



Citation for this collection:

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Mr. Nello Nai

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: This is an interview with Mr. Nello Nai, an Italian immigrant. Okay, Mr. Nai, where were you born?

Mr. Nai: I was born in Italy. The town is called Piancastagnaio.

Interviewer: Piancastagnaio?

Mr. Nai: Piancastagnaio.

Interviewer: Could you spell that? Could you tell that and spell that because the woman who types this has difficulty at times.

Mr. Nai: I'm not accustomed to all over the spelling because in Italy we don't do oral spelling. But I imagine I can work it out. P-I-A-N-C-A-S-T-A-G-N-I-O, okay?

Interviewer: Now, where were ...

Mr. Nai: I think that I goofed. P-I-A-N-C-A-S-T-A-G-N-I-A-O. Yes.

Interviewer: Where was this located in Italy?

Mr. Nai: In Provincia di Siena. The Province of Siena.

Interviewer: In Province of Siena.

Mr. Nai: That's in the center of Italy.

Interviewer: In the center of Italy.

Mr. Nai: Tuscany.

Interviewer: In Tuscany. Now, what did your father do in Italy?

Mr. Nai: He was a shoemaker.

Interviewer: He was a shoemaker. Did he have his own shop or did he work for someone?

Mr. Nai: Yes, he had his own shop.

Interviewer: Now, when you say he's a shoemaker now, when we think of the shoemaker here, we think of a shoe repair man.

Mr. Nai: No, not over there. Over there, a shoemaker is like you would say here, shoemaker here, a repair man is a shoe repair man or a cobbler. He does very little repairing over there because when a pair of shoes goes, it goes, period. But they last long because they make them by hand. They used to anyway. At my time, they used to make them by hand.

Interviewer: Your father used to make shoes?

Mr. Nai: Make shoes, yeah.

Interviewer: Now, in addition to making a shoe, he actually designed the shoe also, did he not?

Mr. Nai: Yes. He'd take the measurement of the person's foot, everything was made to order, custom-made.

Interviewer: Completely made by hand.

Mr. Nai: Take the measurement of the foot and then the customer would explain what type of shoe they want then he would start from scratch, the uppers and the bottoms as well.

Interviewer: Yeah. And what year were you born?

Mr. Nai: 1900.

Interviewer: The year 1900.

Mr. Nai: I was born by the new century, January the 2nd.

Interviewer: Yeah, you are. Almost on the very first day.

Mr. Nai: Just missed it by one day.

Interviewer: Now, what did you do when you were younger in Italy? Now, I hope -- you went to school, all right. I suppose you went ...

Mr. Nai: Yes, I went to school. In fact, I went to school at five years old instead of six. Normally, children start at six. But because my mother was so closely

related and friendly with the school teacher which was only about three doors away from our home where we live.

She asked my mother she would send me over to school because she had room and she could take care of me like that. So I had the advantage of starting school at five.

Interviewer: Okay. Now, what kind of a school was it? Was it a public school?

Mr. Nai: Public school, yes.

Interviewer: Was the public school completely free at that time? You didn't have to pay anything.

Mr. Nai: Yes, yes. No, you didn't pay anything.

Interviewer: You were supplied with books and everything?

Mr. Nai: Everything. They supply you with everything. Of course, if you wanted to buy the scrap books or something right there or pencils of your own, you could have extras but the school supplied everything.

Interviewer: Now, how many years did you go to school out there?

Mr. Nai: Actually I went to school till I was about 11.

Interviewer: So from five, you went around six years.

Mr. Nai: What did the education consist of in Italy?

Mr. Nai: Well, I went as far as the fifth grade over there which here would be considered like junior high. It's abnormally high for small town. Not many town have anything over third grade.

Interviewer: All right. Now, when did you first start thinking about coming to the United States?

Mr. Nai: Well, actually I didn't think about coming to the United States. It was my father's thought. This was in 1914. I was 14, a little over 14, when I came over I was about 14-1/2. In 1914 we sailed from Italy about June, I think it was around the 16th of June and we arrived to Philadelphia I think it was about 11th of July. It was a long, long drawn out trip.

Interviewer: Yes. So, why did your father want to come to the United States?

[0:05:02]

Mr. Nai: Well, financially, things weren't good over there. Work was getting scarce. Many people were immigrating to Germany and to South America and many to the United States including an uncle of mine with his family. And he was here ahead of us and he was the one that gave my father the idea of coming over.

Interviewer: I see. How many were in your family at this time?

Mr. Nai: Well, at that time I had four sisters and a mother and my father. But only my father and I came over. We left my mother with the four sisters over there.

Interviewer: I see. Now, was it very difficult at that time to come to the United States, do you remember?

Mr. Nai: Well, it was difficult -- you mean after I got here?

Interviewer: No, no. I mean to leave or to get over to the United States.

Mr. Nai: No, no. We had no trouble because you have to -- in your passport, it has to show that you had no police record or anything like that. And as long as you had a clear record, you were -- there was no restriction on the immigrants I suppose. We had no difficulty at all.

Interviewer: That's it. Well, when you did leave your hometown, Piancastagnaio ...

Mr. Nai: Piancastagnaio.

Interviewer: Piancastagnaio. When did you leave that, how did you leave that? Did you take a train to go to Naples?

Mr. Nai: No. We took an overnight postal coach.

Interviewer: That was a horse-drawn coach?

Mr. Nai: A horse-drawn coach to -- oh no, I can't remember the name of the -- Montanyada.

Interviewer: And how far was that -- about how far was that from your ...

