

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Italian Americans

Personal Experience

O H 1176

MICHAEL VILLANO

Interviewed

by

Frank Mancini

on

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MICHAEL VILLANO

Mr Villano came to America from Potenza, Italy at the age of eight. Life as a child was tough for him because his dad had left for America when he was one year old. Mike did not see his dad again until he came to America. Originally, Mike's father planned to bring his entire family to America. However, World War II spoiled his plans. His father sent money back regularly and Mike remembered that it was very difficult for his father's four children including himself. Mike recalled going to school and a few games he played including the universal hide-and-go-seek. Mike recalled the American soldiers and how friendly they were. They offered him chewing gum and the first time he ever saw chewing gum, he ate the wrapper and all.

Mr Villano's trip to America was scary for an eight year old. He went through Ellis Island immigration center, a frightful experience to an eight year old remembered Mike. He was afraid of getting in the wrong line or catching the wrong bus because of communication problems. He could speak no English and the many different immigrants frightened him. His father met them at the Island and took them to Brooklyn, New York where he had just bought a business. Originally, his father had come to Youngstown to work with his brother Sam. Mike recalled that the traffic and crowds of New York City awed him. However, when he first moved into a Brooklyn home shared with another family, he recalled thinking that America was not as good as Italy where he had his own room. In Brooklyn, he had to share his room with three other people. Mr Villano felt that learning the English language was difficult. He really did not have to learn it until he went to school. There was an Italian church and enough people to talk Italian with. He started in first grade, but skipped grades as he learned the language. In

Brooklyn, Mike lived in an Italian neighborhood, but where each ethnic group had their own little section. Mike felt that as a child America, many times he thought people were being discriminatory against him, but as he looks back it was "probably more of a feeling than actual case history

- M This is an interview with Michael Villano for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Italian Immigration, by Frank Mancini, at 7629 West Parkside Drive, on October 24, 1988, at 7 00 p m.
- M How old were you when you first came to America?
- V. Eight years old
- M What do you remember about your family and your childhood in Italy?
- V It was a tough family situation in Italy because my dad was in the United States. He came to the United States in 1939 when I was just approximately one years old I had not seen him until I did came to this country seven years later The family situation was a little bit tight because we had three other children in the family and we were all young and we had to support ourselves during the war years from 1940 to 1945 and then I came over to this country in 1946
- M Did you go to school at all in Italy?
- V. Yes, I did I went to school for three years, elementary school
- M Do you remember anything about what school was like?
- V It was tough It was a strict type of schooling where I always remembered that if you ever did anything out of order, the first thing that you did was stick your hand out and a nice ruler would come and wacking on your hand. I will never forget things like that Other than that it was basically similar to what I see in the United States as far as elementary school is concerned Kids playing and the same type of togetherness and everything like that
- M: What kinds of games did you play?
- V Again we did not have any type of real fancy equipment Like today, here, I noticed that the little kids play soccer, they play baseball, football, the little leagues. We did not have things like that A little bit of soccer, mostly jacks or hitting a ball against the wall. Limited to those types of games Hide and seek was a good game that we played at that age.
- M: What factors would you say lead to your leaving Italy then?
- V Again, my father came to this country in 1939, in hopes of bringing the rest of his family over to this country. But World War II broke out and we were stuck there on the other side

- M Do you remember anything about the American war, soldiers in Italy?
- V. Very little. I do recall that the soldiers when they came through our town, which they did, the Americans were very friendly. One of the first things that they did hand out chewing gum to kids. They gave me a package and I took a piece of a mint type of gum. I do not remember the brand or anything like that, but I took the whole paper and put it in my mouth. I thought that you were supposed to chew the whole thing up. They said, "Chew this, chew this," and not knowing any English I did that.
- M Did you encounter any of the German soldiers at all?
- V. No, I did not, but we were very fearful at the time during the war, always we were fearful.
- M When your father came over where did he come?
- V He came directly to Youngstown to visit and work with his brother, Sam Villano.
- M So he had a job and a place to stay?
- V. Yes, he did.
- M Do you recall any of his experiences as he came over, did he have to go through any immigration centers?
- V Oh yes, well we all went through in New York and that was Ellis Island.
- M You went through Ellis Island?
- V Yes, I did.
- M What was that experience like?
- V. Frightening, especially as a child because of the tremendous amount of commotion and the multitude of people. Different languages together in one area, and not knowing one word of English it was more or less frightful, that is the best word I can really think of at the time. Not afraid of getting hurt, but of basically afraid of not understanding, and getting on the wrong line, or getting on the wrong bus whatever when we had to leave there. Although a family relative did meet us and guided us through.
- M: Approximately, how long did you stay there?

