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Mr. Nello Nai

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: We can continue again now.

Mr. Nai: I went to the unemployment compensation office to find out if they had anything there. And they said, "Yes, we have a card here from a firm by the name Zashi *[phonetic]* [0:00:16]," or something like that. They didn't know how to pronounce it but I knew him from the shipyard. We had worked together in the shipyard in the same -- in the electrical department. I knew him very well.

So naturally the card gave me the location where he was located and all in New Castle County airport. And so I took the card and I went to see him and I was with him nearly 10 years as a fellow by the name Zachy's *[phonetic]* [0:00:44] -- Zachy's *[phonetic]* [0:00:45] Electric.

We maintained the airport down here and besides that of course we did a lot of work outside, industrial, commercial and private work too. I had the opportunity doing those nearly 10 years that I was with him to get quite an experience in electrical line and the maintenance which it makes me so that almost any electrical problem that comes along I like to tackle it. It gives me satisfaction to solve it. When you work for 10 years in different industry, places like that you come across almost anything.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: But then things got pretty bad with him and he went out of business that put me out. So again, I went down to the unemployment compensation. They didn't have anything then. This was in April 1964. So I fooled around for a while. I didn't want to work right away. I had been working. I thought I'd take a couple of weeks off.

But the PACE Incorporated *[phonetic]* [0:02:06] down at the airbase, a company that put up the aerosol cans, pressure cans, they found out that I had been -- that I was out on the loose and they called me for me to go down because -- actually, they had been after me to go to work for them for some time because we had been doing their work, their electrical work and they knew me pretty well.

So I went down to see him. He made me a good proposition. I went to work with them immediately. And I stayed with them until they went out

of business in '66, the later part of '66, yeah. The later part of '66, about September '66, they went out of business. They moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut. They wanted to take me up there but I didn't want to go up there. My age was ...

Interviewer: You were pretty well settled here.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, I was pretty well settled here with a family, with my children are here, my wife's family are here. I didn't want to go all the way up there. If I was young it'd be different but at my age, I didn't want to travel.

So I stayed behind. I went back to the unemployment compensation and asked them if they had anything and the lady went over to the filing cabinet and came back with a stack of cards about an inch thick. She says, "Here, take your pick and go to work."

So I looked through those cards and I saw the name of Henry Tobb *[phonetic]* [0:03:30] Tobb Electric *[phonetic]* [0:03:32] and I knew him and he was looking for somebody so I said, "I'll take this one." And I've been working with him ever since. I worked with him up until January 1967. And then things got kind of slack with him and he laid me off with several others. He only kept about two or three men, the older ones. But then that's when I went on the company, the social security. I figured I was 67 anyway so, what's the use of me fooling around.

I went on social security and we have an arrangement with him that he calls me whenever he needs me so that it gives me the opportunity to make my maximum per month with him.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And it's good for me and it's good for him. It keeps me in shape and ...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mr. Nai: Keeps me busy, keeps me ...

Interviewer: Keeps you from being lazy.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, it keeps me out of the rocking chair and at the same time I'm helping him because I do certain jobs that -- once in a while he gives me some --little sticklers that he doesn't want to take the other fellows off the job and so on.

Interviewer: I want to ask you some other questions. In the time that you spent in this country, you saw the Prohibition come and you saw it go.

[0:05:03]

What effects that you might have noticed, did you see a couple in the Prohibition?

Mr. Nai: Well, as far as I'm concerned, it didn't make any difference to me because I never was a drinker. I never indulged on anything, hard drinks like that. If I took a drink of beer or maybe a little wine, see the reason why I probably never got to drinking was because I was always affected with ulcer, stomach ulcer. I couldn't use it anyway so it never bothered me. Only I could see that people were having trouble getting what they wanted. And then there's a lot of people that were making it at home and probably selling it and speakeasy is what they used to call it.

And sometimes you could hear beyond the -- you could hear them tell about the bad liquor that made them go blind or something like that. But nothing that I knew anybody that was ever affected that way. As far as I was concerned, it came and it went.

Interviewer: Now, in addition to living with your aunt and with some of the people within your work, you also lived in several boarding houses, right, that were run by private individuals?

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was life like in a boarding house?

Mr. Nai: Well, I was always lucky to board with friends, somebody that I knew well. And it was just like my own home.

Interviewer: How about some of the other people that you knew who were at other boarding houses where the conditions were not quite the same? What were some of their comments about the boarding houses?

Mr. Nai: It depends when it was. I mean some of them would complain about the food, some of them probably would complain about the heat or some of them maybe complain that they didn't have the freedom of sitting in the living room or something like that. But I never had that problem. I never really heard too much of those complaints.

