

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Italian Immigration

Personal Experience

O. H. 1175

JIM TROPEPE

Interviewed

by

Frank Mancini

on

October 12, 1988

JIM TROPEPE

Mr. Tropepe was born in Polistena, Italy in 1926. He came to America shortly after World War II at the age of twenty-one. Mr. Tropepe attended five grades of high school in Italy which the state paid for. If he wished to continue school, he would have had to pay for it. Mr. Tropepe's father made several trips back and forth and settled in Youngstown, Ohio in 1920. He was able to get a job with Youngstown Machine Shop. He wrote to Jim often, expressing how good things were in America. Mr. Tropepe noted that the American G.I.'s in Italy during the war treated them good. He came to Youngstown to live with his father in 1948. His brother and mother came over shortly thereafter.

Mr. Tropepe did not come through an immigration center and was not bothered by anyone for his immigration status. Mr. Tropepe grew up on Youngstown's East side with many other Italian immigrant's families. He received help from a great many people in learning the English Language, how to drive a car, and safety. He felt no cases of prejudicating and said, "(You) can not compare any other country with the United States. I know we suffered over there through the war."

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YSU Italian Immigration

INTERVIEWEE: JIM TROPEPE

INTERVIEWER: Frank Mancini

SUBJECT: Italian Immigration

DATE: October 12, 1988

M: This is an interview with Jim Tropepe for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Italian Immigration, by Frank Mancini, at 369 Cornell, Youngstown, Ohio, on October 17, 1988, at 7:30 p.m..

Where are you from in Italy?

T: Polistena, region of Calabria.

M: Where is that at?

T: Southern Italy.

M: Southern Italy, is that by the Mediterranean?

T: A Mare Terreno.

M: When did you come to America?

T: 1948.

M: Can you describe your family in Italy, and how they made a living, what your parents do?

T: Well, my father came to the United States first, and my mother, me and my other brother we stayed there. He was working night and day and he sent money to us.

M: Where did he work at?

T: He worked at Youngstown Machinist Shop, and today they call it Wean United.

M: Did he work in Italy before he left?

T: He worked in Italy before the First World War.

M: So how old were you when he first came?

T: How old was I? Twenty-one?

M: Yes, how old were you? Were you in school still?

T: I am trying to think of how old he was and how old I was.

M: How old were you, were you in school when he first came over?

T: When I came to the United States I was twenty-one.

M: You went to school in Italy, what was school like in Italy?

T: Well, it is a lot different than in the United States. You, only go five grades. If you are going to go to high school you have to pay for it. The five grades are free, the government pays for them. If you want to go to high school, you pay for it.

M: Did they have a high school in your city?

T: Oh yes, they had a high school.

M: What kind of games did you play?

T: Soccer, basketball.

M: Did you work at all?

T: Yes, I worked for a carpenter.

M: While your father was in America, did you work while he was...?

T: Yes, he was in the United States most of his life.

M: What factors led to your leaving Italy, you personally.

T: Well, I always liked to come to the United States because my father was living in the United States.

M: Did the rest of your family come when you came?

T: After me yes, I left first in 1948. Then my brother and my mother they left at the end of 1948.

M: What factors attracted you to America, besides your dad over here, was there anything else, any reason why you wanted to come to America?

T: Me?

M: You.

T: I always loved to come to the United States, all the time I wanted to come to the United States.

M: Did your father send back good tidings about America when he was over here?

T: Oh yes, he wrote to us and always say how good it was in the United States. He sent us money. I wrote to him I want to come to the United States.

M: Where did he stay at when he came over, your father?

T: Well, first when he came in 1911, he stayed in Brooklyn, New York. He went back to Italy for the first World War. Served in the Italian Army for the war and when he came back in 1920 and he came straight to Youngstown. He worked for Republic Steel Corporation at the time. In 1925 he went back, he got married and I was born in 1926. He came to the United States and he left in 1929. My brother was born in 1930. He only stayed six months in 1930 in Italy and then he went back. As soon as the Second World War was over, I wrote him. I wrote to him because I wanted to come to the United States and he set up all the materials you needed to get into the United States.

M: Was there any American troops around you in Italy during World War II?

T: Oh yes, quite a few. It was like a big Army.

M: And German troops?

T: Oh yes, you better believe that there were German troops. A big army coming.

M: Was there any fighting around you at all?

T: No, not that much, no. There was not much fighting.

M: How did the Americans treat the Italians around U.S. compared to the Germans?