- V Just a matter of days, and then we went to live with his relative in Brooklyn, New York
- M Do you remember any cases of being hassled because you were an immigrant or prejudice against you at Ellis Island?
- V No, contrary We were treated very nice
- M How was your voyage over, were there any problems?
- V Other than slight sea sickness, and not really accustom to the different types of food that they did have on that ship, the voyage was very nice
- M Did your father or your family have any intentions of going back to Italy to live, or was it coming to America permanent?
- V It was a matter of coming to America permanently to live
- M What things did you miss when you first got to America?
- V It is hard to answer that question, it is more or less what awed me I went around with my head and I had a sore neck the first few days especially from Ellis Island to New York I had never seen buildings in my life that tall, so huge, and the crowds, the traffic So it was a matter of stepping from a relatively quiet town, although a large town in Italy to the largest city in the world at that time I believe It was more of awe, and not really taking the time to miss Now I missed when we did go to Brooklyn and lived in Brooklyn. Because of the situation at the time we had to live in one house with another family that had quite a large number of kids and we were four children plus my mother It was like two or three in a room. Even though in Italy we did not have a large house we each had our own room, and it was a little bit tough
- M: Getting back to Italy, how did your family make a living in Italy?
- V My brother worked in a carpenter shop and I worked even as a child straightening nails in a carpenter shop, that was my job. That was basically for candy or spending money, a few pennies here and there. My dad supported us by sending money over
- M. When your dad came to America then, what did his work involve?
- V He worked at a grocery company that my uncle owned and he worked as a laborer on truck deliveries

- M. When you came to America then, you mentioned that you did not understand the language. How did you learn the language?
- V. Very slowly. It was really difficult because the family that we lived with luckily spoke both Italian and English, but a few words here and there from them, and of course then I went to school; but it was extremely trying because I was made fun of by my peers for not understanding. It was kind of tough. Now I can laugh at it. But at that time it, was a little bit tough. I did start out in first grade, but then I skipped every other grade because of my age and I caught up right away. As far as the sciences and the mathematics there were no problems, it was just the language itself.
- M. When you say your peers, do you mean Americans, or were those other immigrants?
- V: No the American peers, classmates.
- M. Right. Where you lived, did you run into any other Italian immigrant families?
- V. Not first generation, but we lived in an Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York after we left my relatives that we stayed with for about three months. My dad came from Youngstown, bought a business and a house in Brooklyn, and we lived in an Italian based neighborhood with an Italian speaking church and most of the neighborhood understood at least some Italian, so, it was very easy to get along at that time.
- M. Did you run into any other ethnic groups in Brooklyn?
- V. No, the reason that we went to the neighborhood was for the fact that it would be easier to understand and get along. In New York they have basically different neighborhoods for different ethnic groups, where German speaking people would be in one area, etc.
- M. Did you mix with them at school at all?
- V. Oh yes, but there were very few that were actually immigrants like me, maybe one or two at the most.
- M. Did you find yourself wanting to become an American, learning the language, how the Americans have their social life, did you find yourself hanging on to Italian customs?
- V. I found myself wanting to become an American and to learn their way of life.

mainly because I kept feeling, not ashamed, but sort of like a second-class citizen not being able to understand. My dad really pushed me to learn the language as fast as possible, and the customs, so that I would basically be able to fit in with the rest of the kids in the neighborhood.

M: Were there any customs that you kept in America, from Italy? For example, food or social activities?

V: Definitely the food, and the religious aspects we continued 100% the customs that were in Italy. It was easier because we had an ethnic type of church where language of the masses and services were in Italian, and their customs continued as it was at home.

M: When you moved to Youngstown then, did you settle in an Italian immigrant neighborhood again or was it more mixed?

V: No, I settled right here in this house that I am in now and basically it is a mixed neighborhood.

M: What was the normal average daily routine for you as a child in America?

