



Citation for this collection:

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Transcribed Interview With

Valentino Di Sabatino

1718 Beech Street

Wilmington, Delaware

Interviewed By

Francis J. Fierro

March 7, 1968

Transcribed By

Carolyn F. Fierro

January, 1970

Now we're recording. Mr. Di Sabatino, where were you born?

Sant'Omero, Provincia di Terramo.

Sant'Omero, Provincia di Terramo. And this is in what part of Italy?

It's the Abruzzi and Adriatic Sea.

By the Adriatic Sea?

By the Adriatic Sea.

What did your father do?

He was in construction business.

He was in the construction business? Did he have his own business or---

Yes, yea, house.

What did he build? Houses?

Houses, houses, and bridges, railroad station.

I see. Now, when you were in Sant'Omero, did you go to school?

I went to school. Yes, yea.

How old were you when you started school?

We start at six. We go first to the kindergarten.

Then was six years old we start regular school, elementary school.

You start elementary at age 6? How many years did you go to school?

I say about seven years.

About seven years? Was the school a public school?

A public school and, of course, seven years is considered almost like high school.

Almost like high school like here in this country? While you were going to school, did you ever have to do any kind of work after school?

I start part-time as a tailor already.

You started part-time as a tailor? Now when you started as a tailor, were you apprenticed to a master tailor?

Yes, yes.

What was the procedure you had to go through in Italy to be apprenticed to a tailor? Did you get paid for being an apprentice or did you have to pay the master?

No. We don't pay, but we don't get paid either.

What was the process that you had to go through in order to become---

Just know how to use a thimble and a needle and then you start from a little crisscrossing, and so forth.

Well how did you become associated with a tailor?

Well, I want to start to be a bricklayer too.

You wanted to be a bricklayer?

Yea, in fact, I start that but my father say I was too delicate for that trade. So my brother they already were in this country and they know the tailor would have been all right. Someday if immigrate, it would be all right. "Some tailors---job for you".

So this is the reason you were apprenticed a tailor.

The only one in the family to be a tailor.

I see, and the others are what? All stone masons?

All bricklayers. Course in Italy do everything--- stone, brick, everything.

Right. Now when you finished school, you started at age six and I guess by the time you were thirteen years old you were finished. Right?

Right.

Had you finished your training as a tailor by that time?

Well, tailor, you never, never know everything. You always got something to learn.

But it's considered you can be a tailor that many years apprenticed. Now we know that you started school at age six and you finished around thirteen. How old were you when you became apprenticed to the tailor?

Thirteen.

Oh, that's when you became apprenticed?

Right after school.

In otherwords as soon as you finished school then--
Steady as apprentice.

Right. You started as an apprentice. How long did you work as an apprentice before you were considered by others to be a master tailor?

Well, you never be a master tailor because, as I say, there always something to learn about, but it's considered about from thirteen up to about eighteen or nineteen years old.

You should be able to do just about any job that has to be done.

Any job man requires.

In otherwords about five or six years. O. K., now I forgot to ask you what year you were born?

February 7, 1898.

1898. Now, by the time you were eighteen years old, then we were in the middle of World War I. Weren't we?

And I was called in young.

You were drafted when you were eighteen years old?

Drafted.

What did they do with you when they, after you were drafted? What branch of the Army did they put you in?

I was in infantry.

Infranty?

Infantry.

Where did they give you your training?

In Rome.

In Rome? How long a training period did you have then. Do you know?

I was in Rome about three months, then we went camping in Rieti. It's nearby Rome, and from there back to Rome for a few days into the war zone.

To the war zone, and where was this?

In Bassano.

In Bassano, Italy.

Northern Italy, near Udine and near Montegrappa, on the border of Austria?

Now what was the action like there when you

arrived?

Well, I was scared. That's for sure. Yes.(laughter)

That proves you had a lot of sense and intelligence to be scared.

But of course they don't send you up on the line right off the bat. They get all known, all ready the procedure for zone, war zone. Of course you take your turn. Go up in the mountain--

And--

And up there you may spend fifteen, twenty days and then you got other people to replace you. Then back to Bassano, the city(next few words unintelligible)

How long did you spend up on the front?

About two years, two full years.

Two full years.

After which then the armistice. Of course I was wounded. Right after that, not long after that armistice came. I was still at the hospital.