I know that even before I came over I heard some of the people speaking of the times even before that and lived in very primitive locations in the western, northern part of Pennsylvania and working on railroad tracks and living in shambies *[phonetic]* **[0:07:40]** and all or something like that. Many of the Italians lived that way. Just a group, a bunch of men maybe 20, 30 men working pit and shovel all day because they were no machinery those days.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: Back in the early 19, 20th century and even before that in the 19th, the later part of 19th century. They lived pretty bad to hear them the way they described some of the conditions, it was pretty rough. But they were willing to work and make a few dollars, maybe some of them went back to Italy when they made a few dollars, some of them just didn't improve.

Now I have many friends in Hershey, Pennsylvania. I remember I visited Hershey, Pennsylvania 1925 the first time. And many Italians that lived there, they lived in what they used to call the crypt in Swatara just a little farther outside of Hershey.

And the living conditions down there from what I saw that in that visit over night, I stayed two days and a couple of nights with some other friends from Wilmington. The living conditions there were pretty low, crowded and the houses which were later -- not long after that torn down. It was pretty bad. But those same people, you should see their homes that they have now, all working in the Hershey factory. That's about the only thing there is up there, you know?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: But really their Hershey Company really gave them a big break because it put everybody to work, the wife and the husband and the children as they came up. Even after school, some of them would work there. Immediately, they come out of school, right away they went to work in the factory. And if they got a little bit of education, they work in the office and so on. They really got breaks and they've done well. You can tell they've done well because they have some beautiful homes. And everybody's got a car or two or more. And they have everything in their homes.

Interviewer: Now, did you notice lots of a change after Prohibition was lifted?

[0:10:04]

Mr. Nai: Well, it's pretty far back. Immediately after everybody went crazy with beer, I remember they used to get that near beer first and then so on. And I know that there were some -- some of those beers were so green that people used to get sick over them. And I remember myself, once in a while I used to go in the beer garden because there's something new, meet a friend and we'd go in and have a beer or two. I used to get a headache almost immediately after I'd drink a glass of beer. I used to get a headache.

And now if I do get a drink -- a glass of beer, it doesn't affect me like that anymore because now it's well seasoned probably. That's about the only thing I can remember of it.

Interviewer: Now, you've already mentioned some of the changes that took place from the fall *[inaudible]* **[0:10:59]** fall of Saint Anthony's church..

Mr. Nai: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you say that this did a lot of good for the Italian community here in Wilmington?

Mr. Nai: Definitely. I would say so, yeah.

Interviewer: Would say that ...

Mr. Nai: It united the Italians.

Interviewer: Would you say that this was the one single greatest or the one single influence that probably had the greatest effect on the Italian community - in the history of the Italian community in Wilmington?

Mr. Nai: I would think so. It was a good beginning to unite the Italians. There might have been a few arguments when some of them were moving there or saints from Saint Thomas to Saint Anthony. Saint Thomas didn't like the idea of losing those parishioners. But all in all, I think that was, I would say the thing that did more for the Italians particularly in Wilmington than anything else.

Interviewer: Now, you just mentioned something that I've never heard before. I've interviewed almost 40 people in Wilmington. This thing about moving the saints from Saint Thomas to Saint Anthony is that I didn't realize that the Italian people had any statues and ...

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: Yes, they did. I couldn't tell you now how many were, but I would say about three or four. For instance, Saint Michael's, Saint Lucy, Saint Rocco and probably more. Those three I remember for sure because they used to have their feasts there and also down in Saint Elizabeth. Saint Elizabeth then was not where it is now. It was on Home Street *[phonetic]* **[0:13:01]** a small place which is now an apartment house.

They used to have some pretty fancy feasts there, those Italians down there. Now, which statue they moved from Saint Thomas and which they moved from Saint Elizabeth, I couldn't remember.

Interviewer: The Italians, now when they move these statues, did they have a procession to move them or they just go and take them and move them out?

Mr. Nai: That I don't remember. I imagine it was done with a procession at the time -- probably at the time that the Saint was being taken in procession and moved from one church to the other. I couldn't say that for sure but I know there were some arguments among them, but it didn't -- really didn't amount to ...

[Cross talk]

Interviewer: Among the Italians or between the Italians and the church.

Mr. Nai: Between the Italians and the church which they were taken away from. Well, you couldn't blame them for not wanting to lose those parishioners from one church to the other.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: But I think it was a good thing because it united many and it created a lot of interest among the Italians. You know what we did with the school and with the monastery and with the parish house and with the church also and everything.