Mr. Nai: Oh, I would say approximately 20, 25 miles, something like that. I'm just guessing.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And from there we took the train to Genoa in north Italy.

Interviewer: I see. And that's where you got in the ship?

Mr. Nai: That's where we boarded the ship.

Interviewer: I want to ask you this. I realized that a lot of years have passed and you were only about 14 years old at the time. Do you have a -- do you remember at all about how long it took? Do you remember this trip on the coach very vividly, do you remember how long it took you to go from your hometown, today you called ...

Mr. Nai: To Montanyada?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: Well, I imagine it took about three or four hours, something like that. It was nighttime. This coach was taken very early in the morning probably around 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Nai: And we got there before daybreak to meet the train. I suppose the trains were very scarce and rare. And we got to Genoa, I think it was pretty late in the evening, late in the afternoon. It was still daylight. Of course, summertime -- being summertime.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: I recall that the station was -- it looked really huge to me. Of course, when you're small, things do look bigger.

Interviewer: Especially if you come from a small town and you're not accustomed to it.

Mr. Nai: Yeah. I imagine -- I remember everything was kind of strange.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And we went into a hotel there. And the next day, we stayed in Genoa, we roamed around and then we got sort of accustomed with the few streets there. We had a port, we went to see a ship that we were supposed to board on. And the following morning, I think, or evening, I don't recall just exactly, we board the ship. And from there, mind you, we went to Palermo.

Interviewer: You left from Genoa to ...

Mr. Nai: From Genoa to Palermo.

Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the ship that ...

Mr. Nai: Stampalia.

Interviewer: Stampalia. It was an Italian ship?

Mr. Nai: An Italian ship and it was sunk during World War I.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Nai: The Germans sunk it in ...

Interviewer: Did it stop in Naples too?

Mr. Nai: It went to Palermo. At Palermo, we took the cargo. I don't recall what it was called or whatever we took in Palermo. We stayed there some hours or overnight, I don't remember that well. But from there we went to Naples and we took more cargo and passengers there.

And then from Naples, we came to New York. When we got to New York in the late evening, it must have been around 9 or 10 o'clock because it was getting dark. And then it got real foggy during the night and the whistles kept blasting away all night long. We couldn't sleep or anything.

[0:10:02]

And the next morning -- during the night, and in fact or before daybreak, we left New York to come to Philadelphia and we land in Philadelphia.

Interviewer: Now, and the people -- and the life aboard ship and the people aboard ship, were they all Italians aboard ship?

Mr. Nai: Yes. As far as I can remember, yes.

Interviewer: What were the conditions like aboard the ship?

Mr. Nai: Well, we were in steerage. Not too luxurious. It was clean. The food was just so-so, but there were some real nice, what you might call, nurses. I was having the stomach trouble and they were nice enough to give me milk, extra on the side and things like that.

And my father had a couple of days that he had to spend in the hospital -- in the ship's hospital. And I was by myself loose there. I was playing with other boys. As far as I can remember, things were just about as good as you could expect from steerage.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Nai: The ship was a small ship anyway, not very large, not very luxurious.

Interviewer: Now, as far as your meals were concerned, were you in a dining hall of any sort or did you just go and get your meals and ...

Mr. Nai: Yeah -- no. You had to stand in line and get your meals like from a ...

[Cross talk]

Yeah. You had like a nice *[inaudible] [0:11:30]* cups and tin plate and forks and knives. It wasn't so hard and you ate that way. And the bread was like the old flat biscuits, hard flat biscuits. That's the one thing I didn't like very well.

Interviewer: Light carbs that day, huh?

Mr. Nai: Yeah, something like a hard cracker, yeah.

Interviewer: Like a hard cracker really is something ...

Mr. Nai: Hard cracker but they were about five -- about four or five inches in diameter and about a half inch stick.

Interviewer: Now, that's not that hard. In fact even when you put a little water though that ...

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: No, they're not. I'm a great dunker. I dunk almost anything. I even dunk sandwiches in my coffee, but I don't think you can dunk them very well.

Interviewer: Anything, just didn't think of dunking.

Mr. Nai: But a young boy like I was, you know, anything goes then. I didn't worry too much about the food or anything else as long as I had somebody to play with.

Interviewer: Now, when you got to Philadelphia, did anyone meet your father?

Mr. Nai: Oh, yes, yes, my uncle and my cousin met us right up at the battery, which made it very easy for us because my uncle couldn't speak any English yet. They had been here only about a year or so. But my cousin, being a young boy, younger than I was, he had already picked up enough to get by.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And we got out of the bed much faster than almost anybody else. And we took the train from Philadelphia to Ambler, Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: And what ...

Mr. Nai: To where my uncle lived.

Interviewer: Okay. So what did you have to go through to get out of there? Did they have any special procedure you had to follow or did you just ...

Mr. Nai: Well, that's pretty far back. I don't remember -- I imagine they searched our luggage where we had -- didn't have much, just a bag probably, a suit case or two. And probably had to sign something, show our passports and everything. That was an order. But I know that we didn't have any trouble because we got to Ambler it was daylight and we didn't ...

Interviewer: Okay. And when you arrived in Ambler, did your uncle have a home there?

Mr. Nai: Yes. They rented a home because he had a wife and a daughter and a son.

Interviewer: Did you or your father stay at home and ...

Mr. Nai: We stayed with them, yes.

Interviewer: Did your father have a difficult -- now, this is 1914, right?

Mr. Nai: 1914.

Interviewer: Did your father have any difficulty finding a job?

