come?

C: A few years later.

M: What year did your father come?

C: Around 1912.

M: 1912. Did he come back and go back and forth?

C: Yes.

M: How many trips did he make back and forth?

C: Oh, I don't know we were young and I don't know... when ever he got the longing to see the family, he used to get on the boat and come over.

M: Would you say once a year maybe?

C: Probably. Every couple years.

M: He kept in touch with letters and sent money?

C: Money, we needed the money to live.

M: So your mother pretty much ran the household?

C: Yes, and the farm land.

M: Did you work on the farm at all?

C: No. I went to school.

M: What kinds of things were grown on the farm?

C: We had olives, grapes we made wine, wheat, corn, beans, we grew our own food.

M: When you came to America then, was your plan on staying permanently in America or did you plan...

C: Yes.

M: Now when your father came he wasn't sure where he was going to settle was he?

C: No, he was too young to make up his mind.

M: Just a visit maybe.

C: Yes.

M: When you came to America, you came straight to Youngs town, and you stayed with your father correct?

C: Yes.

M: Did you go to school?

C: I went to night school for awhile.

M: Do you remember, did you know how to speak the language?

C: No.

M: How did you learn how to speak the language?

C: I don't know, from being around people.

M: Could your father speak it?

C: Oh yes, he could speak it and write it.

M: How long would you say that it took you to learn to speak English?

C: Oh, not to long. If you go to night school and you run around with buddies, you catch on fast.

M: Do you remember any times where you felt sort of a little bit depressed because you couldn't communicate with people?

C: Yes. A lot of times I had to stand by and just listen, and I didn't understand anything.

M: Do you remember any specific examples, can you think of anything?

C: I remember my buddies would be talking between themselves and I used to do that like a dummy. You can't help it you know.

M: When you came here did you settle in a neighborhood with your father with other Italian people?

C: My father was boarding with an Italian family, and they had kids my age they helped a little bit, because I used to run around with them. It wasn't to hard for me to settle, to adjust.

M: Was there any other ethnic groups from other countries,

other immigrants that came to America around by you?

C: Yes. In the streets they are all different groups of people from other countries.

M: Did you mix in with them, did you hang around there friends?

C: Oh yes. When I went out with these boys where I used to live, they had friends and they were my friends after awhile. I remember we all went out together, went around together.

M: So how many years did you attend school then, when you came to America?

C: I fouled up, I started going out with these buddies after school, maybe a year in high school or so.

M: I you work then?

C: Yes, I worked. My father got me a job down at Republic and I started to work over there.

M: In what ways was America different than you expected it to be?

C: Work, like nights and days, new ways of life, and new people.

M: A lot of work?

C: Work days and nights.

M: Was it tough on you?

C: No. I was seventeen I started right in working.

M: Do you remember any cases of people being prejudice against you because you were in...

C: No. Because at Republic they were all foreign people mostly, I mean old people from Hungary, Romania, here and there. They took me in just like one of them.

M: Did you learn how to talk any other languages, from ...?

C: English.

M: Just English.

C: Yes.

M: Did you pick up any other customs up?

C: No. We stuck with English and Italian. The way that I figured I am over here in this country I might as well talk English. Mostly those people spoke English, the foreign people.

M: So you learned how to do that.

C: Yes.

M: What was your daily normal life, normal day like when you first got to America, your first few years, what did it consist of ?

C: I went to work and I went out.

M: With your friends?

C: With my buddies, yes my friends, we ran around Youngs town was a busy townat the time it had everything that you wanted I mean shows, and dance halls, and dances and parks whatever.

M: Where were your friends from? The ones that you hung around with, Americans?

C: Yes they were born here.

M: All of them?

C: Yes.

M: Did you ever feel left out?

C: No.

M: They helped you out?

C: I couldn't speak Italian with them I had to talk English.

M: So they helped you out.

C: Yes a lot.

M: In what other ways did they help you out, or did other people help you adjust?

C: Being with them made it a lot easier to adjust.

M: Could your father speak English pretty much pretty well?

C: Oh yes.

M: So he helped you adjust pretty much?

C: Yes. My father could speak English real good, and writing too.

M: What customs did you keep in America that were Italian customs, did you keep?

C: I don't know, not that many.

M: Food?

C: Food yes I like it.

M: What kinds of Italian foods did you eat in America.

C: We ate mostly meat, greens, macaroni, American hamburger, French fries and all that.

M: Did you like the hamburgers and the American food when you first were here?

C: Yes, but at that time there weren't to many hamburger places.

M: What kinds of American foods were there?

C: We liked hot dogs and steaks, chickens and all that kind of food.

M: How was life better for you in America than it would have been for you if you would have remained in Italy?

C: I don't know if it would have been any different, because you are what you are. If you are going to make something of yourself over here, then you can make something of yourself anywhere. I was going to school in Italy and the war broke out and we couldn't go to school anymore we had to stop for about three years. Then instead of going back to school I made up my mind to come over here to this country and start a new life.

M: Did you send back for any other relatives to come over?

C: No.

M: Do you remember of any examples of the KKK being prejudice against immigrants?

C: What I saw on television, there weren't any around here.