I see. The war ended while you were still in the hospital.

Still in the hospital.

Now after the war ended, what did you do?

Then I spend one more year in Naples.

Still in the Army?

Still in the Army, and I was sent for about nine months in Lybya, Tripoli. There I spent a few months. I don't recall exactly how long, and I was discharged.

What were you doing in Tripoli?

Tripoli. I don't do hardly anything. We still have a few arabian rebels. They didn't want to be under Italian rule and that was just guard duty.

I see. All right, now, when you finally returned home after being discharged from the Army, what year was it?

1920.

1920?

1920.

What did you do? Did you resume your---

Back to tailor--

Back to tailoring business.

My same tailoring boss.

In otherwords you didn't have a shop of your own.

Not in Italy. Not in Italy. My tailor boss--

Uh huh.

and then, of course, just one year after that I quit.

That was in 1921 you came to the U. S.?

1921.

Why did you come to the U. S.?

Well, first of all, I had two brothers here, and I thought I wanna improve my life. Really I like to travel too. That excite me much more.

Now, the fact that your brothers were in this country---

Two of my brothers were here already.

They were already in this country. This is the reason you came to the U. S. ?

More likely, yea.

Now what did you have to do in order to leave Italy to come to the U. S.?

Well, just go to the travel agency, and I have no trouble at all. I have no trouble that time to get---

Permission?

Permission to come.

Where did you leave Italy from?

From Naples.

How did you get to Naples from Sant'Omero?

By train.

Train? Where did you get the train?

From near our railroad station, pretty close to it.

There's a railroad station not too far from
Sant'Omero?

Not too far.

How did you get there? Did you take a horse and
buggy or walk?

No, that time already we had a bus.

Oh, you did have a bus?

We had a bus.

So you went by bus to the train, when you took a
train to Naples.

Train to Naples then the following day we took a
boat.

I see. What ship did you sail on?

Europa.

The Europa?

The name was Europa.

Was it, what flag did it sail under?

Come again?

What flag did it sail under? Was it an Italian ship?

Italian ship, yea.

How long did it take to get----

About fifteen days.

Did it stop anywhere along the way?

No, direct to New York.

Direct to New York. When you arrived in New York, did anyone meet you?

No, no, no. I know exactly where to go, and we had a little badge on our coat lapel 'to Wilmington'; and I make sure that's my train and when in Wilmington let me know and that's where I get off.

Now when you got off in Wilmington, did anyone meet you?

I ask a stranger that I never know in my life, but I know he was an Italian and I ask for direction to my uncle's house. And he says to me, "I'll take you up there. I know very well". So he take me to my uncle's house.

Who was your uncle?

Ernest Di Sabatino.

Ernest Di Sabatino. Now he's the one that started Ernest Di Sabatino and Sons Contractor.

Yea.

Now when you first arrived at your uncle's house---

Yea?

What did you do? How long did you stay there with him?

Just about a week. Then his son, that would be my first cousin, find me a job.

What was your job?

Should I tell the name of this tailor shop. It was John di Citro.

John di Citro?

That was my first job in this country.

Where was that located?

Jefferson, seventh and Jefferson, I think.

Seventh and Jefferson?

Yea.

How long did you stay there with him?

I think about a year, not even a year, a little less than a year.

And then what?

Then I change to another, to another shop which was Bert Michini.

Oh, yea, Bert Michini.

How long did you stay with Bert now.

I probably stay, oh I believe about, about a year and a half or so.

Where was he located at that time?

Bert Michini? Sixth and Lincoln.

Sixth and Lincoln?

Yea.

I see. Now you stayed with him about a year and a half.

About a year and a half.

And then?

Then I had a brother-in-law in Ohio, and I told Michini Christmas time I wanna visit my brother; and he asked me if I coming back. "Oh, yes". Well, I was single then so I got together with my cousin Tosello. He was in the construction. Worked with our uncle. He says, "Let's go visit my brother in Ohio." "Yes!" So we went in Ohio, and we didn't come back 'till the year after.(laughter)

You went for a little trip, and you stayed for a year?

A year, yea. We were single then.

What did you do during the year you were in Ohio?

Tailoring, tailoring.

What part of Ohio was this?

Canton, Ohio.

Canton, Ohio?

Now after having stayed there a year, you worked as

a tailor, did you decide to come back to Delaware then?