Mr. Nai: No, because my uncle was already working for the Keasbey and Mattison Company, one of the factories there. They had two factories, asbestos manufacturers. And probably through him, they -- this was an Italian colony where we lived. We were in Sesame Street *[phonetic]* **[0:14:30]** in Ambler, yes.

I would say that 90% of them were Italians. So, we had no difficulty getting acquainted and the foreman probably a new factory where he went to work immediately. Not as a shoemaker, but just a factory worker.

Interviewer: Just as a factory worker?

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm assuming there's some ...

Mr. Nai: Yeah. I don't remember just what he -- what type of work he was doing during the time.

Interviewer: Now, did you start school or anything there?

[0:15:00]

Mr. Nai: Well, I had to because I was only -- I was underage. I wasn't 16 yet. So I went to work -- about two, three weeks after I got here, I went to work in Glenside, Pennsylvania with the Russian shoemaker.

Interviewer: You didn't go to school then?

Mr. Nai: Yes, I did. I started school in September. So, we arrived here in July.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Nai: And I went to work probably in August, in the later part of August. And in September, I started school in Glenside. Now, school was about a mile away from where we lived, where I was working. I was working on the

front room of the man's house. He had his wife and children there and they turned their front room into a shoemaker shop. And I was working there.

I couldn't speak any or understand a word in English. He couldn't speak much English himself for that matter.

Interviewer: How did you ...

Mr. Nai: So you can imagine what a time I had.

Interviewer: Yeah. With the Russians, you're the shoemaker.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: Yeah, you were Italian and he's from *[inaudible]* **[0:16:04]**

Mr. Nai: And there were no Italians in Glenside.

Interviewer: Tell me, how did you manage to land a job with this man?

Mr. Nai: Well, somebody recommended me. Probably somebody, I don't remember who the somebody -- he was probably looking for some -- for a shoemaker and word got to my uncle or my cousin or somebody and then that's how I got the ...

Interviewer: And then you had worked with your father everyday then?

Mr. Nai: Oh, yes. I worked with my father since the day that I was six years old.

Interviewer: Oh, then you were an accomplished shoemaker then at that age.

Mr. Nai: When I came over to this country, I was a shoemaker myself ...

Interviewer: Yeah, you were.

Mr. Nai: ... on my own.

Interviewer: Yeah, you could make shoes.

Mr. Nai: I could make shoes myself. In fact, my father and I, we used to make two pairs of shoes a day and one man cannot make one pair of shoes by himself. But we, together, we had a system that we didn't have any less

motions at all. And we were able to make two pairs of shoes every day. Of course, long hours.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: Nine or eight hours. But then we did. And then of course, when we sold them out to come over to this country.

Interviewer: What differences did you meet in the shoemaking industry and the job that you found here ...

Mr. Nai: Oh, I ...

Interviewer: I know it's a long time.

Mr. Nai: Altogether different. Over there, working with new material all the time. Over here, you work with old shoes and sometimes you get some pretty putrid *[phonetic]* [0:17:32] stuff to work on.

But it wasn't too difficult. All we had to do was put a mark on what he'd wanted. I knew what to do and I just went ahead and did it. But those days, everything was done by hand rather than with fixtures. We didn't have furniture or nothing. Everything was done by hand. All the stitching by hand, all the trimming by hand, the sanding and the refurbishing the door with their hot irons and all the black shoes with black and ink and bags and with the -- for tanned shoes with tanned ink and tanned racks. But everything was by hand then.

I worked with him for 10 months. But here's what --the funny part. He wouldn't let me off. I started work at 7 o'clock in the morning, early morning, six days a week until 9 o'clock. I changed my blouse and eat away my breakfast real quick and run one mile to school. Of course, I was always late because the school's opening session was 9 o'clock and I never was there before 15 or 20 minutes after.

Interviewer: Well, you did have to work before and after school.

Mr. Nai: I had to work before and after. So, the school board -- somebody interceded for me and tell them that I had to work for my living because I was there alone. So they allowed me to go to school only half a day. I never went to school in this country in the afternoon.

So that I only went to school until noon then I was to go back to work -- back to the job and work until maybe 7, 8, 9, even 10 o'clock in the evening.

Interviewer: What were your experiences in school like?

Mr. Nai: My experience in school, I can't say that I didn't learn anything but you can imagine how little I could learn because I couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand me. The only thing that I could pick up from them was probably the pronunciation of different things that I heard.

But they put me in the second grade when I first went there. And then there was one boy from the small town nearby, Ridgeville, from there and he was supposed to be -- he was all the time in *[inaudible]* **[0:19:59]** but he couldn't speak hardly any near Italian but he managed to make me understand so that they would find out what grade I had been in Italy.

[0:20:10]

Because I was too big for the small children in the second grade. So, they thought that it was too low for me to be among those little children. They wanted to upgrade me a little bit. So I told them that I had been in the fifth grade. And so that's what they did. They put me in the fifth grade again and that's where I remained. I never went any further.

Of course, I never graduated from the fifth grade either because I couldn't understand enough. But then, I imagine I learned some there. I can't say that I didn't. But then 10 months after that, I went to work in Jenkintown on a *[inaudible]* **[0:20:53]**.

Now, Jenkintown is only a few miles away from Willow Grove Park. We used to go there once in a while. And of course working with an Italian fellow was a little bit different. I was able to talk to him and then later on he got a finishing machine which made it even easier and faster. He didn't have to work so late. I didn't have to work so much in the morning.

He would let me off earlier. We started work early in the morning but he would let me off early so I could go to school. And incidentally, school was only about two blocks away from there, from there on the south. And besides that, there was a restaurant almost across the street from the shop and he would pay for me to eat my meals there because he was single.