M: Just on television, there wasn't any around here. What about Italians in the mafia, did you here about any examples of ...

C: I think it is all what you call phony. I don't think that there is any mafia around here?

M: No there is not.

C: I haven't seen any. My buddies and I ran around and it came up on the news.

M: Really. Was your neighborhood predominantly Italian then?

C: No mixed.

M: Just mixed. Did you find that everybody sort of mixed in together and was just like a melting pot?

C: Yes. At the time we didn't have any mafia or group acts, just having a good time. Went to work and after work went out to have a good time.

M: What was the most exciting part to America when you came over, the most exciting thing that Italy didn't have that America had?

C: The snow, and the better life.

M: The snow? You didn't like that?

C: Yes I use to like it at first.

M: Now you don't?

C: No, now I am getting tired of it. I never saw snow until I came over here.

M: It was always hot in Italy?

C: Yes, it was near the ocean, it is like Florida where I come from.

M: Do you still have relatives in Italy?

C: Yes.

M: Do you keep in contact with them?

C: Yes. We write each other, I go back and forth now and then to visit them.

M: Do they ever expressed any interest to come to America?

C: Yes they have been here.

M: Not to stay?

C: No. Well the laws of immigration have changed and it is not that easy to just come over here any more and stay.

M: When your father came over do you remember if he had to go through an immigration center?

C: He probably did, yes.

M: Do you remember anything about what it was like for him?

C: I don't know it probably was hard.

M: Ellis Island.

C: Ellis Island they abolished that, they don't go there.

M: Did he have any hassles there? Did he have any hassles in becoming a citizen?

C: No.

M: It was pretty much smooth. Would you say that the transition from Italy to America was pretty smooth over all?

C: It was a hard and new country with new customs.

M: For you and your father?

C: Yes.

M: No problems with language?

C: Some because when you go to in school it comes easy to learn a language. Where some other immigrants had trouble because along time ago before they were uneducated people. Some people that came over didn't go to school, they worked on the farm all of the time. That was pretty hard for them to pick up the language., but today there is no problem everyone goes to school.

M: So if you were educated you had an easier time adapting then it wasn't to hard for you. If you had to tell somebody in one hundred years now let's say, and they are going to listen to this interview; and you had to describe the transition from Italy to America

what would you want to tell them?

- C: It was hard being in a strange country having to make new friends. It was a new way of life with new customs.
- M: If they wanted to know what it was like, the things that made...
- C: You see when I came over from Europe and Italy was all destroyed from the war, today over there it is just as good as over here we have the same. Everytime that I go over there I see that life is the same as over here.
- M: So you would tell them that the war made you come over here?
- C: Yes. Because if it wasn't for the war, I probably wouldn't be here I would have went through schools and made my way life there.
- M: Any specific examples during the war that maybe frightened you, can you remember any specific...
- C: The bombs.
- M: The bombs.
- C: The front line, the shooting, and the Germans who always tried to shoot us.
- M: Shoot you?
- C: Yes.
- M: You were able to get away?
- C: I ran away, I kind of hid from them inside the walls, dug holes in the ground.
- M: So you were all afraid?
- C: Yes, we were always hiding from them, because they used to round up men and take them to the front lines make them dig trenches or deport us to Germany.
- M: So they would force you to do that for them?
- C: Yes. They needed man power.
- M: So they would just make you do it. So did the Americans ever do anything like that?
- C: No.

M: Did they ever come into your house, the Germans?

C: Oh yes.

M: And make themselves at home?

C: Yes. They would stand you up against the wall and you couldn't say anything. They went through your house and could take anything they wanted.

M: You didn't do anything?

C: No are you crazy?

M: Yes.

C: You would get shot. They put my mother out of the house and they took over our house for German head quarters.

M: Your house?

C: They took all of our furniture out and they moved in.

M: How old were you when they did that?

C: I must have been about thirteen.

M: Where did you have to go then?

C: We went to live over in my grandmothers farm, and then when we went up to the mountains and hid until the war was over.

M: Then after the war you decided to leave?

C: Yes.

M: Were there any other cases when the Germans did this to other neighbors of yours in Italy?

C: Almost everybody. Some people were shot some people were killed. We were right on the front line.

M: Where was this at, where was the front?

C: At Mt. Cassino.

M: Mt. Cassino.

C: We were not supposed to be there, we hoped the troops would go through at anytime, and we would go back home; but that wasn't the case.

M: Do you think that the Americans took to long in liberating or did they do there best?

C: No, they couldn't get through that is all, and the Germans were well fortified that the Americans couldn't go through.

M: Do you remember who was the American commanders?

C: No we were on the German side.

M: You were on the German side. Anything else that you want to talk about as far as the transition?

C: No. It all went smooth.

M: Went smooth. After the war it went smooth, no problem?

C: No problems. I came over here started working, and I am still working.

M: Do you have any sons or daughters?

C: Yes, I have a son.

M: Did you raise him up to learn Italian?

C: No, he is American.

M: Do you still speak Italian or American around the house now?

C: Always American.

M: So you pretty much consider yourself American now?

C: Yes. I lived more over here then I did over there, I left when I was seventeen, and now I am sixty, so my life has been over here.

END OF INTERVIEW