Interviewer: Right.

Mr. Nai: Doing all, donating all that labor, I think that was quite a big thing. And I consider myself with the work that I did up there too.

Interviewer: Now, what effect did the rise of Mussolini in Italy? Now, this happened right after World War I that he started to rise to power. What effect did this have on the Italian people in general here on this area?

Mr. Nai: In general, I don't know, there were a couple of them, two or three and they were I would say pro-Mussolini.

[0:15:07]

And I think, if I'm not mistaken, one had a little bit of trouble too. He professed himself probably a little too openly. But in general, I don't think it had too much effect.

Interviewer: What did people think of it?

Mr. Nai: Well, like anything else, just like what they think of God or the president of the United States, some people liked him I suppose, some people didn't like him. He probably done some good things. But he done many other things that were wrong and of course that was his downfall. I think he or his many downfall. He might not have been as bad as he turned out to be if he hadn't associated himself with Hitler.

Interviewer: Yes, yeah.

Mr. Nai: That is my opinion.

Interviewer: Now, when World War II started, what sort of an effect did this have on many of the people here in the Italian community? A lot of people still had family in Italy. They had sons who were old enough to be drafted into the service here which meant that the possibility existed where their sons would be over there shooting at their uncles or their cousins.

Mr. Nai: Yes, I imagine that existed in many cases because I know a lot of the Italian boys from here that went -- that was in -- who were in the American Army and went over.

Now, what effect it did on them, I don't think they had too much to do against Italians anyway over there. We weren't actually at war with Italy. I mean we were -- officially we were but then I think the Italians, as far as I can understand, as far as I could see, Italy was more or less glad to see America go in and help them out more than anything else because I don't really think that it's too much of a -- there was no grudge. At least I don't think there was any grudge.

And of those that went over there, they came back. They were fortunate to come back. As far as I know, they had nothing but good things to say about it.

Interviewer: Now, insofar as the depression is concerned -- depression started in the late '20s, the crash in '29 and so forth. How did this affect most of the people here in the Italian community? Now I know it affected a lot of people all over. But I'm mainly interested in the Italian community. How did it affect most of the people up here?

Mr. Nai: Well, many lost their homes if they had one because they had no work. Many were begging for anything, anything they could get. The others would work for even 10 cents an hour if they could find anything to do. Most of them would work for anything that they could get.

Probably somebody got a few properties that away by buying them real cheap from some of the people that were in bad condition. There were bad years. As far as I'm concerned, I never really felt it so much because I managed to keep busy. I was working at the theater that time. And strange as it might seem, that was the cheapest entertainment that anybody could get. And 15 cents wasn't so hard to scrape off. I think that was our price at the time, 15 or 20 cents, I don't recall.

So I managed to make my -- just barely my living while I was working there, working for very little money but -- and many hours. But then I never really felt the depression to say that my family went hungry or without the necessities. No luxuries but we had the necessities.

Interviewer: What changes did you detect as a result of Franklin Roosevelt's election to the presidency?

Mr. Nai: Well, the thing that happened then was what they used to the CCCs. They got a lot of the young people that weren't doing anything, they took them to these camps and gave them something to do and then the WPA and the NRA, all those things there, some of them helped the poor people, the destitute.

[0:20:12]

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: But some of them did harm to the small businessman. I understand that the NRA caused many small business to go out of business because they couldn't meet the demands and to stay by the rules or the minimum

wages and all that they had to pay. And business wasn't there to be gotten.

And the people that did better then were those that didn't work or didn't want to work. I remember times when we needed somebody to do some work down at the theater for instance, me going around asking people to come to work. Well, you could over \$4 a day those days, 25, 30 cents, 40 cents an hour to about 40 cents an hour. That was maximum wages, but you couldn't get anybody to come to work because they were getting \$16 a week just to do nothing, see?

And they say, "Why should I go to work for less money or for the same amount of money?" I'd just stay home and get the same money. And that's what's happening now with many people that don't want to work.

Interviewer: Now, looking back on the years you spent in the United States, what would you consider as the greatest change that you might have noticed? Now, I know there have been so many changes that you could write volumes and volumes of it. But has there been any one particular change which perhaps has impressed you more than any other?

Mr. Nai: Well, I don't know. There has been so many changes like you said. But I would say the progress would be the thing that impressed me mostly because the progress that the people had made and they can make from say 30, 40 years ago until now ...

Interviewer: But the progress in what area though? Are you talking about technical progress?

Mr. Nai: Well, technical progress and everything. The way of living, the way that people can live as well as the rich person that put ...