And then later in 1916, I believe it was, he got married. He married a girl from *[inaudible] [0:21:59]* and I had to teach her how to cook because she did not know how to cook.

Interviewer: Was she Italian?

Mr. Nai: She was of Italian parentage. Her father and mother had been here since they were young. She couldn't speak any Italian at all. Although she lived in the town, they did everything -- but she couldn't speak -- you know, she had been working in a cigar factory all of her adult life. And she had never learned how to cook but she could make the best chocolate cocoa and the best egg custard that I've ever been able to have since.

Those are the only two things ...

[Cross talk]

Interviewer: Well, she couldn't cook anything else.

Mr. Nai: Let's go back to the job. In Glenside, when I was working for this Russian fellow, I was getting 50 cents a week and that was my pay. And it cost me 17 cents every two weeks each way to go to Ambler to see my father and my aunt. I could only go every two weeks.

Interviewer: Oh, in other words, you stayed there for as long ...

Mr. Nai: Oh, I stayed there, yeah. I lived there. That's why I was given 50 cents a week and every two weeks, I'd spent 34 cents.

Interviewer: You got 50 cents a week for working from 7 in the morning to 9 o'clock at night six days a week?

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you had to go to work ...

Mr. Nai: And on Saturday was at least 13 or 14 hours straight without stopping. Then when I went to Jenkintown, we started maybe at a dollar and a half a week. And then he paid for my room where I was staying with some private people and he paid the rest then for my meals.

And then it kept on increasing and so later on, I was given 5, 6, 7.50 a week. And all those men, whenever we had time and if I stayed in Jenkintown and I didn't go to visit my father, on Sunday we would go to

Willow Grove Park and he would take care of all the expenses. And I had to be good and everything.

Interviewer: Willow Grove Park, that was an amusement park back then?

Mr. Nai: Probably heard it, probably would amount to like you would say the one in New York, in Brooklyn, Coney Island, equal to that. And they had the best dance and the best orchestras and the more, like Victor Herbert and Nahan Franko, Wassali Leps, and *[inaudible]* **[0:24:39]** all used to go there.

Each band then used to spend two weeks over there over the year. There were three officers and three bands who stayed ...

Interviewer: And when you worked with this Italian shoemaker, was this shoemaker shop there in Italian neighborhood?

Mr. Nai: No, there were no Italians. There were only about three or four families in all of Jenkintown.

[0:25:01]

Interviewer: By that time, are you speaking English fairly now?

Mr. Nai: No. No. I was just picking it up.

Interviewer: Just out of ...

Mr. Nai: I had the opportunity to pick up the English there probably better than in the other place because this Italian fellow that I was working for, he spoke fairly well English. He had already, I wouldn't say mastered, but he was pretty good at it. And he had some American friends that used to come there and hang around the shop.

They sit around the -- we had a roof-like this chair and there was one fellow that did sell butterine. Those days they call it butterine, it's an imitation of butter.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Mr. Nai: And he had a wagon -- horse and wagon going around selling it at different small towns. And he left me at times for himself. He used to spend ...

Interviewer: What is butterine? I've never heard of that before. Is that something like margarine?

Mr. Nai: Margarine, yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, that's what it was.

Mr. Nai: It's what it was. It's what they used to call it then, a imitation of butter. He sold butter also. But he used to come down spend hours at a time talking about it. Picked it up a little *[inaudible]* **[0:26:28]** over there.

And then I worked also in Ambler, Pennsylvania later on and went to school there.

Interviewer: What kind of work did you do in Ambler assuming that that's in -- when you went back to Ambler, were you then living with your father?

Mr. Nai: Then I lived with my aunt. My father lived with my aunt. And then I left the shoemake -- I never did like shoemaking very much, especially shoe repairing so I went to work with the Keasbey and Mattison Company, one of the factories of the Keasbey and Mattison Company.

Incidentally, those days we used to work 12 hours a day. And it changes shift each week. One week was 12 hours a day, and the next week was 12 hours a night. And in winter, if you work in daytime, you never saw sunshine. Of course, we worked from 6 to 6. And in there, 6 o'clock in the morning was dark and you come out of there at 6 o'clock at night, it's dark.

Then my aunt and uncle, they went to Wilmington.

Interviewer: Yes. Before that, when you worked in the factory, what were the conditions like?

Mr. Nai: You know, just ordinary factory work. There was -- many Italians worked there. And many of the Italians -- well, I would say that 90% of the Italians have worked for the Keasbey and Mattison Company, either one factory or the other and they made asbestos shingles or sheets.

And I used to be just an ordinary laborer pushing chalks around and moving them around and then stocking up these asbestos sheets and shingles before they'd dry. And after they'd dry then they go to the machines and have to be trimmed and so on.

But then there was a fellow that used to drive one of those little electric trucks. They used to have them and just like they have in some of the train stations you see the -- similar to a forklift.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Nai: And they hooked -- string the trucks in back of them and carried them from one end of the factory to the other. So, this --there was only two men who operated these trucks, one in daytime and one in nighttime. One was Italian and one was Polish. One worked in one shift and one worked the other shift.

Now, the Italian fellow, when he was with -- when I was working, he used to let me fool around with that forklift and I learned how to operate it. And then the foreman found out that I could operate one of them and he used to let me do it once in a while besides my own work that I had to do.

And one night, the other fellow was on the opposite shift than mine. He was sick, he didn't get back to work so they came and called me if I would go work in his shift. Well, I was only 17 years old *[inaudible]* **[0:29:44]** big shot that I took it with the bells on. I went to work and I worked three shifts that day.