Then did we decide not only to come back to Delaware, but to go back in Italy and get married.

I see. What year was this now?

That was 1924.

Had you gotten your citizenship papers by this time?

Not yet, but that time there was a certain law that we could go and bring back wife.(laughter)

So you both went to Italy in 1924?

Yes. This cousin of mine---we both went back in Italy and got married in twenty-nine days. Twenty-nine days then back with wives.

Did your wives come back with you when you came back?

With us. With us.

O. K. Right, now, when you came back, did you come back to Wilmington?

Yea, Wilmington.

And you went back into tailoring again?

Tailoring again with the same man.

With Bert Michini again?

Yea, Bert Michini.

And how long did you stay with him?

Then only two months. Then my cousin remained here, and I went back to Ohio.

Why did you go back to Ohio?

Because then the other two brothers were here too, and they went over there too so I had three brothers there.

I see.

So I went there.

In otherwords you went there because your brothers were there.

Because--

What were your brothers doing in Ohio?

Construction.

They were in construction?

Construction.

Are they still in Ohio?

No, no. Now they all dead. I'm the only one left in the immediate family.

I see.

Now we've been tracing your history here pretty closely as to what you've done and where you've gone. Now you stayed in Ohio how many years?

Twenty years.

Twenty years? And then you came back.

Raise three children there and then my wife decided to come back to Wilmington.

Uh huh.

So---

So you came back to Wilmington and you've been here ever since.

Yea.

Let's see. What year was that you came back?

That was 1944.

So '24 to '44. Now I want to ask you a few more things that are not really as cut and dry as perhaps the things we already talked about. For example, when you first came here in 1921, what was life like for an Italian? Now I suppose when you first came here most of the people you associated with were all Italians. Right?

Yea. That's true.

Did you ever have any associations with people who were not Italian?

No. I met people not Italian, yes I did, but mostly like you say, mostly Italian because, first of all, I didn't know the language then.

Uh huh.

As I progress, I met more other nationalities.

Now you're a sensitive man. Did you ever sense or feel that someone might have discriminated against you in any way because you're an Italian?

No, I never find any occasion like that, never.

Did you ever go into a restaurant maybe and find that even though you might have been there before someone else, you were served last or anything like that?

No. Never anything like that.

Never anything like that here in Wilmington?

No, nowhere.

Not in Ohio either?

No.

Never ran into anything like that? How about religion? In so far as religion is concerned, did you always go to the Catholic church?

Always. My children always went to Catholic school, graduate in Catholic school.

Did you ever run into any sort of bias in the Catholic church.

No, no.

None at all?

Never. Don't recall anything.

Now, let's go back again a little bit further to around 19-- , well around the time that you came over here. There was a gentleman in Italy who was causing quite a stir-- Benito Mussolini.

That was another reason why I left.

Another reason why you left, huh.(laughter)

Yea.

What did you think of him?

They ask me if I want to sign up. I says, "Be no use because I have no intention to remain here. I have intention to immigrate in America so there's no use for me to join up".

That's to join the facist party?

That's the facist party, see.

When you came to this country, what did the people seem to think of Mussolini? I have spoken to some people who thought that he did a lot of wonderful things for----

At that time Italians think the world of him, especially other nationalities; and I had a lot of Greek friends that says, "You people got to have a god in Italy". That's what people say.

In otherwords he was well thought of, not only by Italians but----

Oh yea, well liked, not only by Italians, but I think all over the world.

So he was well thought of and admired by many, many people.

Well, he was doing right, doing very good things for the country.

Did you ever run into anyone who opposed him on political grounds?

Well, I really never go into politician but certainly you'll find some person. Not everybody likes dictator which I didn't like myself. That's the reason why I left. That's what they were saying. There will be a man dictator. Well, I never did like dictator.

Now, in so far as your living in Ohio, in Canton, Ohio. When you lived there, did you live in what might be called an Italian community?

No. Really, no. Not because I didn't like, but it happened to be that way. I always tried to live near the church and school.

Uh huh.

I wouldn't consider it as being an Italian colony, no.

Right. Were there a lot of Italians in Canton, Ohio?

Yes, but not as many as down here east.

What drew the Italians to Canton, Ohio?

Come again?

What was the reason that, the reason the Italians went to Canton, Ohio?