[Cross talk]

Interviewer: Materially.

Mr. Nai: Materially.

Interviewer: Materially. And this has been the great progress then. This has been the greatest change, the material change where a man can afford -- today, the ordinary man has things that a wealthy man did not have.

Mr. Nai: Did not have, no. First of all, they weren't here. And if they were here, they would have to be quite wealthy in order to have that. There were

few millionaires those days but they didn't even have the things that we poor people have now.

Interviewer: Yeah, but let me ask you one question. Now, you said that progress has been the big thing, it's technical progress, you have material progress. How about progress as people? Will you say people are better people today than they were 20, 30, 40 years ago?

Mr. Nai: No, I don't think the people are better. I think the people are the same.

Interviewer: You think people are the same?

Mr. Nai: I think the people are the same. Only the environment is different. There might be more people -- there are more people, period.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And among the more people, you're going to find the good ones and the better and the bad ones and the indifferent ones. So if there were 50 million people years ago where you found so many good ones and so many -- and now, there are so many more all together so that you will find a different -- and then, one of the biggest progress is the transportation, the way of connecting one end of the world to the other.

I remember 30, 40 years ago before the advent of radio, that's going back a little further than that, going back to -- in the early '20s because the radio came on about 1921, '22 something like that. But before that, the only news that you got was through telegraph to the newspaper. You had to read the newspaper. Well, by the time you got the newspaper -- they came by train from different places, you were not up to date with news. News were already old when you go them in the newspaper.

Well, then the radio came on and then the television came on and everything and now were the satellites and especially it goes from one end to the world to the other fairly easy.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And they shrunk the size of the world.

Interviewer: Well, how about the socializing between people now?

[0:25:02]

Before you had television and radio and all this entertainment, you really have all the entertainment you can almost put in the house now.

Mr. Nai:

Yeah, well that's the big thing. That's the big change. Before radio came and before people got so many cars, we used to meet among friends and relatives in their homes. Almost everybody had a piano or some kind of an instrument. We used to get together and sing and tell stories or go from one house to the other or go to the parks, the local parks.

Wilmington was lucky to have two of them, one on each end of the city. We used to go to the parks and enjoy yourself there, get on the trolley and go. But then the cars started to come in large numbers and people go on their own cars. And the radio came on and people started to stay home and listen to the stories and different things on the radio.

And then when television came, that was the end of everything. At 1949, that was the downfall of the theaters, the motion picture, 1949. The latter part of 1949, television came up pretty strong. In fact, they couldn't fill the demand. And that was the beginning of the end for most of the theater. They really lost that bad that by 1952, '53 so many of the theaters had gone out of business particularly the neighborhood theaters all over the country.

They picked up a little now since especially that they started with the open air theaters and drive-in theaters, picked up some because of the cars. And even the theaters, the regular theaters picked up a little business now because people are starting to get a little bit accustomed and tired of television. They like to go out occasionally at least once a week.

But then, for a while it was pretty miserable. Actually, television really killed the social life of the people among themselves because you go to somebody's house and you're interfering with their program. That's what I feel. When I go to somebody's house, I feel that I'm interfering with their program because if they're watching the program, they're either going to turn it off to talk to me or else I have to sit there quiet because they want to look at their program.

So I have to sacrifice myself to watch the program that they're watching whether I like it or not. Or else they turn it off -- some of them are graceful enough to turn it off and stay with the company. But not many of them.

Interviewer:

Did you say that this is one of the biggest changes?

Mr. Nai: I think so.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: Socially, yes. Socially, it has been a big change. It separated the people. People don't go to see each other anymore. You see people in church, at the wedding or a funeral or wakes and occasionally on the street. But to go their homes like we used to this time of the year, we used to roast chestnuts and so on and different things, at different times of year you have timely things that you do among -- well, I used to play violin.

I don't know whether you recall or not. And I used to go places with my mom all the time, different places even out of town, set of friends all head out of town. We'd get together, some of them had a ukulele or guitars or banjos and singing with the organ or the piano, singing and playing. We had a good time. So we go on stroll rides over the nights, stay overnight with friends.

Interviewer: In other words, that's ...

[Cross talk]

Interviewer: ... then, didn't they?

Mr. Nai: Yes.

[Cross talk]

Mr. Nai: In a way, yes.

Interviewer: Because they used to enjoy one another, right?

Mr. Nai: That's right. Friendly.

Interviewer: And people don't do that anymore. Right.

Mr. Nai: Friendly. Now, they don't do that anymore. You meet people like strangers. Hi, strangers, I haven't seen you in years. That's true.