I worked 12 hours, I worked his 12 hours then I worked my own shift for 12 hours and it's 36 hours straight without stopping. That's pretty rough, but I did it.

Interviewer: I know, yeah.

[0:30:05]

Mr. Nai: But they gave me a feather on my hat doing that kind of work. I really liked it. And I think it was something different. Then as I said, my uncle and his family had moved to Wilmington and I came to visit them the following Christmas which was Christmas of 1916.

And well, I didn't like the way Wilmington, big city in comparison to Ambler as it was then. And I got the idea of moving over here also. So I came to Wilmington, I think it was in the summer of 1917.

Interviewer: Yeah. Why did your aunt and uncle come here to Wilmington?

Mr. Nai: Well, he was always looking for something better to better his conditions. He had been working in the factory, Keasbey and Mattison Company and he figured that coming to a bigger city he had better opportunities.

So I came over and I went to work as a night watchman at the, what is now the Emily P. Bissell Sanitarium. It was then Hope Farm.

Interviewer: Now, before we go into this, I will ask you another question. It's about the First World War. By this time, the First World War was well underway in Europe.

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did this affect a lot of the Italian people here because Italy was involved in this war? Did you know many people that went back to go into the army in Italy?

Mr. Nai: At that time, I didn't realize it. Imagine, I was too young to realize, to worry about these things and I wasn't demand -- too many Italians but later I found out that some of them that came back that had gone over responded to the Italian Government and many of them went with the American expeditionary force of course. There were Italian in the American army.

But I was called. They sent me papers to go over because I was of age then in 1918 but of course I didn't respond to the Italian call. I just didn't pay any attention to it. But I was registered here. And in 1918 when I came to Wilmington then, after I came to Wilmington from the sanitarium up there, I left in May 1918 and I came to Wilmington.

Interviewer: Now, you were at Hope Farm then and you're working as a night watchman?

Mr. Nai: As a night watchman.

Interviewer: Did you live up there also?

Mr. Nai: Yes, yes. I had my own shed, my own little house. All the employees lived in the little house of their own framed -- small framed building away from the building -- from the main building. My duties were to check the lights in the evening and the heat, see that everything was okay, plenty of water because it had to pump around the water there.

Then late in the night, dump the *[inaudible]* [0:33:45] for the night because they didn't want me to eat during the night. And in the morning, stop the fires again until the men, the bay men would come on. And I'd have my breakfast which was my supper and retire to bed myself.

But my duty started around six or seven o'clock in the evening.

Interviewer: What is the pay like out there as a night watchman?

Mr. Nai: \$5 a week.

Interviewer: \$5 a week.

Mr. Nai: And board, room and board of course. They were treated pretty well, well treated. And I was on night duty. There was only one night nurse. There's only her and I in charge of everything. And there was a no German nurse on night duty. Boy, how could she cook? She was one of the best cooks.

We had chicken every night at midnight. Our midnight supper, it was chicken on the table and some way -- she has so many ways of fixing chicken. I was like a little rubber ball when I come out of there. Yeah. And I picked up a lot of weight.

Interviewer: So what happened after you came? No, there is one other thing I like to ask you.

[0:35:03]

Interviewer: You are in this country. I assume you might have gone to church. I don't think you may not have because since most Italian then especially -- they rarely ever go to church. What was your affiliation of the church during that period?

Mr. Nai: Well, in Italy I was very much of a church member, my family was a strong church members. And in fact, I was one of the boys that served mass in church and did a lot of other functions and all that.

But when I came over, remember there was -- well, if there was a Catholic Church, I don't even know where it was and then moving around from one place to another like I said, Jenkintown and I sort of got away from it in a way.

And there was an Italian Presbyterian nation right there, very handy to us, remember? We used to go there when we -- when I was there, so there. And in fact, when I came to Wilmington when I was up Hope Farm at the Sanitarium, there was no church. And I wasn't affiliated with any of the churches. Of course, Saint Anthony wasn't there then.

And when I came to Wilmington, there was a Presbyterian Church up there on the 7th in Du Pont and I started to go there because the minister was Italian. And few of the Italians, local Italians were going there. So I started to go there.

Interviewer: Didn't that later become a negro church?

Mr. Nai: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Nai: You know where it is?

Interviewer: I know where it was. It was demolished for many, many years, 7th of Du Pont.

Mr. Nai: It was demolished? No, it's there. The building is still there.

Interviewer: Is it still there?

Mr. Nai: Yes, the building is still there.

Interviewer: There used to be an old, a *[inaudible]* **[0:37:04]** that had red cars or something right next to it.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, that's next to it. They cleaned that lot up and they use it as a parking lot now.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Nai: But the building, the church building is still there.

Interviewer: Is it still there?

Mr. Nai: Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's still there. So then of course when the Father of Italy came along and he built Saint Anthony's church, naturally we all -- everybody seemed to shift over towards that and I've been affiliated with the Saint Anthony's church ever since although I was married in Saint

Thomas's because when I was married, Saint Anthony's church wasn't in existence. We went to Saint Thomas then.

Interviewer: Yeah. Now, when you left the Center of *[phonetic]* *[0:37:46]* Bissell, well, it was Hope Farm at that time, did you come into Wilmington, proper to Wilmington?

Mr. Nai: I came into Wilmington proper, yeah, right on 18 Lincoln.

Interviewer: So was your family over by this country by this time?

Mr. Nai: No, not yet. My mother was still in Italy.

Interviewer: And your father was here in Wilmington or ...?