T: Oh, they treated us real good. They just wanted to have a good time, hurry up with the war, and go back home. The G.I. that is the way they are.

M: And the Germans, how did they...?

T: Well, they just believe in war, the superior what they tell them to do and they do it That is the way they are.

M: Were there any cases of people around you where their lands, and whatever was taken over by the state at the time?

T: No, they never did.

M: What were your emotions like on leaving Italy, were you sad or happy to leave?

T: Well, I was happy one way because all I had was a feeling I want to come into the United States. It was tough at first when I first came to Youngstown, but since I learned the language little by little, the way they do here and sports, and I started to like it more and more each day.

M: Could you speak the language before you left?

T: A couple words, but not much.

M: Where did you learn how to speak English?

T: Just go see a game, hang around with the boys. At least they understand me.

M: So you didn't have to go through any immigrations center like Ellis Island or anything like that, you came straight to Youngstown?

T: Well, it is different because my father was an American citizen, and they didn't bother us that much.

M: So you came straight here?

T: Oh yes, he came and picked me up, my old man. They didn't ask to, many questions.

M: Did the rest of your family come with you?

T: Yes, later that same year. No, my mother and brother came later in December 1948. I arrived in January of 1948.

M: And you had a job when you came?

T: No, but I got a job under Republic Steel.

M: You stayed with your father when you got here?

T: Yes, I stayed with my father.

M: In what ways was America different than what you expected it to be when you first got here?

T: Well, in 1948 it was a paradise. It was good. It was real, real good. There was work, good times, you never heard about a crime as it is today. It was beautiful, and to me it is still beautiful, the country.

M: Do you have at all any regrets or anything you miss in Italy?

T: Well, in the beginning yes, but after I got used to it.

M: Did you run into any other immigrants from other countries or Italy too?

T: From Italy quite a few. A lot of them, we work together.

M: Where did you first move to and where did you first live at when you got here?

T: I lived on the East side.

M: East side. Were there mostly Italians?

T: Yes, there was quite a few.

M: Any other ethnic groups. Were there any Slovaks?

T: No, Italians. But there were few Irish but other than that Polish. I don't remember Polish or other groups. But I do remember that.

M: If you had to describe your daily normal life when you first arrived in America, how would you describe it?

T: The first months in the United States you miss a lot. A lot of things are different once you start to go with American you forget about it a little bit, and stuff like that.

M: What customs did you keep in America that you had in Italy for example, did you eat the same foods?

T: The foods yes, mostly the same.

M: You were able to find Italian food around here?

T: Oh yes.

M: Were there any cases of prejudism against you because you were an Italian immigrant?

T: No, I went to work and it was a lot of the guys really helped me. I got a lot of help from a lot of people.

M: They helped you with things like language?

T: Oh yes, this tough language, learn how to drive a car, about safety, about a lot of things.

M: How was life better for you in America, were you able to make more money than you would in Italy?

T: I make more money in the United States than I did in Italy.

M: When you raised your family, did you speak Italian or did you speak English around the house?

T: I raised my family all speaking English.

M: Do you ever speak Italian now? Do you still speak Italian?

T: Oh I still speak in Italian to my mother.

M: Anything else you want to talk about as far as how it was different and the transition coming from Italy to America, any stories that you want to share?

T: You can't compare any other country to this. Once somebody comes to the United States and see what they got, just forget about the other country. I did. I mean you still think about it you know, but what we have over here, no other country in the world has. I know because I came from... Twenty-one years I know how we suffered over there through the war. The United States is always one of the best countries, in my own opinion.

M: When you came over did you have any idea of making it rich like the American dream a lot of people coming over making millions of dollars and becoming rich?

T: No, I never was thinking that way. I just came over to have a good time, live a good life, have a family, and travel a lot. That is all I was looking for.

M: Did you, when you first came over, keep in contact with your relatives back in Italy?

T: My cousin for just a short time.

M: Then your mother and your brother came over?

T: Yes.



M: Did anybody else come over, any other relatives?

T: Oh yes, one of my uncles. He once came here and stayed six, seven years then he went back with the Social Security. How do you like that? He collected the money from the United States.

M: He used to live in Italy?

T: He used to live in Italy. He got two pensions, one from United States and one from Italy.

M: Wow. So you didn't participate in World war II at all?

T: No, I was too young. The war was over in April, 1945.

M: Did you serve in any other military?

T: No.

END OF INTERVIEW