Interviewer: All right. So people have changed, haven't they?

Mr. Nai: I used to go around ...

Interviewer: They have changed their way of living.

Mr. Nai: I used to go around with your father. We went around looking for jobs together. We went out to ball games together when he was young and I was young. Now, you get on the car and go.

Interviewer: So people have changed, haven't they?

Mr. Nai: People have changed to that extent, yes.

Interviewer: The way of living has changed. Mode of living has changed. And people have changed.

Mr. Nai: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now, have you ever desired to go back to Italy? I don't mean just for a visit, I mean go back to live. I mean ...

Mr. Nai: I never thought of going back to live there.

[0:30:02]

Interviewer: Even when you were a little or a youngster when you first came here?

Mr. Nai: Yeah, I don't think I ever had the desire to go back to live there. I had the desire to go back for a visit. But I had too much hard luck with sickness. I had nine operations. I've been on the operating table nine times for different things. And that can give you an idea how it kept me down.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: I wasn't dependable enough to go places and financially embarrassed also. So, I never made the trip. I would like to go back. But if I do go back, I would like to stay there at least three months. I'd really want to roam around, try to go to the places where I used to go after wood, kindling wood and mushrooms and picking chestnuts and different things.

Interviewer: Do you still have family in Italy?

Mr. Nai: I have cousins, only cousins left.

Interviewer: And have you ever regretted coming to the United States?

Mr. Nai: No, no, no.

Interviewer: I understand.

Mr. Nai: No, no. I've never regretted coming to the United States. In fact, I think I've considered myself fortunate because -- before we came to the United States, there was a trend. So many people from my hometown were going to Germany.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nai: And I am certainly glad that we didn't go to Germany because we would have been caught right in the war then.

Interviewer: That's right.

Mr. Nai: I don't know what happened to those people that went there during World War I because World War I broke out immediately after we got here. I think it was the year after.

Interviewer: All right. And then the last question I want to ask you then, we've already been discussing this, do you ever long for a return to the good old days? This is what we're talking about here.

Mr. Nai: Yeah. Well, like I said ...

Interviewer: Yeah. We should go today -- if you had to go back to that way of life you had. Now, certainly, when you think of the material comforts that you have now ...

Mr. Nai: Yeah, it would be pretty difficult to go back to that.

Interviewer: It would be.

Mr. Nai: Yeah. In a way, it would be nice like I said, socially with your friends but that's the only thing because otherwise the way we are accustomed now with the comforts of today, we don't have the icebox to contain -- well, we have the refrigerators, we have gas, no more coal stove, you have heat in the house, comfortable control bio-thermal stat and you have electricity at your disposal, you have air conditioning summer, when it gets too hot.

Well, so many things. And the car at your disposal but the exception, that's -- no, the parking. That's what's difficult. See, I'm used to the old days when I was the only one that had a car within blocks back in 1924.

Who had a car around here? I had the whole west side of Wilmington all to myself, the car. Now, you can't park a bicycle.

Interviewer: That's right. I was lucky to find a space from out here.

Mr. Nai: Yeah, at that time you were a little lucky. Fortunately, I have a garage of my own right back at the house. So if I don't find a parking space over here I go there. But I hate to do it in daytime. I don't like to put the car in the garage during the daytime because if I wanted it, I had to take it out of the garage. It's inconvenient. And you get lazy after all. Let's face it.

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Nai: I used to be able to walk miles and miles and miles when I first came over to this country and in Italy. Now, I can't walk more than two blocks, like I said, on account of my broken leg. But walking is good for you and I like to walk but I can't. I just can't.

Interviewer: Well, I think we've covered most of the things that I wanted to cover unless you have anything else you'd like to add to what we've already done.

Mr. Nai: Well, I don't know. I have a good family here. I raised four children which I'm proud of. They're all married and I have 14 grandchildren. Pretty soon I'm going to be a great-grandfather.

Interviewer: Really?

Mr. Nai: Yeah. Albert's daughter, my oldest son's daughter, she's in Germany with her husband, a soldier. We're expecting her back the end of this month incidentally and she's expecting a baby in about in February. That would make me a great-grandfather and my mother is still living. It will make her a great-great-grandmother.

Interviewer: Wow.

Mr. Nai: I hope she has hers before my mother goes.

Interviewer: Is your mother living in Wilmington?

Mr. Nai: Yes. She's right here in 4th Street. She'll be 91, Sunday.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's nice.

Mr. Nai: This Sunday coming, November the 10th. She'll be 91.

Interviewer: Yeah. I guess that's ...

[0:34:59] End of Audio