Mr. Nai: It was -- my father was still in Ambler then. Then he came to Wilmington and he lived in Wilmington then we board in the same house with him for a time. And in 1919, he went back to Italy.

Incidentally, when the war ended, when armistice was signed in November 1918, I was waiting to be called any moment. My questionnaire had been filled up and I was waiting to be called in the service any moment because I was 18, almost 19 by then. But I never got called. So I was too young for the First World War and I was too young for the Second World War. What a great ...

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: In a way.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: I was right in between, yeah.

Interviewer: Now, you say in 1919, your father went back to Italy.

Mr. Nai: Went back to Italy and he brought the family back, my mother and my three sisters. Incidentally, one of my sisters, the oldest one over there, she died at 16, at the age of 16 while I was here. She died there.

Interviewer: Now, didn't they have a tremendous epidemic of flu in Italy or a typhoid epidemic during the First World War that did take a lot of people?

Mr. Nai: Well, they did same as here. It was a tremendous epidemic of flu here too.

Interviewer: Was your sister caught on this thing?

Mr. Nai: No, she died a different time. I think she died before that. She died before that of other ailments. I don't recall what it was because I was here. But it had nothing to do with the epidemic.

Interviewer: I see. All right.

Mr. Nai: And then my father brought my mother and the other three sisters in January 1921.

Interviewer: So your father stayed there two years then?

Mr. Nai: No, not quite two years, just a little over one year because he went back at the end of -- near the end of '19.

[0:40:07]

[Cross talk]

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Nai: And he left at 1920 and he got here in 1921.

Interviewer: Okay. Now, when your father left and you and your father got a house of your own now or you're still boarding somewhere else?

Mr. Nai: No, no. We still boarded from other people.

Interviewer: When he came here with the family then did you meet them in New York or Philadelphia where they landed?

Mr. Nai: No, they came direct. He was already familiar with the ...

Interviewer: Place.

Mr. Nai: ... with the place. They landed in Canada. They landed in Canada and then they had to hoof it by train from Canada to Wilmington. And when they got to Wilmington, they took a taxi and came in to Futon Street where my aunt lived and I lived with my aunt.

Interviewer: Futon Street.

Mr. Nai: Futon Street right here in Wilmington.

Interviewer: Is that a little street between 7 and 8 *[phonetic]* **[0:41:00]** ...

Mr. Nai: No.

Interviewer: ... and between ...

Mr. Nai: No, it's between Broom and Franklin and between Franklin 2nd, only one block long. That's where I lived.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Nai: And I lived there with my aunt at that time. And that's where my folks got -- we stayed there with them for a few days, a week or two, I don't remember and we got a house for rent on 17 Union.

Interviewer: Now, during this period when your father was gone and when you came into Wilmington from Hope Farm, where did you work?

Mr. Nai: First I went to work with Speekton *[phonetic]* **[0:41:41]** in the machine shop. Mind you, operating a turret lathe myself. And from there I jumped around different jobs but I didn't want to go after shoemaking. I wasn't interested in shoemaking. I could get jobs as a shoemaker but I didn't -- I wasn't interested in that.

Then, I left them after a couple of months because they had a rule that they wouldn't increase the pay until after six months and I couldn't wait that long because the pay was so low and I couldn't support myself with that small pay especially that I had to pay for the trolley transportation back and forth from here to all the way down to Speekton *[phonetic]* **[0:42:27]** Plant.

So I went to work -- that's when I tried the Traction Company as an operator, say a motorman on a trolley. But that wasn't very successful.

Interviewer: But tell me about your experiences on the Traction Company.

Mr. Nai: Well, with the Traction Company, I was accepted by the company of course. And you had to serve two weeks of apprenticeship to familiarize yourself with different lines at the company -- one day, one line; one day, another line and so on.

Now, this has been 1918. The war was still on then. But during the winter of 1917, '18 the trolleys, you didn't stop at Lincoln Street. They had made a dead stop at Union and then they stop at Scott, skipped every other street all over town, not only there.

Interviewer: Well, I remember they used to do this with -- the track was *[inaudible]* **[0:43:30]** during the Second World War.

Mr. Nai: That's right.

Interviewer: *[inaudible]* **[0:43:33]** they didn't stop ...

Mr. Nai: That's right, yeah.

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: Certain corners, yeah. But most of the Italians wanted to get off and on at Lincoln as well as Scott, mostly at Lincoln because that was considered Little Oakley *[phonetic]* **[0:43:45]**, the center of Little Oakley *[phonetic]* **[0:43:46]**. Well, during the war when they didn't stop at -- first of all the company would put signs up on the poles and they would turn around. And then when the motorman didn't stop they would either pull the cords on the trolley then he would have to -- he was compelled to stop because he had no power.

Interviewer: At all.

Mr. Nai: And in some cases I've heard that the couple of the motormen and conductors those days they had a man in the frontline and the back, a motorman and conductor. They had some skirmishes.

Interviewer: So they have a few problems with the Italian.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, they had a problem with the Italian boys so they were pretty rolled down on them. Some of those operations, they were down on them. So when I came as an operator on a West 8 *[phonetic]* **[0:44:39]** street line, coming up West on 8 and East on 7, those operators as soon as they found out that I was Italian, they don't like me so well. They gave me bad reports to the company. So one day the inspector of the company called me on the side and he told me all about this.

[0:45:03]

I had no idea. I didn't even know that they had given me bad reports and he said ...

Interviewer: So you had got no reports up until that.

Mr. Nai: Up until then, this was one of the main lines so I think ...

Interviewer: Well, how did they find out that you're an Italian because when you would speak to the -- people getting *[inaudible]* **[0:45:19]** or ...