V: Because my dad had a small family, what we call today a "Momma and Pappa" grocery store, my routine was to go to school in Brooklyn, the elementary school system was four hours a day either morning or afternoon, eight to twelve, or twelve to four. Depending on what time my particular schedule was for that particular year, I would go to school for say eight to twelve and then go to my father's grocery store and work there until supper time.

M: Now the grocery store, was this Italian goods or American?

V: Mixed.

M: In either case, in Brooklyn or in Youngstown, do you remember running into any examples of prejudice against you because you were an immigrant or your family for example. Did the KKK bother you, or any other native groups?

V: As a teenager in Brooklyn, but then it was basically because of the neighborhoods. Always whenever as a group they went to different ethnic neighborhoods, there would always be some type of harassment. Not because it was me, it was the group in general, not the individual. Now of course there have been times that I had felt in applying for employment, or even in rare social situations where I had felt that because of my ethnic background I was denied certain rights, but I am sure that it was more of a feeling than actual cases.

looking back at it today At that time, I felt differently because of the ethnic background

M How has life improved for you in America from in Italy, do you think that you had more of an opportunity?

V Well, that is the best part about this country here, is the fact that the opportunity is there for anybody who is willing to go after it That is what I would say is definitely the number one point that it has above all other countries in the world in my opinion

M When you raised your family with your son did you keep any of the Italian traditions in raising him? For example, did you speak the Italian language? What customs did you keep and still have today with you that you are passing on to your next generation?

V Basically the ethnic food which I have never left, or my family, Although my wife being a true-blooded American shall we say, has definitely gone along with the ethnic food and the religious aspects, other than that nothing really

M Okay, is there anything else, any experiences that stand out in your mind on making the transition, that you recall about how tough it was or exciting things about America that you found?

V Well, many exciting things again, as I said It was extremely exciting to go to Manhattan as a child and to view the theaters, and just walk up and down the street because we could not afford it at that time to go into the theaters, but at least to view the crowds, the theaters, the skyscrapers The Statue of Liberty was an extremely important to me because I really, really enjoyed visiting the Statue of Liberty and I felt in reading the inscription on the Statue of Liberty that I understood it more than the guy next to me

M A lot of immigrants had the American dream of wealth, to make it rich, to go from rags to riches. Did you have this idea or this hope?

V Not as a child, but as a teenager yes, and I feel that I have come along way toward that goal at the present time

M Anything else that you would like to talk about?

V No, because after that college, the service, it was all just standard, nothing exciting or different to stand out in my mind right now There was one thing as a child, a little innuendo that you do not forget, and that was that I was in one of

my social studies classes at a approximately nine, nine and a half years old I cannot remember maybe the fourth or fifth grade I progressed fast, probably the fourth grade and we were discussing the discovery of America and the name Vespucci came up Amerigo Vespucci and the way the teacher pronounced it "Vespucci" and the other kids in the class all started laughing. It bothered me because I was the only one because I could not understand the letters P-U were emphasized and that is what they were laughing at. To this day, it still sticks out of my mind and I felt like I was the only one in the class that did not understand enough and felt real bad for a few days after that Again that was another impetus that forced me to get and learn the language better and get a better education

M So it was almost like a driving force for you?

V Right

M You did not want to be embarrassed?

V It was an embarrassment because of the fact that I just could not understand, and although it was not something nice to be said but that is the way of it.

M Was the language hard to learn?

V Yes, it was hard to learn, but with the help of the family we did rather well Of course none of our family knew any English at the time that we arrived here, and until the day that my mother died she did very little English. She always spoke Italian at home

M. Do you speak Italian around the home now?

V Not really, not much, but my son is in college studying Italian now I am starting to speak with him a little bit.

M Can you remember any incidents of either an American or another immigrant, not a relative, that went out of their way to help you with something when you were a newcomer?

V Yes, again because of the neighborhood that we were in Although it was ethnic, and we had a lot of help from our neighbors, they understood and they helped us to get around a little bit more. If there was a question or something came up that we needed an American's answer to, they helped right away

M: When your family came over, did they send either money back or arrange for

future passages of relatives that were in Italy to come over?

V No.

M So you were really the last of your family?

V Well, again no, of the direct family yes. But I mean other than the cousins and aunts I still have those. A few left in Italy, but immediate family no. We all came over at one time

End of Interview