Well, I guess like the reason I came here in Wilmington. 'Cause I had the brothers so that probably the same way with these people there.

Yea. I was wondering what originally brought them there. In a lot of places, for example, it's work that gets people where they're going. For example, they might be building a railroad. So they go there where they're building a railroad and they stay.

I guess at that time there were people everywhere in the country.

Yes.

Sometimes one family brings them, then another one. Then another bring two brings more. That's the way it creates a whole colony.

Now, in talking about coming here and so on and so forth, did you have your own money to come to this country, or did your father supply it for you?

Yes, I had some and my brother from here send me the

rest.

To come over here? When you started working your first job, that was back in 1921--

1921.

What was the pay scale like? Was there any specific pay scale or---

As a tailor used to make about 25, 30 the most a week.

A week? What were the hours like?

Oh, the hours were long. The hours were twelve, twelve hours a day.

Twelve hours a day?

They were practically every night. Even Sunday mornings sometime to finish it up.

In otherwords you worked at least six days and sometimes six and a half days a week.

That's for sure.

That's quite a long week for about \$20, \$21 a week.

21, 25 up to 30.

I see. Now what did you do when you weren't working?

Here being a young man not working at the time certainly even though you worked twelve hours a day---this is nothing to a young man---but after you worked you want to have

a good time. You want to relax and enjoy yourself. What sort of things did you do?

Tell you the truth, not much. We used to go out in the afternoon on Sunday and ride and get enough air for the rest of the week.

Did you have a car?

Well, no by bus we had it. A car, my brother had a car, and he had a motorcycle. We go motorcycle to get more air, see.(laughter) Get enough air for the rest of the week.

I see. This is what you did with your time off, huh?

Not much.

Did you ever run into any difficulties at all?

You can't help but think back. The Italians had a reputation. Even when I was a youngster, I can remember the boys at St. Anthony's had a reputation for always fighting. Was this true back in your day too?

Well, no. I never really was in a fight in my life, no. Probably because I never associated with that kind of people.

Yes. Did you ever participate in any sports at all in this country?

No. The only sport we had sometimes Sunday afternoon

we go in the woods and play bocci.

Played bocci, huh.

Didn't have time to be in any sport.

Uh huh. Did you belong to any sort of social clubs or political clubs?

Yes. We have a little club once, young little club and I even forgot the name what we called it. We had a little club.

What was the purpose of the club?

Just to be together every once in a while.

Did you ever belong to any political club like a democratic club or a republican club?

Ummmmmm, no. Really, no, no.

Did you every belong to club like the Eagles?

Well, I joined the Eagles when I was in Ohio, but then I married and had children already.

How about the Sons of Italy? Did you ever join the Sons of Italy?

No. I never was with the Sons of Italy.

O. K. Did you ever belong to any church affiliated clubs?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Which clubs did you belong to?

Oh, not a club at the church.

Oh, I mean like St. Anthony's Catholic Club or--

No, no.

O. K., fine. We've covered I think a pretty great deal, probably most of the things. We certainly haven't gone into these things in depth.

Yes. That's about all of my life.

Uh huh. Did you ever go to school when you came here?

Very little. I didn't have time to do that either. In fact when I had to become citizen after five years, which five years was the limit. I was suppose to go to school, but that time I was making coats for the store. If I don't work at night, I don't make my wages. So a friend of mine he goes to school and he always tell me, "You better go to school because if you don't have no certificate you probably don't get the paper. Well, I have a good reason not to go to school, but I make sure I know all the answer and that's what happened, see. I was called first thing and they ask me if I have school certificate. I says, "I'm sorry I don't have because I couldn't go to school because if I no work at nights I barely make a living. So he starts around with the questions, see. So ask me quite a few more, Then many other

people, but I happened to know these things and he say,
"all right".

So you were able to answer all the questions?

So I was able to answer the questions and I made
out fine.

So you did get your citizenship papers?

So I went in front of the judge for the citizenship
papers. He say, "Mr. Di Sabatino, you make a good citizen".
That's all there.

O. K. Do you have anything else you'd like to add
to this, Mr. Di Sabatino?

What else could I have?

Well anything.

I'm living along on borrowed times, see. I'm
seventy and still work.

Uh huh. Well, I would say you're not living on
borrowed time. You're doing quite well.