Mr. Nai: Well, I don't remember whether it was that way or whether they saw me by the name or whatever it was. Anyway, they found out that I was Italian and that was the result.

So I only had about two days more to go, I think the West 4th Street Line and the -- I don't remember. I think maybe the West 4th Street line was the only line that I had left to do. I think *[inaudible]* **[0:45:45]** to get on it because like I said, they pretty asked me if I wanted to go on, stay. As far as the company was concerned, I was accepted and I was okay.

But he said, "You have to live with them. You have to put up for them. It's up to you. If you can take it, stay. Otherwise, I'll leave it entirely up to you." And I said, "Well, I don't need that job that bad." So I left the company and I never was a motorman anymore. Officially, I never got to be a motorman.

Interviewer: Now, where did you go from there?

Mr. Nai: Well, from there, I don't recall. I worked so many different things. I worked at United Hat Store as a salesman selling hats. Those days, hats were a big thing. Nobody went outside without a hat. Summer time, straw hats and winter time, from Memorial Day to labor, strictly straw hats and Panamas. From Labor Day on to the following Memorial Day was ordinary hats, felt hats or otherwise. So hat business was a big business those days.

And from there I went to *[inaudible]* **[0:47:02]** as a salesman, also in the hat and trunks and so on department.

Interviewer: *[inaudible]* **[0:47:09]** discrimination other than when you work *[inaudible]* **[0:47:13]**?

Mr. Nai: No, no. I didn't. Perhaps it's because I made myself -- I mix in with them, speaking and all that. Incidentally, working up at the hospital when I was

up at Hope Farm, I think that helped me a lot with the language too. Among those patients all the time because I was supposed to sleep there in the day but I slept a little bit at night also and I didn't have to do my sleeping at night -- during the day.

I used to play around with them. I play pool with them, play checkers with them. Some of them were -- I got to be a very good checker player at that time with one of the, there were a couple champion checker players there. Yes, they have some games. And I got to be pretty good checker player and I was taking my -- taking care of myself on the pool table too at that time.

But, what was I going to say? Yeah. I think it helped me with the language a great deal. So when I came over here, I mixed in pretty well with everybody and I didn't have any trouble. Well, I think people that have trouble with discrimination mostly are the ones that don't have the ambition to go ahead.

Or they use that as an excuse. They can't find work because they're discriminating but I don't think so. I think as a rule, if a person really wants to work, he can find work. True that you might not get what you want or as much as you want and on your own line but if you can adapt yourself at doing something different, I don't think this country has any room for anybody to starve.

Interviewer: Now, what were the houses like in those days?

Mr. Nai: Well ...

Interviewer: The house conditions, yeah.

Mr. Nai: The house were -- with very little furniture, seldom you saw rugs on the floor. You might see linoleums in some of the -- they didn't have heat. Most of them didn't have any heat. Many of them didn't have toilet facilities inside and if they did, it's just ordinary bath tub and a **[inaudible]** **[0:49:58]** maybe but nothing like now.

[0:50:01]

And there was no electricity, hardly. Very few homes had electricity. In some, only some had gas.

Interviewer: How about hardwood floors?

Mr. Nai: No.

Interviewer: Never saw any hardwood floors?

Mr. Nai: No, not then. Hardwood floors didn't start until probably in the late '20s, something like that.

Interviewer: And even then I suppose they were rare.

Mr. Nai: Very rare because a very few people would be able to afford them. Then later on, in the late '20s they started to use hardwood floors, seven to eight *[phonetic] [0:50:40]* hardwood floors instead of ordinary pine floors in some homes, in the better homes that they were building then.

But the buildings wasn't going on so much. *[inaudible] [0:50:51]* much building private homes.

Interviewer: What was Wilmington like in those days? How big was the city? What was the limits of the city? This is back in the early '20s or late '10.

Mr. Nai: Well, the limits of the city ...

Interviewer: 1918, 1919, early '20s.

Mr. Nai: Like where we are here in Third Street there was a few houses across the street. There's all houses there. These houses here weren't here at all. These were built in 1924. And there were few homes around here on Lincoln Street. The houses were sparse around, very few here and there. Some of Union Street. There were muddy streets. Many of the streets were muddy.

Interviewer: How was this Lincoln Street, 1918, 1919? Was it paved?

Mr. Nai: It was paved, yes. It was paved, not as smooth as it is now and not quite as wide. It was a little narrower because they enlarged it I think a few years ago. But it was pretty much like it is now.

Interviewer: Now, when did you -- did you ever get into a job which you stayed in for a long period of time? *[inaudible] [0:52:16]* from job to job *[inaudible] [0:52:15]*.

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: I had *[inaudible] [0:52:16]*.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, later on when they were building their homes down on the Union Gardens, I went to work there as a laborer in order to -- one of the **[inaudible] [0:52:27]** that we knew very well whom had fallen during the World War I and a shipyard. He hurt his back and he couldn't do any manual work. So in order to help him out, a bunch of us, eight or ten or us got together and we went down with him and made him a foreman.

In other words, he brought again with him, he says I am the foreman of this pals and we went to work with him as just ordinary laborers. And we, they put us with a group that made cement walks on the walks around the Union Gardens.

Interviewer: What year was this? What year did they start building the Union Gardens?

Mr. Nai: 1918.

Interviewer: 1918.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, I think it is 1918 because I was working there 1919, '20. Then of course that work slowed down pretty badly or when winter came on around Christmas and they laid us, a bunch of us off. And I was one of them.

And I went to work for the Diamond State Fibre Company in Elsmere. It was a factory that made and worked fiber. Later I think it was about 1922 or '21 or '22 it burned down, the whole plant was framed so it burned down. But I wasn't working there anymore then. And I worked there for something close to two years -- not quite two years.

In the mean time I decided while I was there to study electricity. And I took a corresponding course with the Chicago Engineering Works and long before I was through with the course, I left the plant there and I went to work with what then used to be the Electric Specialty Company here in Wilmington. It was 9th Street. I went to work with them.

Interviewer: And what kind?

Mr. Nai: I work as electrician. As electrician helper, of course in the beginning.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: But I was considered a helper only for two or three months and then their boss himself whom didn't work anymore -- he wasn't working anymore, he was in charge of the whole business, he gave me his toolbox and said, "Here, you are a mechanic from now on."

[0:55:04]

And those days, all we were doing was wiring houses, installing the wiring in the whole houses.

Interviewer: This was a fairly new thing then, wasn't it, wiring a whole house?

Mr. Nai: Yes, it hadn't been in use very many years because so many homes didn't have any electricity at all. We used to get in then and take up the floors and move baseboards and everything and install wiring. And in some cases, we blind off the gas when they had gas lights and replace it with electricity. Most of the cases, they didn't have anything. So we just installed electricity there.

Interviewer: All right.

Mr. Nai: And I stayed with him until about two or three months after I got married. I got married in 1924, January 1924. And I left him I think it was around March 1924. And I went to business myself.

Interviewer: Yeah, when you went to business yourself, could you tell me this, what sort of things you did then?

Mr. Nai: Same thing.

Interviewer: The same thing?

Mr. Nai: Same thing.

Interviewer: Wiring houses.

Mr. Nai: Incidentally, the first two houses -- the first two jobs that I did was two houses right across the street from here. And at that time, they were building these homes. And the street was just a mud hole. And from 17 Union, I had to carry my tools and the materials down by on my back from 17 Union to here because I didn't have a car yet.

And I had made a good friend down at Buckley-kane -- it used to be Buckley-kane Motor Company that sold Fords and I made a good friend

there -- with a fellow in charge of service and told him that I wanted some kind of a car. And he said, "The minute that I get a real good one, I'm going to call you." And he did about a month or so after I went in business myself and got a license, went to work.

He called me and I went in and he sold me a little 1921 Model T Ford. And it turned out to be a very good one. And he didn't fool me at all. It was a good one. From then on I was in business with a new Ford.

Interviewer: How did you get your jobs? Did you go around the ...

Mr. Nai: No. Actually, I never did. It was a word of mouth from one person to one person over here or one fellow that call me to do his house and the people next door saw me working there and they ask to do their house and I did theirs and from then on -- I never went after one penny's worth of work. It all came to me.

I got to a point towards around 1929 and in 1930 that I was getting too much work and I had to hire even as high as three or four men working for me. And that really wasn't a money-making proposition because it kept me busy day and night to keep them busy and I didn't accomplish anything. I was working harder and made less money. So then if you recall Mr. Defure *[phonetic]* [0:58:32], the manager of what used to be then the Broadway Theater.

Interviewer: That's where the *[inaudible]* [0:58:38] is that right?

Mr. Nai: And then he moved over -- he was given to manage the Park Theater by Eastburn, Park Eastburn *[phonetic]* [0:58:49]. He and I got friendly and I used to do little jobs for him. In fact, I did pretty good size job for Corleto *[phonetic]* [0:59:00] that he owned the Broadway Theater. And that is really when I met Defure *[phonetic]* [0:59:06], the manager of the theater when I did that big job there putting in a new service.

And he asked me to work for him steady. I thought it all for a while and then things weren't too good so -- like I said, I was getting too much work so things weren't too good. So I decide to go to work for him. And I work for him for good many years in the theater as a system manager or the guy who does everything, a little about everything.

So painting to operating there, the machine in there.

Interviewer: So how long did you stay there with him in the theater?

Mr. Nai: Well, actually, I left in 1952 altogether but during World War II, I went to work in a shipyard from May 1942 until October 1945.

[1:00:00]

But in the meantime while I was working in the shipyard, in the evening I used to go there and help him doing some of the office work for him. At the same time, we remain good friends and I used to help him out.

Interviewer: I see. Now, when you left him in '52, did you go work anywhere else or did you ...

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: When I left him '52 I went to work at Chrysler Plant. They were getting ready to make the tanks then.

Interviewer: Yes, I know.

Mr. Nai: But the plant was so big and working on a night shift -- only *[inaudible]* **[1:00:39]** that the plant was working and the maintenance department was at the other end of the plant. And every time we had to go on an emergency call, I had to walk almost a mile to the other end and being that I had my left leg broken in 1947 I couldn't do that walking so I had to leave the plant after two or three weeks. There's too much walking, I couldn't make it.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Nai: Then I went to work with -- I went back with Defure *[phonetic]* **[1:01:11]**. He was building homes then. I was his Field Superintendent, building homes. We built a few homes around. Then I left him when he stopped building homes. I went to work, 1955 -- no, in 1953, I got a civil service *[inaudible]* **[1:01:34]** determination. I went to work with civil service and a packaging plant, processing and packaging here in Wilmington.

And the government sent me to Toledo to school for two weeks in October 1943. And I was with them until they started to cut down around January 1954. And I think from there -- I don't recall just exactly where I went to work then. But in 1955, I worked for Du Pont at the chamber works as an electrician there. That was supposed to be just a couple of month's job, temporary job. But I was there about six months ...

[1:02:29]

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